

Assignment: Write a literary research paper.

### **Cup of Sorrow**

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Most young people struggle to emerge from their parents' shadow while fashioning ways of expressing their own identities. In the normal course of events, sometimes after a few tumultuous years, they cast off parental guidance and begin to navigate their own passages through life. But some are caught like branches between the rocks that obstruct the water of a rushing river. Feeling victimized, they remain immobilized behind masks of pride carefully crafted to hide their fear. Looking for a scapegoat to bear their sins, they lash out at those closest to them.

Julian Chestny, the protagonist in Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge," is a tortured young man who blames his mother for his failures. A closer look into Julian's troubled mind, however, reveals that his indignation is not the result of an imperfect mother; rather, it is the cry of someone who is unable to reconcile his true identity with reality. It takes an act of grace in the form of violent aggression to shake Julian from his ivory tower of intellectual superiority and make him see himself for who he really is.

Julian is among the first generation of an aristocratic Southern family to live without benefit of wealth or standing in a newly integrated South. He is desperately struggling to come to terms with his identity under the formidable shadow of a mother defined by the South and what he considers its outdated mannerisms. He is the great-grandson of a slave owner and former governor of the southern state in which he and his mother live, and he is the grandson of a wealthy landowner and a grandmother who was a Godhigh. Mrs. Chestny has lost her wealth and aristocratic position. She is reduced to living a life of simple means in a world she defines as a "mess" (O'Connor 407). What enables her to be civil in the integrated society she despises is her unwavering belief in the manners and cultures of her upbringing (Bloom 47). Her "ardent faith in the primacy of manners" is, according to Harold Bloom, a major schism in Julian's relationship with her (47). She tells Julian, "I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am," to which Julian replies, "they don't give a damn for your graciousness. Knowing who you are is good for one generation only" (407).

Contributing to their fractured relationship is Mrs. Chestny's habit of mouthing "self-righteous moral platitudes," indicating her probable perception of herself as a "good Christian" (Walters 127). Mrs. Chestny's behavior likely stems from the predominant belief in the old South that Christianity is a birthright and not something someone consciously chooses as a personal act of faith. His mother's extravagant display of hypocritical Christianity may be why Julian appears to have "lost his faith" (407). In addition to preaching a homespun version of morality, Mrs. Chestny consistently oversimplifies difficult issues, making her appear ignorant to Julian. He responds to such hypocrisy by cultivating his intellect and ignoring his spirit. Through the character of Julian, O'Connor illustrates her belief that there are certain things in this world that cannot be explained outside of God, "where God is present to men and faith is never 'mastered by human intelligence'" (True 272). Julian's indifference to spiritual matters while worshipping intellect will eventually bring him precariously close to the precipice of self-destruction.

Mrs. Chestny's perception of religion is repugnant to Julian, but what offends him most is his mother's persistence in behaving like an aristocrat when in reality she is just a simple woman of simple means (Grimshaw 59). "They argue about true culture, which for Julian is only in the mind, [but] for his mother it is in the heart" (Grimshaw 59). Refusing to relinquish her aristocratic identity, Mrs. Chestny insists, "If you know who you are you can go anywhere" even if it is only to the local Y to mix with people who are not her kind (407). His mother's sense of identity is lost on Julian, who believes himself to be "more broadminded than his mother" (Martin 13). Julian sanctimoniously believes that his mother, who lived the life he only "dreams" of (408), couldn't possibly appreciate it as he could.

Julian claims he detests his mother's heritage, but secretly he relishes it. He uses it to fabricate an identity within his own reality. "Though outwardly he scoffs at her claims of aristocratic connections, inwardly he treasures the knowledge of his own superior heritage" (Walters 128). Julian feels conflicted when he envisions the mansion because it always remains "in his mind as his mother had known it" (408). He believes

his mother is out of touch with reality and unenlightened, but fails to recognize his own phantom retreat into his mother's past (Desmond 3).

Julian wants desperately to distinguish himself from everything in the South which he finds morally, intellectually, and aesthetically repugnant: its racism, its nostalgia for the glorious past; its (to him) petty concern with manners; its barren intellectual life; its insufferably banal social intercourse. (Bloom 46)

His retreat from the world is to no other than the mansion his mother grew up in (Walters 128). But the image of the irreclaimable plantation provokes such conflict for Julian that he never speaks about it "without contempt or . . . [thinks] of it without longing" (O'Connor 408). He is unconfined within his own imagination, yet he envisions the mansion not as an enlightened individual might, but with slaves living in it (408). Certainly it would be difficult for a progressive like Julian to admit that he is not different from his mother or his forefathers who saw nothing wrong with owning slaves. In this way he betrays himself. "He uses liberalism simply as a means of revenge against a past he both falsely idealized and nostalgically admires," and like his mother, he lives in his own reality (Denham 2).

