

# **Everything That Rises Must Converge Study Guide**

**Everything That Rises Must Converge by Flannery  
O'Connor**

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# Plot Summary

Because this was O'Connor's last work, she considered it the culmination of all the themes and elements she had written about thus far. What is striking about all of O'Connor's stories is her use of setting. O'Connor uses the South as a means of supplying motivation; rather than having the setting be only a place where the action takes place, the South allowed O'Connor to create characters and situations that were extremely real and lifelike. Because the South is steeped in historical drama, many different people hold deep discrimination toward others. The presence of religion created a strong sense of perfection and pleasantries; however, these covered up hostile feelings for anyone who was different from the norm. Because she lived many of her years in Georgia, O'Connor was able to take these feelings she witnessed during her childhood and translate them onto the page.

Because the main characters all have personality and moral defects, O'Connor famously uses her "grotesque" sense of justice in order to teach a lesson. Like a parable, she wants to show her readers how these problems don't pan out well. Most of the main characters all suffer from the death of either themselves or a loved one. They live their lives in self-satisfaction for so long that they don't see the error of their ways before it is too late. Heart attacks, strokes, even being killed by a bull's horn are all forms of justice in O'Connor's eyes. It may seem extreme, but O'Connor wants to make a point by not allowing many of her main characters to justify their actions and feelings.

For instance, Sheppard from "The Lame Shall Enter First" and Thomas in "The Comforts of Home" are both two characters that live in self-satisfaction and follow their own morality. Sheppard believes he is doing amazing work in the world, but he is only giving himself the glory. But when he finally realizes that his smugness is hurting his son, his son had killed himself. Thomas sees Star is an embarrassment to his family, but he struggles to find the strength to fix the situation. Yet when he tries to shoot her, he accidentally shoots his mother. Unfortunately, his mother was the person he was trying to protect from Star. It is situations like these which create complex, and sometimes intense, forms of justice for the characters.

O'Connor's stories fall into the southern gothic genre along with others like Tennessee Williams and William Faulkner. Characteristics of this genre are the southern setting, realistic southern dialogue, strong religious presence, and a sense of the monstrous. Characters are typified by their judgmental and hypocritical personalities. The judgment these characters receive are often painful, agonizing, and over-the-top. Another characteristic of the southern gothic genre is the occurrence of family. Each of the stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* shows family is important in the South. However, the family dynamic in these stories is extremely dysfunctional. Mrs. May in "Greenleaf" thinks her two sons are failures; they haven't been able to become successes, so they mooch off her and her farm. Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" can't see his son is suffering from his wife's death. Instead, he thinks his ten-year-old son should be an adult and forget about his sadness.



# Everything that Rises Must Converge

## Summary

The story takes place in a southern city in the late 1960s. Julian, a college graduate, is escorting his mother to the YMCA for a weight-loss class. After the recent integration of black and white people, Julian's mother refused to ride the bus alone. Before leaving, she puts on a ridiculous hat Julian finds revolting. However, he must flatter her or she will break down and pitch a fit. As they walk, his mother brags her grandfather was once a proud slave owner of over 200 workers. Julian rebukes her for thinking slavery was a good idea. His mother, though, says she believes black people should be free. However, she wants them to be free separately from white people. Julian decides to amend for his mother's prejudices, he will sit next to a black person on the bus.

Right before they board the bus, Julian takes off his tie and rumples his appearance. His mother is abhorred and accuses him of looking like a thug. He retorts, telling her culture is defined by the mind rather than by appearances. She begins to throw a tantrum, though, so he straightens his appearance back up. They get on the bus, and Julian's mother exclaims she is relieved because no black people are riding. As she chats with the other passengers, Julian withdraws into his mind and judges his mother because of her discriminatory beliefs. He doesn't hate her, though, because she worked hard to put him through college.

A black man soon boards the bus and sits beside Julian. To make his mother uncomfortable, Julian tries to start a conversation with the man. However, he is unable to speak and instead feebly asks for a lighter, even though there is a no-smoking policy on the bus. He realizes he failed this attempt at humiliation, but he figures he can ignore her when they get off the bus; then she will be worried because he is angry. Julian then resumes daydreaming about bringing home black people to eat dinner, even possibly marrying a black woman in spite of his mother's reactions. But he knows he could never do any of these things. Julian can't connect with black people.

Soon after, an angry-looking black woman and her son board the bus. The little boy sits beside Julian's mother, and the woman sits beside Julian. Julian's mother enjoys the boy because she loves children of any color. The black woman, though, angrily chastises her son and calls him over to her. Julian then realizes the black woman is wearing the same ugly hat as his mother, and he hopes it will teach his mother a lesson. As the bus approaches the stop, Julian realizes his mother will try to give the child a coin, something she does with all children. When Julian, his mother, the black mother, and her child get off the bus, Julian's mother tries to give the child a penny. The black mother is angry at the "charity," and she swings her purse knocking Julian's mother down.

As Julian's mother tries to get up, he takes the time to lecture her about being condescending toward black people. He says they don't like being given handouts. He



hopes she learned her lesson. He realizes, though, his mother has a strange look on her face as she is stumbling around the sidewalk. She calls for help, and Julian begins to run to get a doctor. But he quickly returns and finds her face completely distorted as she dies in his arms.

