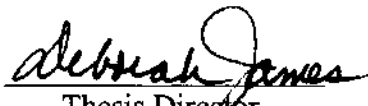


**Cosmic Convergence in *Everything that Rises Must Converge*:  
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as Theological Muse**

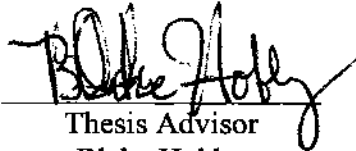
Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with  
A Major in Literature at  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
Fall 2008

By *Carly Crawford*



Thesis Director  
Deborah James



Thesis Advisor  
Blake Hobby

---

“I’m no theologian, but all this is vital to me, and I feel it’s vital to you.”

—Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*

Cosmic Convergence in Flannery O’Connor’s *Everything that Rises Must Converge*:

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin as Theological Muse

Flannery O’Connor’s short stories are notoriously riddled with religious subtexts and symbolism. Her final collection of stories, published posthumously, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, is no different. In fact, *Everything That Rises Must Converge* can be seen as her most religious work. In “The Lame Shall Enter First” and “Parker’s Back,” O’Connor uses religious names, creates self-righteous characters such as Ruby Turpin, Sheppard, Julian and his mother, crafts allusive language, hints at the stories’ religious subtext in clever titles, and arranges the stories with religious aims in mind. To explore this late O’Connor work from a religious perspective means to discover a fully formed theology, one influenced by paleontologist and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

Flannery O’Connor’s letters and book reviews reveal O’Connor’s obsession with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, especially his description of the “Omega point,” which figures prominently into the strange epiphanies we encounter in O’Connor’s stories. This obsession is key to understanding not only how we can read the texts, but also what O’Connor meant by these creations. In her review of his second book, *The Divine Milieu*, she writes: “It is doubtful if any Christian of this century can be fully aware of his religion until he has reseen it in the cosmic light which Teilhard has cast upon it” (Getz 161). O’Connor attempts, in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, to filter her stories through that cosmic light. In a 1961 letter to Thomas Stritch, O’Connor writes: “I don’t

---

understand the scientific end of it or the philosophical but even when you don't know those things the man comes through" (*Habit of Being* 449). O'Connor is right in the presumption that laymen might be deterred by Teilhard de Chardin's work. Teilhard de Chardin's philosophy is complicated and dense. But it is not the specific tenets of his philosophy that are essential to understanding his influence on O'Connor's writing and mission; instead, what is necessary is what O'Connor gleaned from reading Teilhard de Chardin.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a French priest, scientist, and mystic. After his death in 1955, the Church had trouble accepting his works, *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*. The first is scientific and analytical, while the second is religious, but the two are often considered a set (Getz 161). According to Teilhard de Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man*, "because it [space-time] contains and engenders consciousness, space-time is necessarily of a convergent nature" (Teilhard de Chardin 259). The idea of the Omega point, an idea present throughout O'Connor's work, states that the world and all of its layers are heading toward a specific point, an Omega, at which there is a collective consciousness, a convergence of the Universal and the Personal (Teilhard de Chardin 259). O'Connor raves about Teilhard de Chardin in many letters to friends and colleagues, saying, "I think myself he was a great mystic. The second volume complements the first and makes you see that even if there were errors in his thought, there were none in his heart" (*Habit of Being* 430). Teilhard de Chardin's influence on O'Connor is particularly visible in her use of his Omega Point philosophy in her work, most notably in the bizarre, often violent epiphanies that she depicts.

---

In order to find salvation within the theory of the Omega point, it is “*beyond* our souls that we must look, *not the other way round*” (Teilhard de Chardin 259). Flannery O’Connor’s characters in her last short story collection, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, wrestle with this necessity to look outward toward the world to find salvation. As long as their actions are egocentrically motivated, they cannot find salvation. Teilhard de Chardin writes, “Egoism, whether personal or racial, is quite rightly excited by the idea of the element ascending through faithfulness to life... It *feels* right. Its only mistake, but a fatal one, is to confuse individuality with personality” (Teilhard de Chardin 263). Thus, for Chardin, the ego is both a key to growth and also a stumbling block. This kind of obstacle exists with Parker in “Parker’s Back,” Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First” (though he never receives his salvation because of his inability to turn away from his soul), both Julian and his mother in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” and especially Ruby Turpin in “Revelation.” Perhaps the best example of both this need to turn away from personality to achieve salvation and the effects of Teilhard de Chardin on *Everything That Rises Must Converge* can be seen in a parallel between a paragraph in *The Phenomenon of Man* and Ruby Turpin’s salvation in “Revelation.” *The Phenomenon of Man* asserts:

All round us, one by one, like a continual exhalation, “soul” break away, carrying upwards their incommunicable load of consciousness. One by one, yet not in isolation. Since, for each of them, by the very nature of Omega, there can only be one possible point of definitive emersion—that point at which, under the synthesizing action of personalizing union, the noosphere (furling its elements upon themselves as it too furls upon itself)

---

will reach collectively its point of convergence – at the “end of the world.”  
 (Teilhard de Chardin 272)

This paragraph is very similar to Ruby’s vision at the end of “Revelation” through which she receives her salvation. Ruby envisions a parade of souls headed toward heaven made up of all kinds of people, worthy and, according to Ruby, unworthy, coming together at the end of time to march to their creator, a fictionalized account of the kind of convergence experience Pierre Teilhard de Chardin describes.

While much has been written about O’Connor, little has been written on the connections that can be made between *Everything that Rises Must Converge* and the theology/philosophy of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. As critics have focused on O’Connor’s religion, the concept of grace, the grotesque narrative, and her depiction of the South, the critical conversations surrounding O’Connor since the early 1960s have mostly chosen a historical or biographical approach to interpretation of O’Connor’s novels and stories. One such work is Ted Spivey’s *Flannery O’Connor: The Woman, the Thinker, the Visionary*, which explores O’Connor’s spirituality and Southernness. Spivey also explores briefly the influence of Teilhard de Chardin’s philosophical texts on O’Connor’s writing. Spivey addresses nearly all of the main critical points in his book, including the idea that “O’Connor revealed the growth of individuals through the acceptance of suffering” (Spivey 145). This acceptance of suffering, both in her personal life and in a grand, cosmic sense, lies at the heart of O’Connor’s literary-theological way of understanding the world, one informed by ancient texts, the Bible, her own Catholic schooling and religious upbringing, and most especially by the Catholic theologians

---

Thomas Aquinas and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, both of whom focused on the salvific power of grace, which will be detailed after this discussion of pertinent criticism.

In his article “From Sermon to Parable: Four Conversion Stories by Flannery O’Connor,” A.R. Coulthard praises “Revelation” and “Parker’s Back” for their depiction of conversion and redemption while discussing the shortcomings of “A Temple of the Holy Spirit” and “The Artificial Nigger” (Coulthard 63). He writes, “O’Connor, in depicting the advent and aftermath of grace, did not always live up to her dictum that ‘In the greatest fiction, the writer’s moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense,’ but when she did, she did it in fine style” (Coulthard 56). Coulthard argues that the fundamental difference between the superior and inferior conversion stories lies in the comic aspects of each story:

The relative failure of ‘Temple’ and ‘The Artificial Nigger’ may be laid to O’Connor’s abandonment of her instinctively comic vision as the theology of these stories rose to the surface. By the time of ‘Revelation’ and ‘Parker’s Back,’ however, O’Connor had gained the confidence to unblinkingly train her comic-ironic eye on humanity, even in the experience of grace.

(Coulthard 71)

Coulthard’s argument hinges on his knowledge of the timeline of O’Connor’s stories; in order for his argument to stand, it must be known that “Revelation” and “Parker’s Back” were published after “A Temple of the Holy Spirit” and “The Artificial Nigger.” For Coulthard, O’Connor’s success in displaying religion relies on her addition of the comic to otherwise morose situations. Many scholars also discuss O’Connor’s eschatology, or view of apocalyptic end times, in such a manner. For example, in the book *Flannery*

---

*O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, Ralph Wood writes, "Flannery O'Connor's eschatological vision serves both to redeem and dismantle the hopelessness of our time. Far from debasing human existence, her belief in the Life beyond life gives a sharp urgency to ordinary experience" (Wood 253). This urgency can be seen in the necessity of suffering to obtain grace in O'Connor's writing, one in which pain and human foibles are part of a grand scheme, which, despite its grotesqueries and heartaches, is comic.

Accordingly, many scholars write about the distinctly Christian tone of O'Connor's writing while discovering comedy in what at first glance seems to be tragic stories. Michael Jordan, in his article "Flannery O'Connor's Writing: A Guide for the Perplexed," muses, "If read in the right spirit and with spiritual perception, her stories are terribly funny and spiritually vivid" (Jordan 52). Such is the case with O'Connor's "Revelation," in which a judgmental simpleton ends up in a pigsty. Many critics, like Jordan, describe experiences in which they found O'Connor's work desperate and pessimistic in a first reading, but after rereading the piece and researching O'Connor and her religious beliefs, they find that their hypothesis was incorrect. In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Jordan writes, "Our secular, materialistic age has something to do with our blindness. And O'Connor's artistic integrity plays a role as well. She is a literary artist, not a preacher or teacher of moral philosophy" (Jordan 52). Jordan's argument matches O'Connor's own. O'Connor clearly asserted that she despised pious language and preaching tones. Thus, readers find mystery tales such as "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," which, far from simplistic moralizing, present readers with art that must be deciphered like a parable or Zen *koan*.