Unable to express his contempt for the society he feels alienated from, Julian takes aim at his mother. She is a constant reminder that his desired reality is nothing more than a dream. Perhaps this is why Julian contemptuously refers to his mother as a child whenever he is upset with her. Like a jealous sibling, he offends her by remind her of what she can no longer have.

Julian is one of certain other O'Connor characters who are "caught in 'late adolescence' impotence so acute that they can direct hostility only against their protective, and often times patronizing and controlling mothers" (Bloom 46-7). Julian doesn't realize that "what he thinks he detests, he also loves and longs for" and "what Julian believes he is totally free of, he is, in fact, fearfully dependent upon," which is his mother (Bloom 47). As "one of O'Connor's ignorant intellectuals" who is educated but can't make a living, Julian is dependent on his mother to take care of him, blind to his own "intellectual arrogance and savagery" and doesn't see his total reliance on his mother (Baumgaertner 108). He doesn't understand that his mother has sacrificed everything to ensure his success, yet he ends up selling typewriters for a living (Denham 2). Mrs. Chestny struggled to give Julian all the advantages she believed he should have as a Chestny, and yet Julian "could not forgive her that she had enjoyed the struggle and that she thought *she* had won" (411). He mistakenly believes he has been martyred on her behalf and insists that he alone was responsible for raising himself out of their dismal circumstances (McFarland 2). But "his is a martyrdom without spiritual content (Baumgaernter 108). It exists only in his mind.

Julian's behavior is that of a child who expects his mother to service his needs without having to give anything in return. His reliance on her is based on his refusal to group up. Julian wants to be taken care of. His mother's heritage represents a prefabricated, supposedly secure existence that he feels robbed of, thus leaving him to forge his own way in society, but he knows that he will never be able to make a living (406) so he acts like a spoiled child, transferring his resentment to his mother, who has become his caretaker. Like a bird high in his perch, Julian views his mother from a position of moral and intellectual superiority, smugly believing he can "see her with absolute clarity" (411).

Julian not only resents his mother, but anyone he regards as his intellectual inferior. "Playing the intellectual sophisticate, he sees his task as instructing the unenlightened, especially his mother, in the ways of true culture which he believes are always defined in terms of the mind" (Denham 2). However, Julian's intellectualism is "shallowness and pretension" (Denham 3). He smugly ordains himself above his surroundings while evading his racial duplicity by avoiding people or using them as pawns in his infantile game to annoy his mother (O'Connor 412). To her credit, Mrs. Chestny at least tries to live within her surroundings even though she is uncomfortable with the people who inhabit them. In contrast, Julian favors living "three miles" from the nearest neighbor. He isn't really offended by his mother's racial prejudice because he isn't capable of feeling compassion for people (Denham 3). He doesn't much like people nor does he have much regard for their mental capacity. He spends most of his time within the inner sanctum of his mind. It is "the only place where he felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows" (411). It is easy for Julian to measure himself

against the shortcomings of others because he never risks emotional failure himself. Instead, he withdraws into a “kind of mental bubble” whenever he is uncomfortable with his surroundings (411). In his sanctuary, he is safe from “any kind of penetration from without” (411) and is able to single-handedly judge “the intellectual bankruptcy of the rest of mankind (Browning 103).

However, Julian’s flight from humanity is futile because his intellectualism is simply the way in which he escapes the reality of himself (McDermott 3). In a letter to author John F. Desmond in December 1963, Flannery O’Connor wrote that her characters retreat into “abstract intellectualism” and isolation to avoid growth and union with others (Desmond 2). The result is a person who isolates himself from all he detests until he has only himself (McDermott 2). Jill Baumgaertner relates Pierre Teilhard de Chardin’s supposition that if we isolate ourselves, we lose ourselves, and to find ourselves we must move toward one another. According to de Chardin, it is our “originality” and not our “individuality” that defines who we are, and in order to find ourselves, we must unite with others (qtd. in Baumgaertner 110). Due to his immaturity, Julian doesn’t trust or understand his uniqueness as an individual. Instead of expressing himself within a society he doesn’t like, he loses himself as an individual apart from society. He hides behind a mask of indifference and intellectualism in the safety of his own reality.

