

A reading of Flannery O’Connors “Everything that Rises Must Converge”

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ABSTRACT

Everything that rises must converge is a short story which, without the aid of suspense that is often provoked in fiction by actions hanging on a bare thread in a whirling plot of intertwining – and perhaps incredible – events, catches the reader’s attention until the very last word. The plot of the story could not be any simpler; a young bachelor takes his overweight mother by bus to a ‘reducing class’ but before they reach the place the mother changes her mind, heads back home, has a stroke and is left by her helpless son dying or maybe dead as he goes to seek help. But parallel to the plot of events is a “plot” of revelation; as the insignificantly banal happenings take place, an unfolding of character slowly emerges before the reader’s eyes.

Keywords: Character; racism; psychological revelation

1. INTRODUCTION

In this enchanting work of fiction the character of the mother and the son are probed deeper and deeper by the revealing ironies that cast increasingly heavier weight on the ongoing dialogues. The story unfolds as a third person narration reports the incidents with scant description and the dialogues with precision; it is through the dialogues that the reader becomes increasingly aware of the pathetic situation. Although the narration is third person, there is a slight tendency to see things more from the son’s perspective and it is this very mode which raises the story – in my opinion – to a memorable work of art. The more the son reveals his mentality the more the reader becomes aware of his overall ignorance and immaturity. The situational irony takes shape due to his own evaluation of himself as a witty individual grounded by his mother’s infantile simplicity and the reader’s evaluation of him as a lazy dupe not able to accept the consequences of his indolence and therefore perpetually seeking refuge in blaming his mother for the situation in which he deems himself to have been cast unjustly [1].

2. EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE

The setting of the story – although not explicitly mentioned – is a place where racial discrimination between black and white had existed and although existing no more is still not a thing of a far past.

At the beginning of the story, being not yet acquainted with Julian's – the son's – personality, nor that of his mother, on the one hand the reader may feel appreciation for the son's liberal inclinations, his strong democratic ideals that make him cringe – even during a bus ride – at any allusion to racial discrimination: '(His mother) sat forward and looked up and down the bus. It was half filled. Everybody was white. "I see we have the bus to ourselves" she said. Julian cringed.' And on the other hand, harbor a dislike for the racist mother who seems aloof to the idea of there being any immorality in slavery:

‘ “There are no more slaves” he said irritably.’

‘ “They were better off when they were” she said.’

For her, being a slave had been a virtue for the blacks and owning them a right and a heavy responsibility – even burden—for her forefathers: ‘ “Your great-grandfather had a plantation and two hundred slaves” ’ she asserts proudly. Being the descendent of such “prominent” people, although she no longer has any of her ancestral pomp but lives with her son in a place where ‘each house had a narrow collar of dirt around it in which sat, usually, a grubby child’, she still considers herself of a different class, and when Julian admonishes her that “Nobody in the damned bus cares who you are” she declares confidently ‘ “I care who I am.” ’

Since she cares who she is, she tries despite her poverty, to maintain some of that ancestral dignity which she deems innate in her nature. Consequently, her actions harbor aristocratic implications which irritate Julian to the utmost. For example, she buys a hat which for Julian is ‘a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood upon the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. He decided it was less comical than jaunty and pathetic.’ For him the hat is but an imaginary pretension: ‘she was holding herself very erect under the preposterous hat wearing it like a banner of her imaginary dignity.’ Boarding the bus with this “preposterous” hat ‘she enters much to Julian's antipathy’ with a little smile, as if she were going into a drawing room where everyone had been waiting for her.’

For the mother however, there is no illusion; hierarchy is a reality. One is born into a social rank presupposing a hierarchical worth and remains imbued with noble dignity if one happens to be born into the higher ranks – whatever fate may do with one's circumstances – and this, one should not forget. ‘ “Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state” ’ his mother reminds him with gravity, adding: ‘ “Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh” ’. But Julian is clearly of a different generation with a different mindset: ‘Will you look around you and see where you are now?’ he asks tensely sweeping his arm ‘to indicate the neighborhood.’ Still the mother is defiant ‘ “You remain who you are” ’ she retorts. The thought of her ancestral dignity is that with which she manages to keep on living with an air of dignity despite her tragic fall from a slave-owning plantation to a ‘dingy’ neighborhood.

If these dialogues reveal Julian in the readers mind to be the epitome of democratic ideals and indeed, being a college graduate he may harbor some such ideals, nevertheless before long the reader will definitely have second thoughts as regards the mother as well as her son.