## Analysis

Both Julian and his mother exemplify people who believe they are better than others. His mother is cognizant of her whiteness, and she flaunts it like she is superior to black people. She refuses to ride the bus alone in case there are black people. She also thinks integration was a bad idea. She revels in her memories of her grandfather's plantation home and being cared for by her "darky" nurse, Caroline. However, she has extreme sympathy for some people—the half-white, half-black people in the world. In her mind, it must be difficult to be so close to a white person only to be tainted by black ancestry.

Julian also believes he is superior, yet his is different from his mother's form of superiority. Because he graduated from college, he believed his mother's mental capabilities were inferior to his. He also believed her morals were extremely skewed because of her hatred of black people. He thought, because of his education, he was able to look past people's race and instead focus on their personality. However, Julian could not even strike up a conversation with a black person. He had some mental block that kept him from speaking to black people. When he tried to speak with the well-dressed black man, he was only able to mutter "Do you have a light?"

Regardless of what Julian actually thinks of black people, he only uses them in order to upset his mother. They are mere tools in order to manipulate his mother's feelings. He knows she cannot stand being near black people, so he daydreams about presenting them as "friends" to prove to his mother she is wrong. He doesn't care about them or their feelings. It is his own selfishness pushing him to put up with their presence.

## Vocabulary

Jaunty, bulbous, monstrosities, atrocious, saturated, martyrdom, jerkily, threadbare, reparation, pursed, vile, preposterous, icily, reformatory, malevolent, idiocy, obscured, serenely, reproachfully, deterred, stolidly, sonorous, stilted, crepe, bristling, ponderous, incipient, contagion, vehemently, raked, gratuitously, unmoored



# Greenleaf

## Summary

Greenleaf" takes place on a dairy farm in the South during the middle of the twentieth century. Mrs. May, a Christian woman, has two older sons, but neither helps her with the farming duties. So fifteen years earlier, she hired Mr. Greenleaf to be the caretaker. He brought with him two sons, five daughters, and an extremely spiritual, but neglectful, wife. Mrs. May is dismayed nobody will help her remove a bull from her property. It wakes her up at night, and she is afraid it will impregnate her own cows. The next day, she asks Greenleaf to get rid of the bull. He tells her that would be next to impossible; the bull has escaped from all kinds of pens. Her two sons humorously tell her the bull belongs to Greenleaf's sons. The two successful brothers live on the property next to Mrs. May's; she always wanted them to be her sons because she didn't understand how two well-off boys had come from such a lazy family like the Greenleafs.

Mrs. May went to visit the two Greenleaf boys to come and recapture their bull, but they weren't home. Their black help told her the boys didn't want the bull anymore. Mrs. May threatened if they didn't remove the bull by the next day, she would have it shot. But the help told her the Greenleaf boys didn't care whether or not the bull was alive since it was so difficult to keep caged. Mrs. May was upset they weren't going to help her, so she decided Mr. Greenleaf would be the one to shoot the bull. She thought that it would "teach" the Greenleafs to take her seriously. Before she left, though, she went to their own hi-tech dairy the government helped build. She was impressed, but she thought her small operation was better.

The next day, she sees the bull is still wandering around her yard. She thought the Greenleafs were testing her resolve, so she called on Mr. Greenleaf to get his gun. She drove him out to the pasture where the bull was grazing and told him to get out and shoot the bull. As Greenleaf approached, the bull ran over the hillcrest and into the woods. She got out of the truck and lay on the hood to rest in the sun. Minutes later, she awoke to see the bull charging toward her. In slow motion, she realized the bull had gored her through the heart just as Mr. Greenleaf was able to shoot it dead.

## Analysis

Mrs. May defines herself as a Christian woman. She believes a person should work hard for his or her own belongings without receiving outside help, the Protestant Work Ethic. She believed in giving to the less fortunate and doing good deeds. However, she could not be happy for other people's success. Her feelings about the two Greenleaf boys are a good example of this. She sees they have successful lives with a prosperous dairy operation. She even wishes they were her own children. However, she cannot get past her own children's "failures" in order to be happy for the Greenleafs. Also standing in her way is her opinion of Mr. and Mrs. Greenleaf. She believes Mr. Greenleaf is lazy



and ungrateful. However, her opinion of Mrs. Greenleaf is worse. She is appalled by Mrs. Greenleaf's form of spirituality, which consists of lying on the earth and crying. Mrs. May sees all the Greenleaf children running around with dirty clothes, and she doesn't understand how the two boys were able to rise from that kind of family and flourish.

What makes the dynamic between Mrs. May and Greenleaf odd is Mrs. May believes she has had a firm hand in all the farm operations. She believes the farm's success is built upon her own hard work and sweat. Yet she gets Mr. Greenleaf to do all her work for her. He practically runs the farm. It is because of Greenleaf the dairy has remained in working condition, yet she takes all the glory for his toils. The difference between the two is Greenleaf (and his family) represent nature. Greenleaf works on the farm, and the two boys have learned how to work the land like their father. Mrs. Greenleaf even "communes" religiously with nature.