---

In an attempt to explain the Gnostic roots of Southern fiction and Christianity, Patrick Ireland states, “unquestionably in O’Connor’s orthodox theology, the human world is not one-dimensional or exclusively sacred or profane but a place where sacred and profane interact in mysterious ways” (Ireland 188). Ireland uses this argument in his essay “The Sacred and the Profane: Redefining Flannery O’Connor’s Vision” to prove that, while O’Connor’s work is full of “practical heresies” and definitely Gnostic, it does not follow that it must be grotesque. Jack Dillard Ashley makes a similar argument in his essay “The Very Heart of Mystery: Theophany in O’Connor’s Stories.” Though Ashley focuses more on epiphany than Gnosticism, the two are inextricably tied. Gnosticism and theophany both focus on mystery in spirituality. Ashley makes four points that tie O’Connor to theophany:

- (1) Her imagination is greatly informed and enriched by... theophanies –of the Old Testament.
- (2) The elements... are anagoges more medieval than modern...
- (3) Hers is a demanding spiritual exercise consisting more of awe than love...
- (4) Beauty and sublimity reside in terror, fear, and trembling... (Ashley 109)

Against her wishes, O’Connor’s Catholicism has become another aspect of her religious experience and work that is often mentioned in critical essays and articles. In 1960, she wrote, “that she did not wish to be labeled a Catholic writer ‘as it is then assumed that you have some religious axe to grind’” (Mott 218). While here it might be tempting to cast O’Connor as a proselytizing Christian, one influenced by theologians, it is important to note that O’Connor did not theologize per se. Instead of providing an apologetic or a

---



systemized theology, O'Connor borrowed key images from a theologian, which she transformed into bizarre fictions.

In her essay "Flannery O'Connor's Unique Contribution to Christian Literary Naturalism," Sara Mott asserts that O'Connor's "Christian literary naturalism" can be found in stories like "Revelation" and novels like *Wise Blood*. According to Mott, "a significant extension of her being Catholic is her being Catholic in the fundamental Bible Belt and choosing to write primarily about characters and situations rising out of fundamental Protestant beliefs" (Mott 219). If O'Connor wrote about Catholic characters and situations, her writing would not be nearly as open-ended and universal as it is. Ralph Wood broaches the subject of O'Connor's personal Catholicism when he writes, "...she despised Catholic piety of the oleaginous [exaggeratedly and distastefully complimentary] kind." (Wood 183). O'Connor was devoutly Catholic, but according to many scholars, her Catholicism was peculiar and personal. Some scholars, like Albert Sonnenfeld, even argue that while O'Connor "may have been a Roman Catholic, but she is, quite literally, a *Baptist*" (Sonnenfeld 453). Sonnenfeld is referring to John the Baptist. He asserts that O'Connor's approach to her writing is nearly identical to John the Baptist's approach to the kingdom of heaven: "One could, of course, prepare a statistical study of the number of murders, suicides, rapes, and insults in Flannery O'Connor's work to prove her commitment to violent action as a means of dispelling . . . the Pharisees" (Sonnenfeld 453). Sonnenfeld is not the only one to expose O'Connor's peculiar attitudes toward Protestantism—according to Bryan Giemza's essay "Catholic Minds of the South: A New Concert," "O'Connor once said that if she were not a Catholic, she would be Pentecostal Holiness, not Episcopal" (Giemza 135). Here we

---

might assume O'Connor refers to the bizarre nature of the Pentecostal experience, one about which O'Connor was critical in her stories, where many characters fail to "see the light." To add to the oddities, many scholars believe that O'Connor "feels compelled to speak to a secular audience as a means of spreading the good news of the Gospel" (Nisly 66). The idea that O'Connor is not writing for a Catholic audience is not an invented one – O'Connor herself approached the subject with her own dry humor: "O'Connor explicitly rejects writing for a Catholic audience, joking that the audience is too small" (Nisly 66). According to Alice Walker, "it has puzzled some of her readers and annoyed the Catholic Church that in her stories not only does good not triumph, it is not usually present" (Walker 78). While it may be possible to focus on the absence of goodness in the stories, O'Connor's fiction should not be taken at face value. Instead, we must look at the ways in which O'Connor's fallen world experiences a cosmic convergence similar to Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point.

