2006 First Place Critical Analysis

Incidents on a Bus: Insights into Julian’s Egalitarianism

The South in the 1960’s was an uncomfortable blend of the Old Guard who remembered the prosperous days of moonlight and magnolia (or at least remembered the stories of those days) and their children who had to face the harsh realities of civil rights, poverty, and a New South. Children attended desegregated schools against parents’ objections; university students returned to their homeland only to be appalled by the blatant racism that prevailed in much of the region. Flannery O’Conner, a native Southerner, deals with these difficult relationships in her short story “Everything That Rises Must Converge” in which college graduate Julian reacts against his mother’s unashamed racism by going out of his way to treat blacks as equals. On a routine bus ride, Julian offends his mother by sitting next to a black man, tries to stop her from condescendingly giving a coin to a dark boy, and lectures her on the changing face of the South after the boy’s mother smacks her down. At first Julian seems to be a progressive Southerner who has overcome his mother’s prejudice; however, the war motif and Julian’s actions and thoughts on the bus reveal that his egalitarian behavior is only motivated by a selfish desire to get back at the mother he loathes.

Julian seems to be free from prejudice despite his mother’s insistence that life was better before the slaves were freed. In fact, he is so progressive that, when on a bus alone, he always “[makes] it a point to sit down beside a Negro” (438). He is embarrassed by his mother’s racism and actually cringes when she gaily says, upon seeing that every passenger on the bus is white, “‘I see we have the bus to ourselves’” (439). On this particular day, Julian sits next to a Negro man on the integrated bus and tries to silently communicate that he is not like his mother and the other bigoted Southerners who treat the black community unfairly. Julian continues to act the part of the civil rights activist when, after his mother is smacked by the offended black woman, he explains that the good old days are gone and she can no longer be condescending to an entire race. It seems
apparent that Julian is a model of progressiveness, a clear-cut proponent of rights for all, but upon closer inspection, his lack of racism is motivated by his personal vendetta against his mother.

That Julian has a personal vendetta against his mother is made clear by the war motif. He resents her from the first page—he must “[brace] himself” to take her to the Y (435) and considers himself “[a sacrifice] to her pleasure” for this hour (434)—but when he sits beside the Negro man on the bus, his quiet mutiny becomes out and out warfare with his mother. Before, he was almost a martyr who limited himself to muttering and malevolent glares, a disillusioned son forced to contend with his mother’s thoughtlessness, but now that he has “openly declared war on her” by defying the Southern tradition of self-imposed segregation, he feels empowered and is not willing to back down from what he sees as a fight with the woman who raised him (440).

Hence, the war motif continues throughout the rest of the piece; just as armies vie for the upper hand and press on to secure the victory, Julian, in sitting by the Negro, thinks he has the “advantage” and wants to “keep it and carry it though” so that he can defeat his mother and come out the victor in this contest of wills (441). He even refers to her hideous green and purple hat as a “ridiculous banner” (441). In ancient warfare, banners went at the head of armies as a declaration of which side was which. After her run-in with the affronted Negress, Julian’s mother is left sitting on the sidewalk with her hat on her lap; as the hat is her banner, her symbol, she has lost the war. Indeed, she never recovers, and Julian is the winner by default although his victory is a false one. As evidenced by the war motif, Julian clearly considers himself to be at bitter odds with his mother.

The war, however, is only inside Julian’s head; his mother is too weak and too loving to ever consider fighting her only child. She, “blinded by love,” would do anything for him; she worked to put him through college, sacrificed her own teeth for his, and even supports him now that his literary aspirations have been foiled (440). She cares so much for Julian’s welfare and good opinion that when she misinterprets his melancholy as a reaction to her new, too-expensive hat (Julian is actually characteristically thinking of himself), she “[stops] suddenly with a griefstricken look” and promises to return the hat (436). She won’t keep a new purchase if she thinks it will cause him pain; she will definitely never consciously struggle with him because she loves him completely.
She is also too weak to contend with her son. Although Julian insists on seeing the incidents on the bus—as a war between two enemies, his mother never takes a stand against him. When he sits by the Negro, she is not horrified as he intended, but hurt because she can’t understand why he would do such an incomprehensible thing. Her “eyes are battered” (440) and their innocent blue turns “a bruised purple” (442). Significantly, her eyes, the windows to her soul, are described in terms of a beating; this is no battle, but a one sided vindictive campaign by a son so wrapped up in himself he doesn’t realize he is fighting the one person who has always supported him. Julian, arrogant and unfulfilled, clings to his illusion that his mother is out to get him and is even surprised when “she [does] not take advantage of his momentary discomfort” (440) when his overture of friendship to the Negro man falls flat. While Julian fights for the advantage in his private battle, his mother, weak, loving, and somewhat oblivious, will not accept the upper hand at her son’s expense. Julian is bent on combating her and her way of life, but she isn’t even aware of the struggle.