Because of her firm resolve that she is a right and just woman, she feels like the world should revolve around her and her wishes. That explains why she is so upset that nobody will get rid of the bull on her property. The bull represents chaos and disorder—nature—on the pristine and kempt land of Mrs. May. Whereas Mrs. May wants to control everything in her power, the bull cannot be contained. The only way she can restore order to her land is to have it killed. She then makes Mr. Greenleaf kill the bull. Greenleaf knows the bull is uncontrollable, but Mrs. May refuses to listen to him. Unfortunately, Mrs. May's obstinacy resulted in her death.

## Vocabulary

Venetian, gaunt, uncouth, wallow, menacing, chalice, aping, rheumatic, entailed, chalice, morbid, guttural, winced, silage, pensions, bungalow, exasperated, brittle, incredulous, taut, ambling, forage, rotary, stanchions, insolence, diminished, asinine, wallowed, loitering, demented, tactfully, shyster, gait



# A View of the Woods

## Summary

Grandfather Fortune is an old man who lives in the South. He and his granddaughter, Mary Fortune, are starting over his land where construction equipment is clearing out the land. Mary Fortune and her grandfather share the same physical traits, and he believes Mary will follow in his footsteps to become a successful businesswoman. Grandfather Fortune believes in the future of development, and he wants to push progress in the town; in order to do this, he sells off bits and pieces of his land to developers. Another reason, though, was he wanted to upset his children. He thought one particular daughter and her husband, the Pittses (Mary's parents), wanted him to die so they could take all his land. Because he didn't think they were worthy of his land, he didn't want any left for them after he died.

As the two sat, Mary got up and started playing amidst the construction machines. Grandfather Fortune told her to stop, but she refused to listen. He began getting angry, but he knew he wouldn't do anything about it. He knew Mary's father beat her because he saw Pitts beat his daughter in the woods one day. Grandfather Fortune had followed them and he stood behind a boulder and watched. Then Pitts left the girl alone in the woods. When Grandfather Fortune came to comfort Mary, Mary said nobody beat her. She said if someone had beaten her, she would have killed him. Grandfather Fortune knew Pitts was trying to drive a wedge between Mary and himself, and he had to figure out a way to get even with his son-in-law.

Grandfather Fortune decided to sell the plot of land across from the Pitts' home. He wanted to put in a general store so he didn't have to drive very far in order to get his groceries. He also knew this would upset the Pittses because they let their cows graze on that land. The store would also obstruct their view to the nearby woods. Grandfather Fortune thought Mary would agree with him, but he didn't realize Mary had such a strong attachment to the view of the woods. She began to oppose him and grew more obstinate when he tried to mention the general store. After Grandfather Fortune and the store owner signed the contract, Mary threw a bottle at the two of them. Grandfather Fortune forced her into the car. He realized he had been too lax with her and decided that she needed to be beaten. He pulled over in the woods and tried to whip her, but she began to beat him up. When Mary finished, he grabbed her neck and bashed her head on a rock. Grandfather Fortune then died of a heart attack while looking at the construction site.

## Analysis

Grandfather Fortune is an interesting character. He feels a strong attraction to his granddaughter, Mary Fortune. He never refers to her simply as "Mary," but as "Mary Fortune." He wants to disregard her lineage as a Pitts, so he thinks of her as his own





daughter. In his mind, she completely supports all his endeavors for “progress.” In reality, though, he thinks Mary hates her parents and wants to get even with them.

In some way, Grandfather Fortune is narcissistic. By seeing himself in Mary Fortune, he is essentially seeing himself as Mary Fortune. This is most apparent in the last scene when Grandfather Fortune is beaten by Mary. The text says “the old man looked up into his own image,” meaning Grandfather Fortune had sabotaged himself. By pampering Mary Fortune and giving into her whims, he was only pampering himself. Even wanting to leave all his wealth to Mary was his way of leaving the land back into his own hands. He saw Mary’s life as a continuation of his own, so he fostered her in an environment that promoted selfishness and self-preservation. But when those traits manifested and turned against him, Grandfather Fortune saw he had made a mistake. He then grabbed Mary’s neck and “brought it [her head] down once hard against the rock.” He even disassociated himself from Mary, referring to her body as “it.”

## Vocabulary

mulberry, embankment, corrugated, gullet, flrid, irascible, sullen, affliction, contorted, relish, deign, mulish, quartz, quaver, prostrate, languid, scurry, astride, ward, jardinières, mortification, emphatic, profusion, incredulous, pique, jovially, imperious, hellion, corrugated, gaunt



# The Enduring Chill

## Summary

Asbury Fox, a young college man living in New York, arrives back in the South to stay with his mother and sister at the family dairy farm. Asbury is extremely ill and believes he is going to die. His mother and sister come to pick him up at the train station. His mother tries to convince Asbury he isn't going to die. She says all he needs is a little work and fresh air in the South. He refuses to see Doctor Block, the town doctor. His sister, Mary George, said Asbury was faking his illness. Asbury wanted to be a writer and "artist," and he couldn't write anything decent. According to Mary George, he faked an illness in order to be a tragic figure.

