

Saved through
suffering in requiem
for a dream and
everything that rises
must con...

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Suffering plays a major role in Flannery O'Connor's short story "Everything That Rises Must Converge", and also in Rupert Selby's *Requiem for a Dream*. The two works take different approaches to suffering, however; O'Connor is concerned with the way that human nature and spiritual pettiness leads to suffering, while Selby specifically addresses the suffering caused by addiction and focuses on the body. Nonetheless, the approach to different causes of human suffering is not the major difference between the two narratives. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge", Flannery O'Connor offers some sense of redemption through suffering; it can be argued that her protagonist, Julian, is ultimately allowed a chance to be redeemed at the end of the story. In *Requiem For a Dream*, no such glimpse of redemption is offered. While both stories deal with human suffering in an unflinching way, O'Connor's narrative offers a glimmer of hope, while Selby's story is a cautionary tale of despair.

There are three primary sufferers in "Everything That Rises Must Converge". The first is Julian's mother, who is never named. Although the reality of her suffering is masked by the contempt that her son, Julian, feels for her, O'Connor conveys the hardship of the mother's life early on: "...[H]er 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 who was supporting him still, " until he got on his feet," she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town" (p. 1). For the reader, the mother's suffering is perhaps the most difficult to parse, because it is never actually expressed overtly as suffering. Hints can be found, however, in the indecision and

inability to make decisions that the mother demonstrates in relation to her new hat: “ She stopped suddenly with a grief-stricken look...’I’m going back to the house and take this [hat] off and tomorrow I’m going to return it...I can pay the gas bill with that seven-fifty’” (p. 2). The mother appears to be torn between the practical world of bills and the world of small indulgences, in which she allows herself to buy a new piece of clothing for herself.

Even more poignant, perhaps, is the pain that the mother feels regarding her son, Julian. The “ grief” in the quote above is in response to his “ long, hopeless, irritated” face. A few lines later, the mother expresses both shame and anger towards Julian when he accuses her of lacking a sense of identity and purpose:

“ Most of them are not our kind of people,” she said, “ but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am.”

“ They don’t give a damn for your graciousness,” Julian said savagely. “... You haven’t the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are.”

She stopped and allowed her eyes to flash at him. “ I most certainly do know who I am,” she said, “ and if you don’t know who you are, I’m ashamed of you.” (p. 2)

The mother’s suffering is powerful in that it unites the mundane and petty with the sublime; she simultaneously expresses racist sentiments, worries about her hat, and expresses love and pride in her son. This blending is typical of O’Connor’s work and reflects the author’s worldview: “...

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, 1987).

Along with the suffering that is experienced by Julian's mother, another way in which suffering is manifested is through the suffering of the African-Americans who appear in the short story. Although, on the surface, it appears that these characters are somewhat ancillary, it can be argued that their suffering is actually crucial to the climax of the narrative, in which Julian's mother is struck on the head with a purse. At the time that "Everything That Rises Must Converge" was written, the Civil Rights movement in the south was gaining momentum; it is no surprise, therefore, that racial tension is present in the story (Shinn, 2008). This is highlighted several times, such as Julian noting 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" (p. 3). This is reinforced when Julian moves to sit next to an African-American man on the bus later on after a white woman has moved away from sitting there; however, it is notable that the man never even acknowledges the shift, "He was either ignoring the change of seating or had never noticed it" (p. 6). Although O'Connor provides no further information about the mindset of the African-American man who "refused to come out from behind his paper", it is not difficult to imagine the degree of tension and fear that must surely have been present on an "integrated" bus. The wrong glance or move could spell disaster.

The irony, of course, is that it is the wrong gesture from Julian's white mother that creates the climactic moment. There is some indication that the "giant of a woman" who boards the bus with her young son is no stranger to suffering, either: "Her face was set not only to meet opposition but to seek it out. The downward tilt of her large lower lip was like a warning sign: DON'T TAMPER WITH ME" (p. 7). This stance implies that the woman has been tampered with in the past; it can be argued that her stance, although "seeking opposition", is actually one of deep defense. Julian is dimly aware of the inherent danger here, and tries to prevent his mother from showing charity to the little boy, but fails. The reaction of the African-American woman is one that expresses the sum total of the tension and suffering that has accumulated thus far in the story: "The huge woman turned and for a moment stood, her shoulders lifted and her face frozen with frustrated rage, and stared at Julian's mother. Then all at once she seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given one ounce of pressure too much" (p. 9). The woman's subsequent shout of, "He don't take nobody's pennies!" can be read as a protest against the trials and ordeals undergone by African-Americans during this historical time period and their resistance to the appearance of white "charity". It should also be noted that for an African-American woman to strike a white woman would have been extremely unusual and dangerous; in this way, perhaps, even the African-American woman attains some level of redemption by stepping up towards the perceived aggressor (Shinn, 2008; Crawford, 2008).