Unfortunately for Julian, his reality is not impenetrable. His dependence on his mother is a piercing reminder that he is not who he envisions himself to be. Consequently, Mrs. Chestny, by default, bears the brunt of her son’s utter contempt for mankind. Author Dorothy Walters suggests a person’s angst about society begins initially when he is a baby dependent upon his authoritarian mother. The mother is the first in society to tell the child what he can or can’t do. When the child grows up and can no longer tolerate society’s rules, he retaliates. He now wants the mother punished for how he believes society has failed him. But Walters points out that because children are so closely linked with their parents, an attack on the mother is not only an attack against society but also an attack against the self. A child’s desire to injure his mother is evidence of deeply buried hostilities.” The child either harms the parent or harms himself through “spiritual withdrawal” (Walters 143-44). Julian contemplates harming his mother, thinking he could “with pleasure have slapped her [his mother] as he would have slapped a particularly obnoxious child in his charge” (414). As it turns out, Julian doesn’t physically harm his mother, but he does cause her great emotional trauma that indirectly leads to her death.

Throughout the story, Julian imagines ways he can teach his mother a lesson through what she would consider unacceptable interaction with African-Americans 9414). All the delusive scenarios are concocted to provoke his mother to anger. Julian acts out the behavior of young progressives who “seek to expiate the sins of the parents by openly accepting [what Mrs. Chestny believes are] their inferiors” (Walter 128). When a well-dressed, obviously professional black man takes a seat across from Julian, Julian purposefully gets up and sits down next to him not so much to declare allegiance to the black race as to “declare war” on his mother (McDermott 50). But Julian’s attempt to engage the black man in an intellectual conversation “about art or politics or any subject that would be above the comprehension of those around them” is met with indifference and finally annoyance (412-13). That particular opportunity to enlighten his mother fails. However, when a rancorous black woman and her young boy board the bus, Julian smiles at the situation that is rife with possibilities to teach his mother a lesson. Unbeknownst to Julian, the outcome will shock him to his core.

Julian wants to see housemother punished but is unable to execute this except through verbal attacks on her or inept interactions with people of the black race. When the black woman boards the bus, Julian notices she is wearing the same hat as his mother. His reaction is like that of a mischievous child who has just hatched an impish scheme. He revels in the irony of the situation and flashes his mother a smile that bespeaks: “Your punishment exactly fits your pettiness. This should teach you a permanent lesson” (416).

The black woman reminds Julian of his mother, but the woman bears similarities to Julian as well. The woman “personifies the insidious gradations of his angry mind” (McDermott 3). Unexpectedly, Julian’s neurotic fantasy with his mother lying desperately ill (416) becomes a reality, and he gleefully seizes the opportunity to knock his mother once and for all from her aristocratic pedestal.

Nothing illustrates Julian's callous insouciance more than the way he treats his elderly mother, who has just suffered a violent attack. Incredibly, as she sits wounded and disoriented on the sidewalk, Julian insolently launches into a bitter diatribe ordering her to face the reality of a "new world and telling her to "buck up . . . It won't kill you" (419). Her physical well being is of no concern to Julian as his thoughts selfishly play back to the "house that had been lost for him" (419). It's the moment he has been waiting for, when he exacts retribution on his mother and the society he believes has failed him.

The son Mrs. Chestny raised so sacrificially has become a total stranger to her. Instead of giving her the comfort she so desperately searches his face for in her final moments on earth, Julian completes the violent attack she suffered only moments before. McDermott contends it isn't the attack on Mrs. Chestny that kills her. Rather, he says, she died from looking into her son's face and seeing nothing (4). The "nothing" that she sees as her eyes "rake" her son's soul is "the equivalent of the total absence of goodness in Julian's now vacuous spirit" (McDermott 2). Pride killed his humanity and his ability to feel compassion. Julian resembles Satan more than God, pouring salt in his mother's physical wounds with angry taunts instead of words of mercy, admonishing her like a child and saying, "I hope this teaches you a lesson" (O'Connor 419). However, it is Julian who is about to learn a lesson of tragic proportions.