Once in his bed, Asbury awoke to find Doctor Block standing over him. Asbury kept insisting he was dying, but nobody in the room took him seriously. Much to his mother's chagrin, Asbury's health keeps getting worse. He thinks about the time when he tried to get his mother's two black workers to break the rules with him. They smoked in the dairy together, and then he tried to get them to drink the unsterilized milk. They didn't drink the milk, though. To make his doting mother even more upset, he asks for a Jesuit priest to come visit. Mrs. Fox finally agrees, but the Jesuit doesn't debate the existence of an afterlife with him like he wanted. Instead, the Jesuit tells Asbury he is a sinner and needs God before dying.

Days later, Asbury feels like he is on the brink of death. He gives his mother a key to a drawer which contains a letter to her to be read posthumously. It describes how he ultimately forgives her for all her wrongs. But his mother and Doctor Block come in and tell him he isn't actually dying; instead, he has undulant fever. This can only be caught by consuming unsterilized meat or dairy from an infected animal, much like the milk Asbury drank years earlier. While he will most likely have fevers and muscle cramps for the rest of his life, he won't die from undulant fever. Asbury realizes he will never achieve the ultimate tragic artist's death he longed for.

## Analysis

O'Connor frequently uses religion as a tool in her stories. In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury shuns religion because he thinks he is too educated to believe in God. Instead, he worships art. He moved to New York to become a writer in order to fulfill the vagrant artist lifestyle he believed necessary in order to write. Yet moving to New York didn't work out for him. Whether it was a lack of talent or a lack of drive, Asbury gave up his dream and instead wanted to die a tragic death. Because he could not produce a work of substance, he thought death would be a defining moment in his life. He thought death would allow him to transcend a meaningless existence.



Even writing a letter two notebooks long was a part of Asbury's plan to make a lasting impact on his mother. The narration never describes how exactly Mrs. Fox wronged her son. However, if Asbury has contempt for his mother's "mothering," then it can be presumed he finds her nurturing nature to be what caused him to not be able to write. He says she took away his creativity. In his eyes, his failures are a direct result of her pampering ways. Most likely, though, Asbury's own ideals about being an artist overshadowed his actual ability. He wanted to live the life of an artist and be profound. But Asbury was so self-absorbed in his own ego he couldn't handle failure or rejection. That is why the letter was so important to him. He wanted his mother to view him as a tragic victim.

## Vocabulary

turrets, aghast, dilapidated, irked, indignations, nirvana, roved, saris, fez, walleyed, garlanded, pinion, fretful, asinine, mastitis, rapport, acidly, trifle, abhorrent, badgered, psychosomatic, bier, saturnine, asceticism, ethereal, catechism, affably, sniveler, ineffable, gelid, racked, blanched, implacable



# The Comforts of Home

## Summary

Thomas is a thirty-five-year-old writer whose mother lives with him. Recently, his mother became the caretaker of a young psychopath. The girl called herself Star Drake, but her real name was Sarah Ham. She had been arrested for passing bad checks, but she was also a sociopath who used Thomas's mother. Sarah twisted the woman's heartstrings and made up stories about her abusive childhood. She moved into the guest room at Thomas's house and Thomas was fuming. He belittled her, called her a "slut," and refused to converse with her. Thomas's mother tried to be a liaison between Star and Thomas, but Thomas told his mother the girl wasn't welcome in his house. Thomas thought he had put his foot down the way his deceased father would have wanted. He thought he inherited his father's sense of practicality tempered with some of his mother's morality.

The day after kicking her out, Thomas and his mother received a phone call saying Sarah was drunk and being belligerent. Thomas wanted to throw her back in jail, but his mother refused to put her there. The girl came back to the house and tensions began to rise. Thomas eventually refused to be in the same room as Sarah. A week or so later, Sarah slit her wrists and was completely hysterical. She kept saying nobody wanted her, and she would be better off dead. Thomas believed this was true, and he was upset Sarah hadn't actually killed herself. When the doctor came, he said Sarah had done minimal damage and only needed a Band-Aid; the entire suicide attempt was only to get attention. Thomas realized Sarah was crazy enough to try something more deliberate next time, so he hid his gun. Later, he saw the gun was gone, but he didn't know if she had taken it. Thomas kept trying to think of ways to get rid of Sarah, but he couldn't figure out how. It wasn't until after she came to him in his bedroom one night he went to the sheriff and asked him to take Sarah away.

When Thomas went back to his house, he went back to his desk and saw the gun was replaced. He heard his father's voice in his head calling him an imbecile, and he felt a strong pull to plant the gun in Sarah's purse. He debated with himself for a while, but he realized planting the gun was the only way to get rid of Sarah. As he was dropping the gun into her purse, she came into the kitchen and saw him. She called him out on his actions when his mother entered the room. An argument ensued, and Sarah lunged at Thomas. He fired the gun, but his mother had jumped in front of Sarah at the last minute. At that very moment, the sheriff came through the door and saw Thomas and Sarah standing over the woman. In his mind, he saw he could make a case for conspiracy: Thomas and Sarah were lovers, and they wanted to kill the mother.



## Analysis

Sarah's overt sexuality and disregard for morals is terrifying for Thomas. While he tries to convince himself she is beneath him and not worth his family's time, he is completely paralyzed when he is alone with her. For instance, when Sarah first enters Thomas's room, he picks up a chair and uses it how lion tamers use chairs in the circus. The chair is a weapon against Sarah, but it is also a buffer between him and Sarah. Thomas is also upset when she went into his office. It wasn't so much about the gun as it was he couldn't stand "the thought of Sarah Ham's hands sliding among his papers." She was a disease, an infection in his home, but he could not do anything about it.

