Several characters in Flannery O’Connor’s short stories “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and “Revelation” are quite ugly, either physically or character-wise; however, uglier still in these works of fiction is the decaying Southern society that frames and shapes these unpleasant characters. The time period these stories develop in is one of extreme racial tension and violence, culminating in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960’s; harmful and erroneous traditions and ideas held for centuries were finally declared to be wrong, much to the embarrassment of those benefited by the past societal structure, namely middle to upper class white citizens. In Flannery O’Connor’s two short stories “Revelation” and “Everything That Rises Must Converge” the moribund Southern society pervades and spoils all forms of interaction between the characters, particularly Mrs. Turpin, Mary Grace, Julian, and his mother.

Mrs. Ruby Turpin creates in herself a sense of entitlement and superiority that leaves an imprint on every relationship and interface she has with others. Complacent because “[Jesus] had not made her a nigger or white-trash or ugly,” (386) she does not bother to question the prevailing bigoted notions of the time; she rather embraces the small-minded and stereotypical social class system for it bolsters her pride and allows her to continue looking down upon other, “lesser” people. Ruby Turpin’s entire life revolves around her society and its stratifications; she “occupies herself at night naming the classes of people” (382) and names the people she comes into contact with based on superficial things that indicate one’s position in society, such as the “stylish lady” or the “white-trashy mother” or “the ugly girl” (383). She treats each person she comes across according to how they appear to fit into the social class system. Her relationships have no depth; her social interactions show no great concern for the individual, but rather the utmost interest in maintaining the status quo. For example, she holds an evident distaste for the “white-trash woman,” allowing her “the merest edge of her
attention” due to the woman’s lack of social poise (383). However, she continues to converse, if somewhat condescendingly, with her, because she knows that “you had to have certain things before you could know certain things” (384). Mrs. Turpin’s relationship with her husband Claud advertises hollowness and superficiality as well; their marriage remains one of socio-economic convenience and contains little veritable romance or affection. After the singular scene where the couple exchanges affections, where Claud kisses his wife, Ruby demonstrates no ardor for her husband. After the kiss she “continues to study the ceiling” with an “expression of ferocious concentration” as before (390). The kiss does nothing to affect her emotionally. Mrs. Turpin does not love her husband or hold a truly meaningful relationship with him. She holds no meaningful relationships with anyone. Rather, the best “friend” Mrs. Turpin has is the rigid social structure that she clings so desperately to.

Indeed, Mrs. Turpin reflects the Southern society at large in that she only adapts to her changing environment brought on by the Civil Rights Movement enough to continue living comfortably. She waves and greets the group of African-Americans that work in her field only as a show of affection, only to make the workers think they “read out of the same book” (384). Mrs. Turpin resists the looming societal changes in the South; she likes her social environment as is. After all, she benefits greatly from hailing from a more “respectable” class.

Mary Grace tears herself away from the stagnant mores of her homeland and grows bitter and hardened as a result. Her actions, such as throwing her book at Mrs. Turpin (389) and calling her and “old wart hog from hell” (391), reveal the immense anger she feels towards the narrow-minded and discriminatory ways of her peers. The disgust Mary Grace feels at the blatantly class-conscious traditions of her home causes her to be bitter and angry and lash out at others around her. She is removed from the hypnotizing customs of the South, to attend Wellesley College, a university in the northern United States known to promote liberal ideas (386). She opts for the extreme opposite view of race and class than her mother and her peers, unashamedly letting her distaste for such racist tendencies be known. However, Mary Grace has yet to entirely extricate herself from the grasp of her environment; her extreme hatred exposes her attachment to society. She can’t escape the bigoted, harshly unfair civilization she lives in, and behaves unreasonably insolently as a result.
Julian, who prides himself in having the “right” perspective of society and race, is equally guilty of making class distinctions and judgments as his mother; he simply goes about his racism in a different, more disguised manner. He, like Mary Grace, goes to college and emerges full of contempt for the unabashedly insular Southern society (399). However, Julian is not as “free of prejudice” (399) as he claims to be; he still very much views people in terms of their race or wealth, even if he thinks he does so favorably. He plots to befriend a “distinguished Negro,” one of the “better types” in order to cause distress in his mother (400). If Julian truly held no prejudices, he would hardly categorize an African American as such, and if he honestly took no thought to one’s income, he would not look down on the fact that his mother lives in a neighborhood of houses that are “bulbous, liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness” (395).

In reality, Julian remains shackled by the parameters of the society he lives in; he struggles against the prevailing social biases and tendencies yet fails to completely erase the constraints and stereotypes implanted in his head by the society he grew up in. Regardless of what he may think, his emotions and psyche are too tightly intertwined with his past and upbringing. Julian repeatedly dreams about his mother’s past, of the “decayed mansion” of her grandfather’s he cannot think of “without longing” (396). The mansion, a relic of the Old South and symbolic of his Southern roots, exudes “elegance” to him and he finds it more favorable than “anything he could name” (396). Regardless of what Julian consciously evaluates as his emotional attachment to his family and home, his pining for the mansion illustrates that his upbringing remains deeply rooted in his psyche. For this reason Julian fails to cultivate a healthy relationship with his mother, a paragon of Southern values. Part of him despises his mother and harbors “an evil urge to break her spirit” (397) while the other part remains with the old family mansion. The part of Julian that loves his mother feels “guilt and sorrow” when he brings about the situation that leads to her suffering an emotional breakdown (404). Julian does not “cut himself emotionally free of [his mother] and… see her with complete objectivity” (399) but rather the opposite. Unable to reconcile his upbringing with his current beliefs, Julian lives with inner turmoil and confusion.

Julian’s mother, very much an exemplary product of the society she was raised in, refuses to perceive other people in any way that differs from her preset outlook of the world. She clings to the old traditions and values she was raised with and bases her identity on her view of the ideal Southern class order, despite the
reality of the South being vastly different. Julian’s mother insists on behaving kindly to others, but not out of pure kindness; she acts courteously towards those “not of [her] kind” (395) because she has an inflated sense of dignity and pride in her ancestry and social status. Julian’s mother sees the world from a narrow slit, picking and choosing what to accept as fact. She forms an illusion in her mind, attempting to preserve the old social order of the South that she longs for so nostalgically. She only superficially acknowledges the impending, radical changes that loom in the horizon for the South; commenting on events such as the beginning of integration between whites and blacks she says “I don’t know how we’ve let it get in this fix” (398). Julian’s mother refuses to acknowledge the finality and significance of such advances as racial integration; her obstinacy similarly compares with the intransigency of the South in general towards correcting its backward traditions.

The problems of the characters in “Revelation” and “Everything that Rises Must Converge” reflect a deeper issue in the structure of Southern society. The characters refuse to look past such stereotypical and petty categorizations as black or white, rich or poor. The traditional structure of society and one’s expected behavior in it overpowers their consciousness and renders them unable to form deep and meaningful relationships. They fail to look past the facades of other people and see them for what they truly are – human beings, not lifeless figures or caricatures of a particular caste. Although an organized civilization can serve to aid its members, in the case of Flannery O’Connor’s stories, the members of society are slighted by its flaws and immoral customs.
Works Cited