A rush of sorrow engulfs Julian as the gravity of the situation suddenly dawns on him. He is beside himself with anguish as his mother crumples on the sidewalk and falls "at her side crying 'Mamma, Mamma!'" (420). But he is like a child unable to offer his mother any consolation, in need of consolation himself. Everything he has believed in and relied on as a source of identity fails him in this moment of greatest need. "Julian's perverse intellectualism suddenly pales before the stark reality of his mother's death" and his belief that "he had cut himself emotionally free from her and could see her with complete objectivity" is nothing but a sham (Denham 3). Julian now recognizes his dependence on his mother.

He has been sheltered from convergence with the world by his mother, who has been willing to deflect his pathos and foster the belief that he will eventually become something. Mrs. Chestny's attribution of Julian's dour attitude to his immaturity and inexperience only serves to contribute to his dependence on her. Absolved of accountability, Julian is free to hide behind the masks of pride and intellectualism in order to remain detached from society. O'Connor believed people resist convergence and that it takes a tragedy to force them out of isolation and into the light of their true identity (Desmond 2). The tragedy that forces Julian's convergence is his mother's death. Some critics speculate that Mrs. Chestny doesn't die at the end of the story, but if that were true, then the point of the story would be lost. Julian gets his wish to see his mother punished, but it is Julian who "enters the world of guilt and sorrow" (Denham 4).

Mrs. Chestny experiences her own convergence as she struggles to find solace in a familiar face. Not finding it in her son, she must resort to memories of the "Negro" nurse of her childhood. The fact that she has to summon a memory from as far back as her childhood suggests that she has led somewhat of an isolated life herself. But it is Julian, not his mother, who has shirked the responsibility of forging survival for the self. "His perversions of her [his mother's] real values and his own prideful isolation have fostered a moral adolescence in which he has no mature spiritual identity" (Denham 4). When his mother dies, Julian must face his own true self. "He must face the void alone" (Denham 4).

Julian reaches a crisis as he loses the one person on earth he depends on. He experiences an epiphany of life-altering proportions that will force him to connect with the rest of humanity, to rise and converge. O'Connor referred to the one thing that stops people from rising as sin (McFarland 2). Julian had led a life of one or all of the following: "entrenched pride; willful sin; deliberate rejection of God, or possibly all three!" (Martin 120). He is "the personification of pride" as evidenced by his treatment of his mother. Julian's pride has been "so consuming" that he hasn't even been aware of how it has been changing him. The tragic violence against his mother brusquely opens his eyes to his true self, and that is what traumatizes him (McDermott 2). Julian's pride has caused him to lose his faith, but his moment of greatest sorrow is about to become his moment of greatest grace.

Many of O'Connor's stories concern God's love and man's ability to save his soul as he receives the love as a gift of grace. Before the tragic loss of his mother, Julian had difficulty accepting Christianity and

the principle of divine grace as a result of his modern, rationalistic intellect (Drake 273). After his mother's death, Julian becomes one of O'Connor's characters who "are clearly in acceptance of grace after having lived insensitive to it" (Martin 133). Part of God's love is helping man to recognize His love (84). Mrs. Chestny's death forces Julian to confront "his betrayals and denials of love" (McFarland 3). At the end of the story, Julian is seen running toward the lights, but "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" (420). The lights might be seen as the salvation of Christ. The "guilt and sorrow" indicate the inevitable struggle Julian will face as he struggles to live less selfishly and more transparently, sharing the sufferings of Christ.

Julian's excessive pride causes him to lose all touch with reality and subsequently destroys his spirit (McDermott 2). Too proud to admit that he is bitter at having lost his heritage, Julian hides behind a mask of intellectual superiority in order to isolate himself from human connections. The consequence is total dependence on his mother, causing him further bitterness and ultimately preventing his entrance to adulthood and his convergence with humanity. The violence he witnesses is a result of his unwillingness to accept his true identity within "the corporate unity" (Desmond 68-9). The death of Julian's mother is the "terrible means by which he can grow towards maturity" (Denham 5-6). It is, for Julian, a moment of grace. It is the moment he "crosses over into maturity and knowledge" (Martin 132). It is the moment he finally breaks loose from the tethers of deception and makes the choice to be a victor and not a victim—to become the captain of his own soul in the sea of humanity. Exactly how Julian navigates that sea remains a mystery to the reader except to know that he will, by choosing grace, inevitably partake of the cup of sorrow that accompanies the circle of love.

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