His stationary behavior is contradictory to the image he presents, though. In Thomas's mind, he is a pillar of morality and practicality. He thinks he is a replica of his father, a man who would not put up with an "injustice" like Sarah. However, Thomas's memory betrays the reputation he holds about his father. He believes his father's actions were always right because the ends justified the means. Yet his father was practically crooked; he and the sheriff would commit atrocities in order to keep things "practical." This manifests when the memory of Thomas's father convinces Thomas to hide the gun in Sarah's purse. A moral and practical man would not stoop to this level. However, Thomas and his father only care that their lives be free from any unpleasanties like Sarah Ham.

## Vocabulary

unequivocal, comedienne, gaunt, incongruous, tritest, denizens, ample, sadists, atrocities, congenital, leer, meekly, omniscient, sibyl, onset, deigned, tam, insinuations, repugnance, delectably, martyrdom, tourniquet, akin, qualms, ultimatum, gesticulating, coherent, doggedly, burr, chortling



# The Lame Shall Enter First

## Summary

Sheppard, a social worker, and his ten-year-old son, Norton, have a fairly prosperous lifestyle even though Sheppard's wife died a year earlier. Sheppard, though, feels like his son is ungrateful for everything they have. He is unresponsive, disinterested, and uncompassionate. Sheppard tells his son Rufus Johnson, a fourteen-year-old crippled delinquent, was hunting around a garbage can for food. Sheppard recalls his time working with Johnson. He thinks Johnson is the most intelligent boy he's ever known, but Johnson doesn't realize his full potential. When Johnson and Sheppard finished their sessions, Sheppard gave him a key to his house because he trusted him. One day when Norton was home alone, Johnson came in and started wandering around the house. When Sheppard came home, he said Johnson could stay with them.

Days later, the three are upstairs looking through a telescope. Norton is bored, but then Johnson opens a discussion about religion. Sheppard tells Johnson he is too smart to have religion, and this upsets Johnson. Norton takes interest in what Johnson is saying, and then he begins worrying about whether his mother is in hell. After that night, Norton begins getting extremely interested in the telescope. Johnson, though, keeps disappearing from the home. The police say he has committed a string of break-ins, but Johnson denies it. At first, Sheppard is disappointed in Johnson. But Johnson convinces Sheppard into believing he is innocent. Sheppard then becomes determined to buy Johnson a new shoe for his clubbed foot. When they arrive at the store, Johnson refuses to wear the new shoe. Later that night, Johnson admits to Sheppard he committed all the break-ins. Sheppard is hurt and all he wants is for Johnson to leave.

The next morning, Johnson and Norton are reading the Bible together. Sheppard chastises them for it, and Johnson begins eating pages from the Bible to prove he's devoted to God. He then runs out of the house. After dinner, Sheppard goes to Norton in the attic and asks where Johnson is. Norton ignores him, and he exclaims he has found his mother by looking through the telescope. Sheppard dismisses him and goes downstairs to answer the door. The police have shown up with Johnson in custody. Sheppard says he has done everything he could for Johnson, including ignoring his own son. The police leave, and Sheppard finally understands he has neglected his own son's emotional well-being. He runs upstairs to begin a new relationship with him, but Norton had hung himself.

## Analysis

This story is another that employs strong religious imagery and symbolism. Sheppard refuses to believe in God, and he believes both Johnson and Norton are too intelligent to believe in something as incredulous as religion. At the same time, he believes himself to be a Christ-like figure. Sheppard helps young teens straighten out their lives. Yet



Sheppard, unlike Christ, does this all for his own ego. He finds the satisfaction of helping children makes him feel like a better person; this feeling is what fuels his need to do good deeds. He also thinks what he does is more important than religious figures. He says “his credentials [are] less dubious than a priest’s,” meaning Sheppard thinks his education is better than the religious figure’s.

On the opposite end of the religious spectrum, Rufus Johnson believes Christianity is true. However, he doesn’t behave like a Godly person. Johnson says Satan has power over him; that’s why he commits crimes. But Johnson sees some people can have redemption. That is why he is determined to tell Norton about Christ, heaven, and hell. In some way, that is his only redemption. He hates things of the world, and that’s why he refuses to follow along with Sheppard’s plans of rehabilitation.

## Vocabulary

imperceptibly, absolve, dubious, forelock, palpable, contemptuous, belligerence, ascetic, sacrilege, engrossed, dormer, joists, trussed, shambling, mediocre, complicity, blazoned, insolently, dour, impunity, haggard, infinitesimal, dint, reproached, psyche, aghast, grotesque, woodenly, sully, jubilant, cursory, forlorn



# Revelation

## Summary

Ruby Turpin and her husband are in a small doctor's office. Mrs. Turpin begins looking around the room and sees a myriad of people: a respectable woman and her fat daughter, a trashy woman and her son, and an elderly woman who is the mother of the trashy woman. She strikes up a conversation with the respectable-looking woman, and they talk about how important it is to have a good disposition and to be grateful for things they have been given from God. The fat girl named Mary Grace begins glaring at Mrs. Turpin, and Mrs. Turpin tries to ignore her.

