2003 Second Place Critical Analysis

Flannery O’Connor Sees the Future: A Great Works Response

Works:

Two short stories by Flannery O'Connor: "Revelation" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge."

Synopses:

"Revelation": Mrs. Turpin, a proud and overbearing woman, enters a doctor's waiting room with her husband. While they wait, Mrs. Turpin converses amiably with the room's occupants while mentally judging them to be "pleasant" (492), "common" (491), or "whitetrashy" (491). Her self-righteous comments seem to disturb "the ugly girl," a college student who keeps glaring at Mrs. Turpin in a menacing way (490). Enraged by one of Mrs. Turpin's pronouncements, the girl attacks Mrs. Turpin and insults her. Mrs. Turpin returns home, but her formerly cheerful demeanor is altered and she begins to feel angry, bitter, and confused about her experience. She is unable to understand how she can be both a saved, choice individual and a "wart hog from hell" (505). Finally, Mrs. Turpin has a vision in which she sees "a vast horde of souls…rumbling toward heaven" in which white trash and lunatics come before dignified people whose "virtues were being burned away", giving Mrs. Turpin cause to reconsider her own opinion of herself and her virtues (508).

"Everything That Rises Must Converge": A young man, Julian, must accompany his mother as she rides the bus to her weight reduction class because she refuses to ride the newly integrated buses alone. Mother and son converse, revealing their conflicting value systems: the mother favors a return to the old, segregated social order and has a firm belief in the concepts of personal dignity and identity, while Julian derides his mother for her foolishness and champions social progress and the development of the mind. Julian is extremely upset by his mother's perceived naiveté and so he plan ways to teach her a lesson, most of them involving talking to black people or inviting them over for dinner, both prospects his mother would detest. A black woman and her son get on the bus, causing Julian's mother to be upset when the woman sits next to Julian. To make matters
worse, all four get off at the same stop. Julian's mother attempts to give the young boy a penny, an action the child's mother rebuffs, knocking Julian's mother to the ground in the process. Julian takes this opportunity to lecture his mother, telling her that her views are outdated and useless. His mother is so upset that she refuses to acknowledge him and begins to head for home on her own, only to collapse moments later. Julian rushes to her side and then runs off into the darkness, calling for help.

**Historical Significance**

Flannery O'Connor was born in Georgia in 1925 and published most of her works in the 1950s and 1960s. This era was a tumultuous time for the South and the nation as a whole, as racial and political issues caused conflict and violence. O'Connor's stories depict these conflicts and other issues such as family dysfunction, class conflicts, and crime. Her works portray the South in a state of decay and dishonor. However, these works also feature strong religious elements, evidence of O'Connor's Catholic faith and her place in the genre of Christian Humanism. Although her stories contain irony, satire, and violence, her message is often one of salvation by grace and the need for God. Her work shocked many with its grotesque elements and violent conflicts, but it paved the way for future writers to delve into the psychological underpinnings of Southern society.

**Analysis:**

Underlying many of Flannery O'Connor's short stories is a feeling of conflict and tension that, while not overtly expressed for much of the story, is nonetheless felt by many of the characters. This tension builds until it explodes into a forceful confrontation. One such conflict, which is central to both "Revelation" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge," deals with the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the older and younger generations. It might be tempting to view O'Connor's stories as simple arguments for progress in which the older "establishment" is hopelessly backward, misguided, and in need of a revelation from the rising generation of youth, but the author avoids such generalizations. She shows that both generations have good qualities as well as flaws and imperfections, and her typically ambiguous endings leave the reader wondering, as O'Connor herself must have wondered, what the future of society will be.
The characters of Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation" and Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises…" identify strongly with the values and traditions of the pre-integration South. Mrs. Turpin complains that "niggers don't want to pick cotton any more . . . because they want to be right up there with the white folks" (493), and sighs, "That's the way it's going to be from now on" (494), as though she is upset with the current situation. She also displays a certain disdain for young people, as she refers to Mary Grace, a college student, as a "girl" (490) and speaks to her condescendingly: "You must be in college . . . I see you reading a book there" (497). At times she joins Mary Grace's mother in discussing the girl's behavior as if she was not even there. Mrs. Turpin's speech, mannerisms, and overall demeanor show her to be firmly anchored in her own generation and derisive of those younger than she is. Julian's mother shares many of Mrs. Turpin's values and prejudices. She constantly moans, "The world is in a mess everywhere," often referring to the increased social equality of blacks or the degeneration of the upper-class white families (410). She holds many prejudices and expresses them often, as when she states, "I see we have the bus to ourselves" after noticing that everyone riding the bus is white (410). She is condescending towards blacks, treating them as if "she was being particularly gracious to an inferior" (417). Both Mrs. Turpin and Julian's mother cling to racial prejudices and show condescension toward those they consider below them or inferior, exemplifying the negative characteristics of their generation.