Many O'Connor scholars discuss the idea of grace. Often tied in with the concept of grace is the idea of rage and violence—in O'Connor's work, many redemptions arrive only after great suffering, such as in "Greenleaf," where a bull gores the protagonist or in "The Lame Shall Enter First," where Norton commits suicide, jumping out of a window to his death. In "God May Strike You Thisaway": Flannery O'Connor and Simone Weil on Affliction and Joy," Ralph Wood discusses the misconception of O'Connor's work as negative and even malevolent. According to Wood, "few other writers have enabled us to name so clearly the nature of both the violence that wracks our terror-stricken world and the grace that might redirect such violence to non-destructive ends" (Wood 181). Another aspect of O'Connor's religious philosophy lies in the condemnation of the

---

human intellectual: "These people are atheists or agnostics; they recognize nothing superior to man's mind... They have abused God's most generous gift to man – rational intelligence – and have committed the most heinous of sins – intellectual pride" (McCarthy 1144). McCarthy argues that O'Connor believes it does not matter how good someone acts; how good they are and how loyal they are to God that will move them upward in life. Similarly, Bob Dowell describes faith in Christ in "The Moment of Grace in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor": "In the O'Connor world whether one commits himself to evil deeds or good deeds makes little difference ultimately, for without Christ one's actions only lead to evil" (Dowell 236). In "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace," Thelma Shinn gives us an argument very similar to McCarthy's. She writes, "The most obvious secular grotesques are those who have deliberately rejected God in preference to the gods of the modern world" (Shinn 62). Characters embodying such grotesqueries often fail or find themselves subjected to a violent redemption, such as Julian in "Everything that Rises Must Converge" and the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

Shinn also argues that "Miss O'Connor used violence to convey her vision because she knew that the violence of rejection in the modern world demands an equal violence of redemption – man needs to be 'struck' by mercy; God must overpower him" (Shinn 58). Shinn, like many others, believes firmly that O'Connor wrote of a necessity for violence to bring about salvation. Claire Katz gives us a similar perspective in "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision": O'Connor's purpose, she writes, is "to reveal the need for grace in a world grotesque without a transcendent context" (Katz 54). O'Connor's religion and grace are not pretty, but they are functional and necessary. With this

---

violence, some scholars believe, O'Connor achieved "a violation so intense that the protagonist and the reader were shocked—traumatized, we now might say—into a posture of humiliation and submission to some awful, awesome destiny" (Kahane 441). Kahane, along with others, suggests that the violence transcends the page and affects the reader as well. Joyce Carole Oates, in her article "The Action of Mercy," adds that O'Connor's "Christian imagery is sensed rather than made explicit" (Oates 160). Bob Dowell adds to the equation that "her own view of man is unmistakably theological, and in commenting on the milieu from which her characters are drawn she says that 'in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological'" (Dowell 236). It is impossible, according to O'Connor, to remove the Bible belt from the trousers of a Southerner.

*Everything That Rises Must Converge* is a collection that has been considered extensively by critics. The collection features nine stories: "Everything That Rises Must Converge," "Greenleaf," "A View of the Woods," "The Enduring Chill," "The Comforts of Home," "The Lame Shall Enter First," "Revelation," "Parker's Back," and "Judgment Day." Two of the most discussed stories from that collection are "Parker's Back" and "Revelation." While "The Lame Shall Enter First" is not covered as thoroughly in criticism, it is indeed studied. Margaret Earley Whitt's book *Understanding Flannery O'Connor* gives us great insight into each of these stories. In discussing "The Lame Shall Enter First," Whitt tells the reader that "O'Connor was uneasy with the story, convinced that it did not work: 'The story doesn't work because I don't know, don't sympathize, don't like Mr. Sheppard in the way that I know and like most of my other characters'" (Whitt 140). O'Connor's statement gives us great insight into the rest of her work—she

---

feels as though she must identify with characters to really give them life. In discussing “Revelation,” for example, Whitt points out that Ruby Turpin’s acts at the pigsty mirror the figure of speech “‘not in a pig’s eye,’ mean[ing] ‘absolutely not; no chance; no way’” (Whitt 149). Finally, much of the discussion on “Parker’s Back” in both Whitt’s book and other scholarly sources centers on the visual. It is one of her final stories, and “she comically illustrates how that ‘sense of expectation’ for the ‘hopes of the Incarnation’ can come from the most surprising of places” (Whitt 150). Visual elements in “Parker’s Back” include, most importantly, Parker’s tattoo of a Byzantine Jesus.