The two women begin discussing farming, and the trashy woman interjects. She says how she hates black people and wishes they would go back to Africa. Mrs. Turpin says she's glad God made her a white woman, and Mary Grace hurls a college textbook at her. Mary Grace then leaps onto Mrs. Turpin and begins strangling her. Right before people pull Mary Grace away, she says, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog."

When Mrs. Turpin gets back home, she is upset by what Mary Grace had said to her. She doesn't understand why someone as good and Christian as she is deserved to be insulted. She is upset because she feels like there were other people in the waiting room who should have received that message instead. Mrs. Turpin leaves to visit her hog shed, still angry with Mary Grace. Her anger then turns to God. She challenges him to rebuke her one more time. Mrs. Turpin then experiences a vision. All the poor and black people are walking toward Earth from heaven. Behind them are the "respectable" people who have been stripped from their worldly façades.

## Analysis

Many of the stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* describe how many who consider themselves righteous are actually judgmental and discriminatory. Mrs. Turpin constantly reminds herself she is a good person with a pleasant outlook on life. Her conversation with the respectable woman shows their beliefs about being good people coincide with Christianity; Mrs. Turpin sings along with hymns on the radio, and she thanks God for all the good things she has acquired in her life. Yet subtle clues at the beginning of the text show Mrs. Turpin is highly critical and prejudiced. One of the things she thanks God for is that she's white; she doesn't know how she could handle being black. She also has class bias. She thinks one of the women in the waiting room is trashy. She even believes the trashy woman and her son are beneath respectable black people.

It was Mary Grace, the fat young woman, who was able to break Mrs. Turpin from her judgmental ways. O'Connor humorously uses a college textbook called *Human*





Development to knock sense into Mrs. Turpin. Mrs. Turpin, a human, had to go through the proper mental development in order to change her ideals. The girl that brought this change was Mary Grace. Her name signifies she had a divine presence in the whole ordeal. Throwing the book and muttering the curse was the only thing she could think of to show Mrs. Turpin she was wasn't as righteous as she thought.

## Vocabulary

romper, idle, florid, vacant, encased, seared, merest, coping, grotesque, sober, svelte, buoyant, grimace, folly, astride, agitated, jovial, fervently, brooked, repudiation, protuberance, solicitous, astounded, trough, farrowing, shoats, abysmal, hieratic, horde, battalions



# Parker's Back

## Summary

O.E. Parker, an unreligious man, lived with his prudent wife. It was difficult for Parker to live with her because he didn't feel like he chose to marry Sarah Ruth. She was too cautious and religious for him. He met her one day when his car broke down beside her house. He tried to get her attention, but she was appalled by all the tattoos on his body. When Parker was fourteen years old, he went to a fair and saw a man whose body was covered in tattoos. He then went to get his first tattoo, an eagle sitting on a cannon. Later, he joined the Navy and kept getting more tattoos like an addiction. However, he didn't get his back tattooed; he couldn't see it, so there was no point in having it inked. When he was speaking with Sarah Ruth beside his car, she showed disdain for his tattoos, calling them a sin. He never wanted to see her again, but he kept showing up at her house regardless. They were married soon after.

Marriage, though, didn't make Sarah Ruth any less bitter. She still called him a sinner for various reasons, and it upset him. One day at work, he almost died in an accident. His brush with death scared him so badly he had to get a tattoo to ease his mind. He went to the city to his regular tattoo parlor. He realizes he wants a tattoo of God on his back. He looks through the tattoo book and sees a Byzantine Christ staring back at him. He knows this is the God he wants on his back. He gets the tattoo and returns back to Sarah Ruth. Sarah Ruth doesn't like the tattoo and calls it idolatry. She takes a broom and shoos him out of the house. He crawls to a tree and begins crying.

## Analysis

Many people say they can't believe in God because they can't see him. This is why Parker didn't believe in God. He personified this by not getting tattoos on his back. Because he wasn't able to see his back, he didn't see a reason to put a tattoo on it. So putting a tattoo of God on his back was, for Parker, the ultimate show of his faith. Sarah Ruth, though, didn't see this the same way. She saw his show of faith as idolatry. She said "no man shall see [God's] face," meaning it was a sin to put a face on God. When Parker got the tattoo, she saw there was no way for him ever to be saved. In her eyes, she committed a permanent sin, and there was no way to erase the face of God on his back.

## Vocabulary

conjured, sultry, hoary, incensed, jolted, stupefied, arabesque, slate, microcosm, haphazard, botched, furloughs, latent, acute, dallying, agape, lapsed, vista, cavernous, chiropodist, taut, saffron, lineaments, phosphorescent, dilatory, gingerly, peremptorily, loomed, enflaming, taint



# Judgment Day

## Summary

Tanner, an older white man from Georgia, is living in New York with his daughter and son-in-law. He is secretly planning a trip back home because he doesn't want to live with his daughter anymore. He believes, though, he won't make it back to Georgia alive. In that case, he just wants to be buried in Georgia. He once overheard his daughter saying once he died, she was going to have him buried in New York. Tanner dreamed about the "better" times when he owned property and had black workers. That is how he met Coleman, his lifelong companion. However, he lost all his land and had to move to New York with his daughter.

