

Old south vs new south



In Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," many deep-seated issues of the South are brought to the attention of the reader. While on the surface Julian, the protagonist, seems to reject the ideas of the old South such as slavery and racism toward African Americans, when one reads more closely, it is evident that his actions and thoughts do not correspond with his proclaimed beliefs. O'Connor's use of first person narration allows the reader to peek into the mind of Julian in order to observe his perception of the world. By giving the reader access to his thoughts, Julian's prejudices are much more apparent—which, in turn, reveals many unfortunate realities about the South. Without this narrative, it would be far more difficult for one to determine Julian's genuine feelings toward African Americans.

This short story presents a shift in the type of racism that exists in the United States post-Jim Crow. The relationship between Julian and his mother is representative of this transition from the old South, which is structured with principles that support slavery, racism, and segregation, to a "new" South, that claims to be in favor of the equality of whites and blacks. While Julian's mother clearly represents the ideals of the old South with her outright racist remarks such as "[African Americans] should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence"(2), Julian represents a new generation of forward-looking, open-minded individuals who supposedly reject the beliefs of the old South. This is problematic because many people, like Julian, may verbally reject the ideals of the older generation but are unaware that just because they are not explicitly racist does not mean that they do not have implicit biases that are arguably just as racist. Due to the first person perspective, the reader is able

to recognize that the new generation has a skewed perception that they are unbiased, progressive people who will eliminate racism from the South.

By using a fairly mundane scenario for this short story, O'Connor is able to demonstrate that these issues of racial tensions in the South were prominent in day-to-day life. After reading this story it is hard to believe that an ordinary task, such as taking the bus, is capable of revealing so many imperfections in the way that whites perceived African Americans. It is easy to forget, as a modern reader, how normal it was to regularly view African Americans as an inferior race, whether it was intentional or not. O'Connor, through her basic story, does not allow this fact to go unnoticed to the reader. Even though this story may seem simple on the surface, with a closer reading, more and more problems present themselves.

For those of the older generation, such as Julian's mother, the integration of the buses, as well as other forms of integration, makes them incredibly uncomfortable. When Julian and his mother get on the bus, everyone is white, and his mother remarks to the other passengers that " we have the bus to ourselves" (4). Unfortunately, this is representative of how many people who grew up in the old South felt about integration after Jim Crow laws were no longer in place. Later in the story, when an African American decides to sit in the front of the bus, Julian's mother whispers to her son " now you see why I won't ride on these buses by myself"(5). Reading the dialogue between the various white women on the bus gives the reader a sense of how purely racist many older people were in this time. While this is upsetting to the modern reader, this was the reality of the time. Earlier in the story, Julian's mother proudly reminds him that his " great-grandfather had a

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plantation and two hundred slaves” and that black people “ were better off when they were” slaves (2). Even though comments like these make Julian visibly upset, likely due to the college education he has had, his thoughts reveal quite the opposite.

Even though Julian vocalizes his opposition to the beliefs of this racist older generation through the dialogue with his mother, since the reader has access to his inner thoughts, his true perception of African Americans is not as unbiased as it may seem from the outside. If an outside observer was watching Julian, they would not necessarily be able to say that he was racist toward African Americans since he or she would be unaware of Julian’s intentions and reasoning behind interacting with them. However, to the reader, it is much more obvious that his purpose behind interacting with African Americans is to provoke his mother in order to “ teach her a lesson”(6). Using African Americans as a tool to upset his mother exhibits the unfortunate reality that many people did not view African Americans as humans. He is using African Americans for his own desires just as they were used as slaves on plantations. Julian does not show any indication that he actually cares about African Americans as people and seems to only think about them in a context of using them as a weapon against his mother. It is almost as if he is playing a game with his mother when he interacts with them. Julian even goes as far as fantasizing about his mother being “ desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her”(7). His thoughts about how he can make his mother suffer is disturbing for the reader because he finds it almost humorous. It is unsettling that Julian doesn’t recognize these thoughts as being racist in nature; this behavior

represents the internal prejudices that this new generation has toward African Americans in general.

Throughout the story, when Julian thinks of African Americans he is only capable of picturing “ some of the better types” who are highly educated doctors, lawyers, and the like (6). He clearly finds himself superior to the majority of African Americans. When Julian awkwardly asks an African American for “ a light,” despite the fact that he doesn’t smoke, it is obvious that Julian doesn’t know how to interact, even with small talk, with them. Even though Julian’s views are less extreme than those of the old South, it does not necessarily mean that they are less racist. While it may not entirely be Julian’s fault since his mother likely isolated him from the company of blacks, he only speaks of racial equality to annoy his mother, not out of any compassion for African Americans. This exemplifies that these racial prejudices are deeply rooted inside of him and other people in the new South.

The first person narration that O’Connor as well as many other southern writers use allow the reader to have exclusive access to the true thoughts and feelings of the main character. This allows the reader to understand and spot flaws in the character’s perception of his or her reality. For example, Julian is so sure that he isn’t racist since he constantly ridicules his mother; however, the reader is easily able to identify contradictions to his “ beliefs” by examining his thoughts toward African Americans. Even though this lack of awareness of bias is still prevalent today, in the post-Jim Crow South, the tensions between blacks and whites were much stronger due to a mixture of these two different forms of racism. Unfortunately, many southerners, like <https://assignbuster.com/old-south-vs-new-south/>

Julian, are unaware of their implicit or unspoken racism and do not realize that they are not treating African Americans as equals or even as humans. While many of his mother's comments make Julian "cringe," his thoughts are constantly flooded with ways in which he can use African Americans as a means to infuriate his mother. While many blatantly believed that they should never have stopped being slaves, others are more indirectly racist. Julian reveals that people are capable of being unintentionally racist toward a group of people despite feeling as though they are doing the opposite. The misconceptions that Julian has about himself are concerning to the reader because if he doesn't realize that there is a problem with the way he thinks about African Americans, then he won't know that he needs to change along with many others who are a part of the new South.

The end of slavery gave hope to African Americans because they now wielded more control over their own lives; however, they continued to face both the harsh, direct racism from those in the older generation as well as the more indirect, unspoken racism from those of the younger generation. As Julian helplessly watches his mother die at the end of the story, the reader is witnessing the death of the old South while the new South emerges to take its place. Unfortunately, the underlying prejudices of the two generations are essentially identical; they are just presented in different ways. Racism is deeply implanted into the minds of southerners whether they like it or not. O'Connor makes it evident that newer does not always mean better. The South is now full of white people who are blind to their own prejudices, and this poses problems for the South as a whole because they have a false sense of progress when, in reality, nothing has changed.