*As Everything That Rises Much Converge* indictates through its violent epiphanies, Flannery O’Connor lived a difficult life, one that is mirrored in her fiction and reflected in her theology. “To her admirers,” Giemza argues, “her death by lupus seemed only to underscore that hers was a peculiar destiny, and that she dwelt more in the spiritual ways than the physical” (Giemza 136). But O’Connor fuses the real and the surreal, the violent and those who bear the yoke of suffering into a cosmic vision commensurate with the Christian mystical tradition. As Katz writes, “Because of her extraordinary fictional talent, she could so shape and project her inner vision that, against our rational, progressive wills, we identify with freaks, equate human with grotesque, and renounce our humanistic heritage and the desire to grow up” (Katz 67).

As an exemplary story of O’Connor’s theological views, “The Lame Shall Enter First” presents the selfless Sheppard, the father of Norton and self-appointed guardian of Rufus Johnson. It is no coincidence that his name has pastoral connotations. Sheppard tends his flock and takes care of both boys. He hopes to be like the shepherd in the Bible, who, when one sheep strays from the flock, leaves the rest to search out the

---

one and bring him home to safety (Matthew 18:12-14; Luke 15:3-7): “My resolve isn’t shaken,’ Sheppard repeated. ‘I’m going to save you’” (474). Ironically, Sheppard is a militant atheist, though many of his reactions, like the one seen above, are drawn nearly directly from biblical passages. He is a character like Christ—the greatest-known shepherd of them all—whether he believes in Christian dogma or not. Even Rufus Johnson, his delinquent charge, recognizes his Christ-like demeanor: “‘God, kid,’ Johnson said in a cracked voice, ‘how do you stand it?’ His face was stiff with outrage. ‘He thinks he’s Jesus Christ!’” (459). O’Connor attempts to show readers that trying to be the savior in her world is egoism; without deference to the Omega Point this egoism will ultimately cause destruction. One cannot be both self-absorbed and like the body of Christ, though it is certain that Sheppard tries. Not only does O’Connor use parables to illustrate her understanding of images present in Teilhard de Chardin, but also she uses biblical allusions.

Through the names of the characters in “Parker’s Back,” we can glean both symbolic meaning and an O’Connor quirk, the undeniable presence of Catholicism that permeates nearly every aspect of her stories, regardless of the characters’ religion. Parker’s given name, for example, is Obadiah Elihue (O’Connor 517). Both are Biblical names packed with significance: Obadiah is an Old Testament prophet, and Elihue is a friend of Job’s who insists that even the righteous can suffer (Job 32-37). His initials are also O.P., an acronym in the Catholic Church meaning “Order of Preachers.” Parker’s wife’s names are also both Biblical and meaningful: Sarah is Abraham’s wife who ends up pregnant after decades of infertility and Ruth is the book from which the famous passage “whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people

---

shall by my people, and thy God my God” comes (Ruth 1:16). Sarah Ruth, however, does not follow the legacy of her middle name. When Parker returns home with the tattoo of Jesus Christ on his back, she does not accept the image as one of her God. Instead, she treats this image of Christ as the real Christ was treated on the march to Golgotha—by beating and shunning him: “He sat there and let her beat him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ” (O’Connor 529). Sarah Ruth accuses Parker of worshipping idols, in this case a religious icon, and claims that this depiction of Jesus is not her God. She is terrified by the way Jesus is depicted in the tattoo and the egoism that, in her mind, Parker must espouse in order to deem himself worthy of a tattoo of Jesus Christ. But Parker is not the only character in this late work that struggles with the ego.

Focal characters in O’Connor’s stories “Revelation,” “The Lame Shall Enter First,” and “Everything That Rises Must Converge” all struggle with self-righteousness; it is apparent that O’Connor wishes to convey the idea that one must separate from egoism to achieve salvation. These characters envision themselves as tolerant, but they are far from it. Ruby Turpin, the protagonist of “Revelation,” is both classist and racist. The moment she walks into the doctor’s office waiting room with her husband Claud, she begins to judge the other patients: “The old woman had on tennis shoes and the white-trashy mother had on what appeared to be bedroom slippers, black straw with gold braid threaded through them—exactly what you would have expected her to have on” (O’Connor 491). She immediately considers this “white-trash” family “Worse than niggers any day” (O’Connor 490). Ruby sees herself as an open-minded, accepting

---

individual. After all, she does not view herself as a racist—she prefers Blacks over white-trash:

Sometimes at night when she couldn't go to sleep, Mrs. Turpin would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself. If Jesus had said to her before he made her, "There's only two places available for you. You can either be a nigger or white-trash," what would she have said? "Please, Jesus, please," she would have said, "just let me wait until there's another place available"... but it would have been no use and finally she would have said, "All right, make me a nigger then—but that don't mean a trashy one." (O'Connor 491)

It is Ruby's self-righteousness that causes her great pain in the end. On the surface, Ruby resembles her name. She is sparkling, kind, and seemingly tolerant. Underneath, however, she is coarse and ugly. She is unable to express herself in a tolerant manner, and believes that anyone that appears equal to her status will agree with her.