Because he had once been in charge of black people, he doesn't understand black people actually live a decent lifestyle in New York. A black couple moved into the apartment next door, and Tanner saw them entering the room. He referred to the man as "Preacher" and asked if he would rather be back in South Carolina. The black couple was outraged at his derogatory remarks. Tanner, though, couldn't understand why this black couple didn't respond well to his comments because that was how he had always talked to blacks. The second time, the black man shoved him. Tanner suffered a stroke and was unable to go through his plans to leave for Georgia. He left a note saying if anyone found him dead or alive, they should take him to Georgia. Tanner tried walking down the stairs in the apartment complex. He fell, though, and was dangling on the stairs. The black couple came by, and Tanner insulted them again. They left Tanner on the stairs, and his daughter came back to find him dead. She buried him in New York, but she felt bad about it. So she sent his body back to Georgia.

## Analysis

Even though Tanner's conversations with the black couple weren't ill-intentioned, he found it difficult to communicate with them. In Tanner's mind, all he wanted was to talk with someone from the South. That is where his prejudice got in the way. He unrightfully assumed this black couple was from the South. He was also used to speaking down to black people, so he didn't understand calling all black men "Preacher" was derogatory. So when the black man in New York took the term in a bad way, Tanner was immediately taken aback. He wasn't used to black men talking back to him.

## Vocabulary

dawdled, decipherable, audible, ponderous, taut, furtively, pallet, roused, paroled, evasively, whittling, averted, solemnity, morbid, feigning, galluses, racked, fumed, hoisted, dank, jarred, jauntiest



# Characters

## Julian

Julian is the main character in “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” He is a young college-educated man who wanted to be a writer. However, he sold typewriters in the meantime. He tries to help his mother after the United States integrated blacks and whites in public. However, he hates that his mother is so wary of blacks. He thinks that he is too educated to hate blacks. Yet he cannot strike up a conversation with a black person.

## Mrs. May

Mrs. May is a widowed dairy farm owner in “Greenleaf.” She has two sons who she considers failures, but she is jealous of her hired help’s family. When a bull arrives on her land, she sees it as a personal vendetta from the Greenleafs against her success. She takes the opportunity to drive a wedge between Greenleaf and his two sons. This backfires, though, as the bull comes back and kills her.

## Grandpa Fortune

Grandpa Fortune is a wealthy landowner in “A View of the Woods.” He doesn’t like any of his family except for his granddaughter, Mary. Even though her last name is Pitts, he calls her Mary Fortune because he wants Mary to be his legacy. When he sells off a lot of land for a general store, Mary becomes angry and lashes out at her grandfather. Grandpa Fortune, though, kills Mary because she defies him.

## Asbury Fox

Asbury Fox is a sickly college student in the story “The Enduring Chill.” He wanted to be a writer, but he wasn’t able to produce anything of worth. Asbury had to come back to his mother’s home against his will. However, he wanted his mother to suffer because he felt like his mother ruined his chance of becoming a decent writer. He thinks that, by dying, he will be able to achieve artistic greatness. Yet his illness isn’t deadly. It will only make him have consistent fevers for the rest of his life.

## Thomas

Thomas is a thirty-five-year-old writer from “The Comforts of Home.” He describes himself as a moral yet practical man. When his mother takes in a sociopathic prisoner, though, both his morals and practicality are put to the test. The young woman makes



Thomas extremely uncomfortable, and he thinks she is threatening the peace of his household. She keeps pushing him to the brink of his nerves, and he tries to shoot her.

## Sheppard

Sheppard, a social worker in “The Lame Shall Enter First,” is a widow with a ten-year-old son. However, he ignores his son’s cries for attention and instead focuses on one of his wards. He believes he is too intelligent to believe in God, and he tries to impose these beliefs on his son and the ward. However, he spends time “playing Jesus”; he feels like he is doing better work than religious leaders. When he finally realizes his son needs him the most, though, it is too late.

## Mrs. Turpin

Mrs. Turpin is an older woman in “Revelation.” She considers herself to be a good Christian woman. She seems jovial and she sings along with the hymns playing on the radio. Her thoughts, though, show she is self-righteous and egotistical. She is racist against black people, and she also thinks poorly of people in lower classes. She suffers a crisis of faith and she finally sees the error of her thoughts.

## O.E. Parker

O.E. Parker is lower-class man in the story “Parker’s Back.” He doesn’t believe in religion and he also is addicted to getting tattoos. He marries a plain yet prude wife who hates his tattoos. However, he merges a newfound sense of spirituality with tattoos by getting a tattoo of God on his back, which ultimately severs his marriage.

## Tanner

Tanner is an elderly man from “Judgment Day.” He lives in New York with his daughter and son-in-law, but he wants to be back in Georgia. He doesn’t understand how to speak to black people in New York because they respond differently from the black people in the South. He suffers a stroke and dies trying to get down to the South.



## **Objects/Places**

### **The South**

All of O'Connor's stories center around the South.

### **The Green and Purple Hat**

In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Julian's mother as well as the black woman on the bus wear a green and purple hat.

### **The Bull**

In "Greenleaf," a bull wanders onto Mrs. May's land.