In both stories, a young person reacts to manifestations of old-fashioned values with disgust. Mary Grace, the college student who is portrayed as Mrs. Turpin's nemesis in "Revelation," stares at the older woman "as if she had known and disliked her all her life" (495). Mary Grace seems to disagree with Mrs. Turpin's fundamental views on life and is most upset when Mrs. Turpin makes comments that are overtly racist, self-righteous, or hypocritical. She attends college in Massachusetts where, presumably, she has been exposed to more progressive attitudes on race and social class that conflict with Mrs. Turpin's old-fashioned beliefs. As the story progresses, tension builds between Mary Grace and Mrs. Turpin until, finally, Mary Grace attacks Mrs. Turpin and tells her to "go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog" (500). Like Mary Grace, Julian in "Everything That Rises…" hates his mother's attitudes and prejudices. He accuses her of living "according to the laws of her own fantasy world," in contrast to his worldly, educated perspective (411). He believes in the supremacy of intelligence and learning, believing himself to be "free of prejudice and unable to face facts"
and insisting that "true culture is in the mind" (409). He holds progressive views and favors integration, even to the point that "when he got on a bus by himself, he made it a point to sit down beside a Negro, in reparation as it were for his mother's sins" (409). He constantly desires to teach his mother a lesson, and when the opportunity arises, he proudly tells her, "The old world is gone. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn" (419), a sentiment that echoes, in a more eloquent style, Mary Grace's crude indictment of Mrs. Turpin's character and value system.

On one level, the two stories illustrate the conflict between the older and younger generations and end, predictably, with the youth exposing the faults of the old. However, Flannery O'Connor presents a more complex picture, in which she admits that the older characters have some good qualities and the younger ones are deeply flawed. For example, Mrs. Turpin, while harboring prideful and prejudiced views, does make an effort to be pleasant to everyone, and "to help anyone out that needed it was her philosophy of life" (497). She is also quite religious and expresses gratitude for her blessings. Julian's mother also exhibits some positive traits. She has faith in her son's potential, insisting that he will soon succeed and excusing his quirks on the grounds that "he was still growing up" (411). She also sacrifices her own comfort for his benefit; for example, "her teeth had gone unfilled so that his could be straightened" (411). Julian's mother also retains a sense of personal dignity despite her "reduced circumstances" (408), insisting that the measure of true character is "in the heart…and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you are" (410). Both Mrs. Turpin and Julian's mother possess good character traits as well as negative ones, which prevent them from being classified strictly as "villains" in these stories.

Like Mrs. Turpin and Julian's mother, Mary Grace and Julian contain a mixture of characteristics. While some of their views are progressive, they are undeniably rude and unpleasant people. Mary Grace scowls at Mrs. Turpin throughout the entire story and even physically attacks her without direct provocation. According to her mother, Mary Grace is also "an ungrateful person . . . who is getting a good education, who wears the best clothes, but who can never say a kind word to anyone, who never smiles, who just criticizes and complains all day long" (499). Likewise, Julian hates everything his mother stands for and has "an evil urge to break her spirit" (409). After his mother is struck by the black woman, Julian takes advantage of her shame and
discomfort, vindictively telling her, "you got exactly what you deserved" (418). Julian's derision extends beyond his family circles to the rest of society: "It gave him a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation. It confirmed his view that with few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles" (412). Although Mary Grace and Julian are correct in identifying the flaws of the older generation, they are far from perfect themselves, harboring bitter and vindictive attitudes against, apparently, the entire world.

Flannery O'Connor portrays her characters in great depth, emphasizing both their virtues and their faults. While this tactic makes for interesting reading, it also creates ambiguity, leaving the reader wondering who the real "hero" of the story is and how one should feel about the outcome. The ambiguous endings of the two stories reflect what seems to be an ambivalent view of the future of society. While the rise of the younger generation to replace the old is inevitable, O'Connor expresses both hope and concern: hope that attitudes on race will change for the better and that hypocrisy will be eliminated, but concern for the seething anger and cold bitterness that many of the younger generation seem to cling to. Flannery O'Connor's short stories provide a view of a changing society, one which is trapped between a flawed past and an uncertain future, and even the author herself is not sure what the outcome will be.