Unfortunately, that is not true—Mary Grace, the pleasant lady's daughter, finds Ruby repugnant. Without Ruby's smug attitude, Mary Grace might never have insulted and physically attacked Ruby. However, as is the case with the mother in "Everything that Rises Must Converge," Ruby is struck low in order to understand, another of O'Connor's truth-struck lost on their way to redemption.

"The Lame Shall Enter First's" Sheppard, like Ruby, sees himself as a fine, upstanding citizen. He is well off, and he chooses to share his well-being with others like Rufus Johnson. He is determined to take care of the "lesser" in society; this mission can be seen in his "adoption" of Rufus, a boy from the reformatory that Sheppard helped

---



when he was detained. Sheppard is ruthlessly optimistic to the point of extreme annoyance. O'Connor's intentions are clear when his downfall comes from his belief that he is a more powerful presence in Rufus's life than Jesus:

“I'm going to save you.” Johnson thrust his head forward. “Save yourself,” he hissed. “Nobody can save me but Jesus.” Sheppard laughed curtly. “You don't deceive me,” he said. “I flushed that out of your head in the reformatory. I saved you from that, at least.” (O'Connor 474)

Here Sheppard equates himself to God. Of all of O'Connor's characters that struggle with egoism, Sheppard is the worst, and therefore does not achieve divine revelation or redemption. Because he seeks recognition and praise, Sheppard's superficial belief in Rufus is transparent; Sheppard's statements affirming his belief in Rufus are half-hearted. Rufus knows that Sheppard does not truly trust him. Sheppard is embarrassed that he does not trust Rufus, and therefore works to keep Rufus out of jail for the second time to project a trust that does not exist, even though he is guilty. Unfortunately, Sheppard is also a narcissist obsessed with his own knowledge. O'Connor condemns him most for his atheism and God complex, and seeks to prove that without the knowledge of God, Sheppard will be lost forever. When Rufus brings his notions of Christianity into the house, Sheppard is both skeptical and rude, making fun of the religion: “‘That book [the Bible] is something for you to hide behind,’ Sheppard said. ‘It's for cowards, people who are afraid to stand on their own feet and figure things out for themselves’” (O'Connor 477). It is his reluctance to teach his son about his own beliefs, combined with the thought that his son was nothing special: “Heaven and hell were for the mediocre, and he was that if he was anything” (O'Connor 463). It is this projection that

---

ultimately causes his son Norton's suicide (O'Connor 463). Norton is lost without the idea of God. His father has been so self-centered that Norton has become selfish in order to survive. Because of his father's failures, Norton is condemned, even when he does believe he sees the face of God.

Similarly, both Julian and his mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" suffer from self-righteousness. Julian's mother, like many of O'Connor's characters, sacrifices everything for her son and his education, so she sees herself as selfless and good. Julian is ungrateful, but sees himself as much more intelligent than his mother, particularly because he had recently graduated from college. While Julian's mother is uncomfortable with the idea of racial equality—"They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence"—she insists that she is, indeed, open-minded. "I've always had a great respect for my colored friends,' she said. 'I'd do anything in the world for them..." (O'Connor 408-409). Julian, on the other hand, wishes to sit down as far away from his mother on the political fence as possible. He believes his education has brought him the greatest knowledge: "'True culture is in the mind, the *mind*,' he said, and tapped his head, 'the mind'" (O'Connor 409). Unfortunately, both Julian and his mother have been unable to look beyond themselves into the world. Julian's tolerance is self-contained, and his mother has a wall blocking her vision of reality with what is really true.

Other characters that have built walls to block the true reality are visible in "Parker's Back." The allusions in "Parker's Back" are both complex and deliberate. It is difficult to read a single page without running into a religious allusion or potential double meaning. For example, when Parker first meets Sarah Ruth Cates and she insults his tattoos, it is said that Parker "remained for almost five minutes, looking agape at the