### **The Land Across from the Pitts's House**

In "A View of the Woods," Grandpa Fortune wants to sell the land across from the Pitts' house to make Mr. Pitts mad.

### **Asbury's Letter to his Mother**

In "The Enduring Chill," Asbury writes a cryptic letter to his mother to be read only after his death.

### **The Gun**

In "The Comforts of Home," Thomas believes that Sarah Ham stole his gun.

### **The Shoe**

In "The Lame Shall Enter First," Sheppard wants to buy Johnson a new shoe for his clubbed foot.

### **Human Development**

In "Revelation," Mary Grace throws a textbook called Human Development at Mrs. Turpin.



## **The Tattoo of God**

In “Parker’s Back,” Parker gets a tattoo of God on his back after barely escaping an accident alive.

## **Tanner’s Note**

In “Judgment Day,” Tanner pins a note to his jacket saying that he wants to be buried in Georgia.

# Themes

## Self-Righteousness

Many characters in O'Connor's stories suffer from feelings of self-righteousness. For instance, Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" thinks that he is more moral and better educated than his mother. Another character that feels superior is Mrs. Turpin. While in the doctor's waiting room, she weighs her personal ideologies against those of another woman, and she believes she is more tolerant than the racist woman. However, all these characters realize their personalities are lacking; the situations show them their self-righteousness is unwarranted.

## Discrimination

Because these stories were set in the South during the 1960s, many of the characters held deep discriminations against other classes, races, and ages. Thomas from "The Comforts of Home" despises Sarah because of her lower stature; he thinks her presence is an embarrassment to his family. In "Judgment Day," Tanner is discriminatory toward black people, although he doesn't think he is saying anything wrong to them by referring to all black men as "Preacher." Each character, though, has his or her discriminations thrown in his or her face.

## Religion

Flannery O'Connor was deeply religious. However, she wasn't so religious she couldn't see the hypocrisy many of her fellow Christians practiced. Mrs. May from "Greenleaf" firmly believes her Puritan Work Ethic will reward her over others who don't work as hard as her. Sheppard from "The Lame Shall Enter First" doesn't believe in God, but he acts like he is a better person than prominent religious figures. He also thinks religion is for the unintelligent and weak-minded. All the main characters have a radical, yet self-serving, view of Christianity.



# Style

## Point of View

The stories are all told from the third-person-attached point of view. We can see all the deep thoughts of the main characters, but the reader also gets a more holistic and less biased narrative. For each main character, the reader can understand exactly how the characters view themselves. But the third-person narrative gives a wider perspective and shows the reader the main characters are actually hypocritical.

## Setting

Except for the last story, all the tales are set in the South. Some areas are not explicitly stated. However, O'Connor always made the South its own character. The time period is set during the 1960s, right after the government banned segregation between blacks and whites in public. There was extreme tension between blacks and whites, which made the characters have unique feelings and interactions with people of other races.

## Language and Meaning

Typical of O'Connor, her narrative language is very fluid. The writing flows with ease, making it easy to understand. However, the dialogue is cognizant of the setting. Her characters all speak with accents, and she writes out these accents like they would sound, like how a southerner says "Gawd" instead of "God." This promotes a better sense of setting. It also makes her writing unique.

## Structure

Everything That Rises Must Converge is a short-story anthology consisting of nine different stories. None of the story lines, characters, and settings intersect. Most of the stories take place in one section; however, "The Lane Shall Enter First" is divided into two sections. Every story previewed in this anthology.

## Quotes

Knowing who you are is good for one generation only. You haven't the foggiest idea where you stand now or who you are.

She continued to stare straight ahead but the entire scene in front of her had changed—the tree line was a dark wound in a world that was nothing but the sky—and she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly restored but who finds the light unbearable.

The old man looked up into his own image. It was triumphant and hostile. 'You been whipped,' it said, 'by me,' and then it added, bearing down on each word, 'and I'm PURE Pitts.' "A View of the Woods" Asbury blanched and the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his eyes. He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror.

Finally, he said 'How do you do, Sarah,' in a tone of such loathing that he was shocked at the sound of it. He reddened, feeling it beneath him to show contempt for any creature so pathetic.

I lie and steal because I'm good at it! My foot don't have a thing to do with it! The lame shall enter first!

They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.

The front of Parker was almost completely covered but there were no tattoos on his back. He had no desire for one anywhere he could not readily see it himself. As the space on the front of him for tattoos decreased, his dissatisfaction grew and became general.

During the night the train would start South, and the next day or the morning after, dead or alive, he would be home. Dead or alive. It was being there that mattered; the dead or alive did not.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 1

How does O'Connor's writing style add to the authenticity of the stories' setting?

## Topic 2

What do all of O'Connor's main characters have in common?

## Topic 3

Compare Thomas's mother from "The Comforts of Home" to Julian's mother from "Everything That Rises Must Converge." How do these two women differ? What are their motivations?

## Topic 4

Describe Asbury from "The Enduring Chill" and Sheppard from "The Lame Shall Enter First." What traits do these men share?

## Topic 5

Describe the setting of O'Connor's stories. How does the setting affect the personalities and motivations of the characters?

## Topic 6

Do any of the main characters in O'Connor's stories show genuine concern for other people than themselves? Was this natural, or did they change? If they changed, what made them change?