Everything that rises must come down, including opinion. Having raised our opinion of Julian's mother to racist heights, we have occasion to look back down with more transparent retrospect. Julian is out of school but not making money and does not have any definite career nor does he seem, for that matter, to be following one; if his mother were to embrace a critical attitude toward him as he does toward her, she would be justified in reproaching his irresponsibility, especially since it had not been an easy task for her to rear him to his present status. 'What she meant when she said she had won was that she had brought him up successfully and had sent him to college and that he had turned out so well-looking (her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened), intelligent (he realized he was too intelligent to be successful), and with a future ahead of him (there was of course no future ahead of him).'

Despite the unmistakable self-pity and ironically critical attitude with which Julian's musing on his mother's estimation is filled, the reader cannot help but feel a cold indifference to his self-sympathizing scorn for his bad fate nor can he discern any wrongdoing on the mother's part. Julian does not, after all, deny that he went to college and that his teeth were filled. One can imagine the plight of a lone woman who cannot afford to fill both her own teeth and her son's and who wants to provide him with college education; no small sacrifice.

Yet for all her endeavor not only does she not reproach his indolence, she is mildly insistent in her support: ' "I think you're doing fine" she said, drawing on her gloves. "You've only been out of school a year. Rome wasn't built in a day" '. Moreover she is still even willing to forgo her desires for his sake: ' "maybe I shouldn't have paid that for it" ' she says about the hat she has recently bought, and decides she should go 'back to the house and take this thing off' because she 'can pay the gas bill with that seven-fifty'. She doesn't complain and ask till when should she pay the gas bill, on the contrary, she concludes that 'I was out of my head [to buy the hat]'. Whatever potential harm her racist sentiments may have, should be asked of Julian, however as far as we can see her only relation to him centers on self-sacrifice.

3. CONCLUSION

Everything that rises must converge, including inflated illusion which must sooner or later converge with reality. But, unlike the reader for whom it does not take long to realize Julian's democratic ideals are mere illusions, Julian himself does not discern the real nature of his fancies until the very last moment – or rather, after the very last moment when realization is no longer of any consequence. Julian's illusions have swelled and risen so high he can no longer distinguish a border demarcating reality.

It is difficult for "great minds" (we recall Julian's evaluation of himself as 'too intelligent') to condescend to the triviality of this inconsequential worldly existence and Julian though in youth 'was (already) disenchanted with it as a man of fifty. ' "True culture is in the mind, the *mind*," he says and taps his head, "the mind" '. The learned observation distances him far from his mother who, he believes, 'lived according to the laws of her own fantasy world outside of which he had never seen her set foot.' Of course not everyone can be as naturally erudite as himself and he allows that '(t)he old lady was clever enough.....if she had started.....from any of the right premises, more might have been expected of her.'

Being in such manner 'disenchanted' he can discern inexperience clearly on his mother's face; 'Two wings of grey hair protruded on either side of her florid face, but her eyes, sky blue, were as innocent and untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten. Were it not that she was a widow who had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and was supporting him still, "until he got on his feet" she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town.' He does realize that she 'was supporting him still' but his mind is so preoccupied with mocking her fancy that she was doing so "until he got on his feet" that he can readily dismiss the significance of her sacrifice. How could he "get on his feet" when her folly had cast him in a situation beyond redemption? It was nothing but a compensation; her doing sacrifice for him was because 'she had first created the necessity to do so by making a mess of things. If he had permitted her sacrifices, it was only because her lack of foresight had made them necessary.'

Everything is sorted out clearly Julian's mind; he is a highly intellectual individual who has been deprived of showing his great wit due to the dullness and the mistakes of his mother. Everything is her fault. No blemish on him. What exactly her fault is, we do not know, neither does the narrator. Neither, for that matter, does Julian himself - unless there is something that he keeps from the narrator which doesn't seem very probable since he doesn't exactly hide his views about her. It is however related to a house in which they once lived. A house that 'appeared in his dreams regularly. He would stand on the wide porch, listening to the rustle of oak leaves, then wonder through the high-ceilinged hall into the parlor that opened into it and gaze at the worn rugs and faded draperies.' When he remembers this house, he seems to forget all his democratic spirit, since presumably, it must have been a house where the slave-owning ancestors in whom his mother takes so much pride had lived. For all his hatred of anything symbolic of racism he preferred the 'threadbare elegance (of the house) to anything he could name and it was because of it that all the neighborhoods they had lived in had been a torment to him.' Ironically the mother had accepted the change of fate quite easily and she is rebuked in Julian's mind for having done so: 'she had hardly known the difference. She called her insensitivity "being adjustable. "What is even more disgusting for Julian is, she even thought it had been fun: 'it was fun to struggle' she believed 'And when you had won, as she had won, what fun to look back on the hard times!'