---

dark door she had entered” (O’Connor 515). The obvious, literal interpretation of this sentence is that Parker is so bewildered by the way Sarah Ruth treated him that his mouth is hanging open in shock. It is no coincidence, however, that O’Connor chose the word “agape,” which, though pronounced differently, is a word also known to encompass divine, unconditional love. It is after this agape moment that Parker finds himself unable to resist returning to the Cates house and visiting often. There are many images of snakes, particularly in the beginning of “Parker’s Back.” The most famous serpent, of course, is the one that tempts Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Serpents are also bringers of temptation in “Parker’s Back.” When Sarah Ruth first sees Parker, she is transfixed by his tattoo of a snake. “The girl gazed at this with an almost stupefied smile of shock, as if she had accidentally grabbed a poisonous snake” (O’Connor 512). From that moment, Sarah Ruth is enraptured with Parker—the serpents have taken her in. Parker also brings apples to Sarah Ruth and her family. Yet another natural item that is bursting with Biblical symbolism, the apples represent knowledge and the ability to differentiate between good and evil. He buys the lurking children off with apples so he can be alone with her, and brings her closer to him by giving her an apple as well (O’Connor 515). Finally, there is burning bush imagery placed throughout the story. When Parker runs the tractor into the tree, the tree begins to burn, reaching out to him. “The tree reached out to grasp him again, then burst into flame” (O’Connor 524). There are many times in the story when Parker, always in fear, flashes back to the flaming tree.

As seen in “Parker’s Back,” all aspects of O’Connor’s work are deliberate.

O’Connor organizes *Everything That Rises Must Converge* in a purposeful and effective arrangement that, in several ways, mirrors the narrative structure of the Bible. The title

---

story, “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” quite literally gives all nine stories in the collection a convergence point. A prime example of O’Connor’s version of this convergence comes when the large Black lady gets on the bus wearing the exact same hat as Julian’s racist mother (O’Connor 415). The titles of the next four stories in the collection give the reader a sense of the region: “Greenleaf,” “A View of the Woods,” “The Enduring Chill,” and “The Comforts of Home.” The sixth title in the collection begins our point of interest: “The Lame Shall Enter First.” This title is reflective of the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. We see, for the first time in this collection, O’Connor creating her own version of the Bible. She creates a Bible for the fallen, focusing not on spreading the good news of Jesus Christ but on spreading the gospel of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s Omega point through characters both redeemed and condemned in parabolic stories. While the lame are not directly referenced in the Bible’s Beatitudes, it is not unexpected for O’Connor to use such an affliction as a means to enter Heaven. O’Connor makes use of physical deformity often in her work, usually to display someone either enlightened or in need of redemption. “The Lame Shall Enter First” is a title reflective of that need; it proves that redemption is both possible and required. Without redemption, one will face a fate like Sheppard—alone and condemned. The biblical titles in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* seem to follow a chronological order. After “The Lame Shall Enter First” comes “Revelation,” the title of the last book of the Bible and the harbinger of the apocalypse. Ruby Turpin does enter what appears to be a disastrous end to her life, but is saved by a vision of a grotesque rapture: “...A vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black

---

niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs” (O’Connor 508). At this, Ruby experiences a theophany—a divine manifestation that will bring her salvation. She realizes that she must look to the world—the white trash, the lower class—to discover herself. She has learned, in true O’Connor fashion, to look beyond her own soul.

By examining O’Connor’s works from a structural and sociological perspective, one can glean her theology, which, as it critiques a fallen world, also envisions a cosmic convergence. The Biblical chronology of the last four stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, however, makes this collection unique. As O’Connor neared her death and her own “Judgment Day,” perhaps she felt the pull to write about consequences of self-righteousness, as seen in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” “The Lame Shall Enter First,” “Parker’s Back,” and “Revelation.” Though these stories are religious in nature, no character is privileged enough to see the face of God: “‘Don’t you know who it is?’ he cried in anguish. ‘No, who is it?’ Sarah Ruth said. ‘It ain’t anybody I know.’ ‘It’s him,’ Parker said. ‘Him who?’ ‘God!’ Parker cried. ‘God? God don’t look like that!’” (O’Connor 529). Flannery O’Connor attempted to create a relationship between herself and the reader—her imprint on her work is especially evident when considering the influence of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin both on her life and her late work. O’Connor’s intentions do not show a simple moral truth. Instead, she tries to create through her writing some cosmic sense of Teilhard de Chardin’s Omega point in which everything is transfigured in a blinding point of revelation.

---

## Works Cited

- Ashley, Jack Dillard. "The Very Heart of Mystery': Theophany in O'Connor's Stories." *Flannery O'Connor's Radical Reality*. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, Eds. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2006.
- Beardsley, Monroe C. "The Authority of the Text." *Intention and Interpretation*. Ed. Gary Iseminger. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992.
- Coulthard, A.R. "From Sermon to Parable: Four Conversion Stories by Flannery O'Connor." *American Literature*. 55.1(1983): 55-71. 27 Oct 2008  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2925882>>.
- Dowell, Bob. "The Moment of Grace in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor." *College English*. 27.3(1965): 235-239. 27 Oct 2008  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/373114>>.
- Getz, Lorine M. *Flannery O'Connor: Her Life, Library, and Book Reviews*. New York: E. Mellen Press, 1980.
- Giemza, Bryan. "Catholic Minds of the South: A New Concert." *The Southern Literary Journal*. 39.1(2006): 133-136.
- Gleeson-White, Sarah. "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor." *Southern Literary Journal*. 36.1(2003): 46-57. 27 Oct 2008  
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2004000233&site=ehost-live>>.
- Hirsch, E.D. "In Defense of the Author." *Intention and Interpretation*. Ed. Gary Iseminger. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992.
-