Although the war may be inside Julian’s head, he insists of fighting it and attempts to uses his mother’s racism as a weapon in his battle, so his seeming lack of prejudice is not as praiseworthy as it first appears. Although he does sit by the Negro man on the bus, his true motive is revealed when the first thing he does is “[look] serenely across at his mother” (440). He moved not to protest the other passengers’ treatment of this man, but to strike at his mother, who is unable to understand him and only “[fixes her eyes] reproachfully on his face” (440) because she can’t even upbraid him. As the bus ride continues, he goes on to daydream of other ways that would offend her Old Guard sensibilities: he imagines making friends with black lawyers, joining a sit-in demonstration, or (this is his personal favorite) bringing home a “beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman” (441). Never once does Julian express a genuine wish to bridge the gap between the races; he only sees befriending black people as a way to send his bigoted mother’s blood pressure through the roof. So Julian is perhaps just as bad as she is because while she sees black people as inferior to whites, he sees them as mere tools in his battle. For example, when the Negress and her son board the bus, Julian, wishing to punish his mother, hopes the Negress will sit by her. According to the text, “he could think of no better arrangement” (442). He sees this stranger and her son as pawns in his game and wants them to sit as he wishes with no
thought for their desires or free will. He dislikes his mother so much that he thinks of people only in terms of how they will affect her, and he uses her born-and-bred racism against her.

Julian’s actions and thoughts also reveal that he is probably racist and definitely selfish. The text tells us that “[Julian is] free of prejudice and unafraid to face facts” (440); however, as the narrator is third person limited, or Julian himself, this claim is highly suspect and challenged directly when Julian, striving as ever to irritate his mother, admits to trying to make friends with “some of the better types” of Negroes, the doctors, clergyman, or lawyers (441). By attempting to be friends only with certain Negroes, he is implying that black people are, by and large, lower than he is and not good enough to serve his purposes. (A black lawyer would probably offend his mother more because the man’s degree would challenge her stereotypes about racial superiority.) Hence, Julian is possibly racist and definitely selfish because he takes no thought for the wishes of those hypothetical black doctors, clergymen, and lawyers.

His selfishness shows elsewhere in the story when, while lecturing his mother on the harsh truths of reality, he adds that “[the Negress] can wear the same hat… and it looked better on her” (445). This tag adds nothing to his speech about the evils of racism; it is petty and spiteful, and reveals that his dislike for his mother’s racism may just be founded in his dislike for his mother. Finally, in this same speech, when he should be full of righteousness as he confronts the evils of close-mindedness, all he can think of is the “house that had been lost for him” (445). He is referring to the family estate that was abandoned because funds were low; even when his mother is on the ground and he has the opportunity to tell her that equality is coming and coming soon, he is still thinking only of himself. Julian is clearly selfish, and his objection to all Negroes except the ones respectable enough to offend his mother implies that he is quietly racist as well.

The lines between prejudice and open-mindedness in O’Conner’s “Everything That Rises Must Converge” seem fairly straightforward at first, but Julian, as evidenced by the war motif and the incidents on the bus, is not nearly as unprejudiced as he thinks he is. He protests racism only to irritate his mother, and his petty battle does nothing for the plight of the black men and women in the Deep South. Julian’s mother is racist because she was raised that way; Julian prides himself on being unprejudiced but uses people in ways his
mother never would. Perhaps the true message of O’Conner’s story is a warning to look deeper than actions for the motives that lie beneath.