The "little girl" notwithstanding her self-attributed superiority of rank comes to terms with reality and faces the challenge but the "disenchanted" man of wisdom cannot overcome his nostalgic desires. In a way, Julian is right; paradoxically his old mother is a young girl and he, her young son is as a man of fifty: she had had the youthful stamina to commence a long struggle, and he feels old not having started at all.

Having artistically portrayed the idea in his mind that, were it not for his mother his life would be a sensation, Julian feels the only thing which remains for him to do is agonize her with all means possible. Why a youth who feels as if he were fifty and is disenchantedly oblivious toward the world would want a sensational life anyway, is for Julian, beside the point; and for torturing her mentally what theme better than the liberation of slaves and the equality between black and white which he knows is his mother's soft spot. It is therefore that he takes any opportunity that comes his way- as it does in the bus- to torment her; he has the chance to sit beside a negro; he takes it and looks 'serenely across at his mother. Her face had turned an angry red. He stared at her, making his eyes the eyes of a stranger.

He felt his tension suddenly lift as if he had openly declared war on her.' He is enjoying himself so much that he does not take note of how red her face is even though it 'seemed to be

unnaturally red, as if her blood pressure had risen.’ Our wise young man ‘would have liked to teach her a lesson that would last her a while.’

However since the negro does not seem enthusiastic for any conversation Julian turns back to his thoughts, into ‘the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time’ and ‘was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him.’ Here he toys with various situations and takes highest pleasure when he envisions taking a colored girl home and introducing her to his mother as her daughter-in-law, saying ‘there is nothing you can do about it.

This is the woman I’ve chosen. She’s intelligent, dignified, even good, and she’s suffered and she hasn’t thought it *fun*.’ This scene he knows would be the ‘ultimate horror’ for her. He does not have to remain in his imaginary refuge for long though since to his unbelievable surprise and good luck a negro woman wearing exactly the same hat as his mother, enters the bus with her small boy; ‘(t)he vision of the two hats, identical, (breaks) upon him with the radiance of a brilliant sunrise. His face was suddenly lit with joy. He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson.’ He therefore gives ‘a loud chuckle so that she would look at him and see that he saw.’ Seeing the pitiful expression on her face he has a momentary pang of conscience, this however does not last long since ‘(j)ustice entitled him to laugh.’ His sadistic pleasure is of course in the cause of *justice*.

The culmination of his pleasure comes when they get off the bus and his mother tries to give the little negro boy a coin. The big Negro mother is infuriated and punches her back saying “He don’t take nobody’s pennies!” Julian’s mother is left sitting on the sidewalk and Julian’s vicious nature finds opportunity to pour all his bitter contempt on the woman who he deems responsible for his lost desires. And he pays a high price. For this short while of satisfaction he loses his mother and at that moment it dawns on him that ‘the dumpy figure, surmounted by the atrocious hat’ is his ‘(d)arling’, his ‘sweetheart’ and therefore he begins pleading with her to ‘wait’. But it is too late she can no longer hear him.

‘ “That was the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. That was your black double. She can wear the same hat as you, and to be sure”, he added gratuitously (because he thought it was funny), “it looked better on her than it did on you. What all this means”, he said, “is that the old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn”. *He thought bitterly of the house that had been lost for him.* “You aren’t who you think you are”, he said.....She continued to go on as if she had not heard him. He took a few steps and caught her arm and stopped her. He looked into her face and caught his breath. He was looking into a face he had never seen before. “Tell Grandpa to come get me”, she said. He stared, stricken.

“Tell Caroline to come get me”, she said

Stunned, he let her go and she lurched forward again, walking as if one leg were shorter than the other. A tide of darkness seemed to be sweeping her from him. “Mother!” he cried. “Darling, sweetheart, wait!” Crumpling, she fell to the pavement. He dashed forward and fell at her side, crying, “Mamma, Mamma!” He turned her over. Her face was fiercely distorted’ (emphasis mine).

References

- [1] O'Conner Flannery, *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, Penguin: Signet. New York 1983.

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