- Ireland, Patrick J. "The Sacred and the Profane: Redefining Flannery O'Connor's Vision." *Realist of Distances*. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, Eds. Denmark: Aarhus University, 1987.
- Jordan, Michael M. "Flannery O'Connor's Writing: A Guide for the Perplexed." *Modern Age*. 47.1(2005): 48-57.
- Kahane, Claire. "The Re-Vision of Rage: Flannery O'Connor and Me." *Massachusetts Review: A Quarterly of Literature, the Arts and Public Affairs*. 46.3(2005): 439-461.
- Katz, Claire. "Flannery O'Connor's Rage of Vision." *American Literature*. 46.1(1974): 54-67. 27 Oct 2008 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2924123>>.
- Knapp, Steven and Walter Benn Michaels. "The Impossibility of Intentionless Meaning." *Intention and Interpretation*. Ed. Gary Iseminger. Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992.
- Martin, Carter. "Flannery O'Connor and Fundamental Poverty." *The English Journal*. 60.4(1971): 458-461. 27 Oct 2008 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/813164>>.
- McCarthy, John F. "Human Intelligence versus Divine Truth: The Intellectual in Flannery O'Connor's Works." *The English Journal*. 55.9(1966): 1143-1148. 27 Oct 2008 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/812300>>.
- Montgomery, Marion. "Fiction's Echo of Revelation: Flannery O'Connor's Challenge as Thomistic Maker." *Flannery O'Connor's Radical Reality*. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, Eds. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2006.
- Mott, Sara. "Flannery O'Connor's Unique Contribution to Christian Literary Naturalism."
-

- Realist of Distances*. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, Eds. Denmark: Aarhus University, 1987.
- Nisly, L. Lamar. "Wingless Chickens or Catholics from the Bayou: Conceptions of Audience in O'Connor and Gatreau." *Christianity and Literature*. 56.1(2006): 63-85.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "The Action of Mercy." *Kenyon Review*. 20.1(1998): 157-160. 27 Oct 2008  
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2000053638&site=ehost-live>>.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971.  
———. *The Habit of Being*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979.
- Park, Clara Claiborne. "Crippled Laughter: Toward Understanding Flannery O'Connor." *American Scholar*. 51.2(1982): 249-257. 27 Oct 2008  
<<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=1983023888&site=ehost-live>>.
- Presley, Delma Eugene. "The Moral Function of Distortion in Southern Grotesque." *South Atlantic Bulletin*. 37.2(1972): 37-46. 27 Oct 2008  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3197720>>.
- Robillard, Douglas, Jr. "Revisiting the Catholic Literary Imagination." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*. 53.1(2007): 174-182.
- Ruddell, R. et al. "The Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing." *Making Meaning With Texts*. Ed. Louise Rosenblatt. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2005.
-



- Shinn, Thelma J. "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace." *Contemporary Literature*. 9.1(1968): 58-73. 27 Oct 2008  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207391>>.
- Smith, Jon. "Politics and the White Southern Woman Writer." *Southern Literary Journal*. 37.1(2004): 67-72.
- Sonnenfeld, Albert. "Flannery O'Connor: The Catholic Writer as Baptist." *Contemporary Literature*. 13.4(1972): 445-457. 27 Oct 2008  
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1207441>>.
- Spivey, Ted R. *Flannery O'Connor: The Woman, the Thinker, the Visionary*. Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1995.
- Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *The Phenomenon of Man*. Trans. Bernard Wall. New York: Harper, 1959.
- Walker, Alice. "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor." *Critical Essays on Flannery O'Connor*. Melvin J. Friedman and Beverly Lyon Clark, Ed. Boston: G.K. Hall and Co, 1985.
- Whitt, Margaret Earley. *Understanding Flannery O'Connor*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1995.
- Wood, Ralph C. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004.
- . "'God May Strike You Thisaway': Flannery O'Connor and Simone Weil on Affliction and Joy." *Renascence*. 59.3(2007): 181-195. 27 Oct 2008 <<http://o-search.ebscohost.com.wncln.wncln.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mzh&AN=2007400751&site=ehost-live>>.
-

Works Consulted

O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969.

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *The Divine Milieu*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

---