Of all the sufferers in “ Everything That Rises Must Converge”, Julian is perhaps the character who suffers the most. His suffering is of a psychological nature, rather than emotional; this is highlighted in the exchange between Julian and his mother before boarding the bus: ““ True culture is in the mind, the mind’, he said, and tapped his head, ‘ the mind’. ‘ It’s in the heart,’ she said, ‘ and in how you do things and how you do things is because of who you are’” (p. 4). Julian is tortured by his mother’s behavior, her “ small” pleasures, her faux middle-class sensibilities. Julian imagines himself to be an intellectual, and the disparity between his aspirations and the reality of his life is unbearable: “ He walked along, saturated in depression, as if in the midst of martyrdom he had lost his faith” (p. 2). Crawford (2008) states, “ 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” (p. 10). It can be argued that for this reason, O’Connor particularly emphasizes Julian’s suffering throughout the story, because ultimately Julian’s redemption is the central theme of the narrative. Julian criticizes his mother constantly for her parochial sentiments and her pettiness; yet O’Connor emphasizes the fact that his suffering in these matters stems from the fact that he himself actually behave in a judgmental and petty way towards his mother. He begrudges her even her smallest pleasures, although it is stated early on in the story that he lives with her and that she continues to support him financially. Julian is consumed with punitive urges: “ There was in him an evil urge to break her spirit” (p. 3). He wants to teach her a “ lesson”. One possible reading is that Julian’s suffering and psychological torment actually originates in the fact that his mother

seems, on some level, to have overcome her own suffering. There is a certain innocence and child-like air about the mother that is incongruous with her sufferings in raising a child alone as widow; this seems to be a great source of torment for her son. In fact, Julian's mother has arguably already achieved a form of redemption: " Ironically, to Julian's dismay, despite her condescension and racist feelings for the entire Black race, it is his mother who succeeds in establishing a friendly contact with the little Negro boy, playing hide-and-seek with him through her fingers" (Enjolras, 2009, p. 38). The implication is that, for all her faults, the mother may be more advanced spiritually than her son, Julian.

Ultimately, both violence and redemption lie at the heart of O'Connor's narrative. In speaking of O'Connor, Wood states, "...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, 2004, p. 181). When Julian realizes that his mother is truly injured and dying, his false intellectualism and petty suffering begin to crumble away: " 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!'" (p. 10). In the true moment of crisis, the language that Julian uses towards his mother is the language of love: " darling" and " sweetheart". Throughout the story, Julian has never extended a moment of grace or love, but his mother's violent death transforms him. The final words of the story hint that this is just the beginning of Julian's transformation: " The tide of

darkness seemed to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow” (p. 10). At first glance, this does not seem like redemption: how can the “ world of guilt and sorrow” be redemptive? However, when considering O’Connor’s orthodox Roman Catholic background, it becomes evident that grace is here after all, albeit hidden. According to Shinn, “ 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, 2008, p. 58). Julian has been ‘ struck’ in the spiritual sense, just as his mother was struck in the physical sense; grace and redemption are available through a reconnection with the “ heart” that his mother mentioned to him earlier in the story.

While redemption is conveyed through violence and suffering in “ Everything That Rises Must Converge”, it can be argued that it is almost entirely absent in Rupert Selby’s *Requiem for a Dream*. O’Connor deals with spiritual matters of the heart and soul, but Selby is more interested in the devastating effects of addiction. At the beginning of the novel, relationships and bodies are intact: Harry and Marion love each other, and Tyrone is willing to change his life by getting away from his destructive environment. Sara has ambition and dreams. For all of the characters, hope seems present and success is accessible.

This sense of choice and autonomy is soon stripped away. Once the characters become addicted to drugs, their choice is taken from them and suffering increases. In contrast to Flannery O’Connor’s narrative, there is no

overarching spiritual truth here that can offer redemption through suffering; there is only human folly and pain. In his introduction to the novel, Selby states, “ This book is about four individuals who pursued The American Dream, and the results of their pursuit. They did not know the difference between the Vision in their hearts and the illusion of the American Dream. In pursuing the lie of illusion, they made it impossible to experience the truth of their Vision. As a result, everything of value was lost.” (Selby, 2011, p. ii-iii).

The transition away from hope into despair is highlighted in contrasting passages within the book. Early in the narrative, the following description is given of Harry and Marion: “ She felt loved. She felt necessary. Harry felt real and substantial. He could feel all the loose pieces starting to fall in to place. He felt on the verge of something momentous. They felt whole” (Selby, 2011). Furthermore, the love that the two experience for each other is congruous with hope and belief: “...the night was comfortingly warm as the soft filtered light continued to push the darkness into the shadows as they held each other and kissed and pushed each others darkness into the corner, believing in each others light, each others dream” (Selby, 2011). The novel spends a great deal of time focusing on the body and sensations; these sensation are the source of immense gratification, as in the passage above and in many of the passages describing the intake of drugs, but also ultimately are the source of intense physical discomfort and pain. This focus on the body is intentional because it brings attention to desire, which is the root of addiction: “ These characters, in their struggle for corporeal and social differentiation, look externally, outside of themselves, to various

objects of desire, such as television, food, sex, relationships, and heroin” (Moreno, 2009, p. 219). In “ Everything That Rises Must Converge”, the source of suffering for Julian is the mind or intellect; in Selby’s novel, it is the body.

At the end of *Requiem for a Dream*, no redemption or glimmer of grace is forthcoming. All of the characters are in the throes of intense, unending suffering. This is summed up in the descriptions of Harry and Tyrone: “ Harry...felt his eyes closing and fought with everything in him to escape the blackness and the claws of its monster and get back to the dream of light as he descended into unconsciousness” and then “ For weeks Tyrone thought he was going to die any minute, and there were also times when he was afraid he wasn’t going to die” (Selby, 2011). Death is preferable to the agony of addiction, an agony that has no end, in Selby’s depiction of it.

In conclusion, both “ Everything That Rises Must Converge” and *Requiem for a Dream* deal with the themes of suffering. In O’Connor’s story, Julian, his mother, and the African-American characters she portrays all suffer in different ways. In spite of suffering, there is the suggestion of redemption at the end of the story, when Julian is forced out of his intellectual mind and into his heart through the violent death of his mother. In *Requiem for a Dream*, the focus of both suffering and pleasure is centered around the body, rather than the mind or spirit. In contrast to O’Connor’s work, the focus on the suffering created by addiction leaves no room for redemption; addiction ultimately destroys the lives of the main character irreparably.