

TEILHARD DE CHARDIN'S VIEW OF DIMINISHMENT AND  
THE LATE STORIES OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR

by

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ABSTRACT

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Scholars have used different approaches to study and interpret the work of Flannery O'Connor; those approaches have ranged from Feminism to New Criticism to religious (Christian and non-Christian) to psychological. These attempts to analyze and interpret her work have produced a diverse approach to understanding this intriguing author, who lived only to the age of thirty-nine because of lupus erythematosus.

The approach of this dissertation is that the presence of this disease in her life caused her to look for ways to resolve and adapt to the limitations of the disease. One prominent source for reflecting and resolving the situation was the influence of Teilhard de Chardin. Beginning in May of 1959, when she first heard of him, through the summer of 1964, when she died of the disease, she read, reviewed, and discussed his ideas in an increasing manner. In that five-year period, she had collected eight books written by and about him, written numerous reviews about his work for the *Bulletin*, the local Catholic diocesan paper,

mentioned him numerous times in her letters, and talked about him with acquaintances. Chardin's concept of progressive diminishment in convergence helped her to resolve and adapt to the pervading limitations of her long-term disease.

Through two books that O'Connor found provocative, *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*, she discovered a philosophical framework called progressive diminishment operating in convergence. The gist of this Teilhardian idea is that human beings evolve throughout time developing a propensity towards psychic development as they journey towards a destination called Point Omega. Some psychic development characteristics are possession of a central body of knowledge, the concept of community, and the ability to reflect on existence.

Since progressive diminishment helped O'Connor resolve and adapt to the presence of lupus erythematosus in the last five years of her life, she incorporated his ideas into her posthumous collection "Everything That Rises Must Converge." This psychological approach analyzes the link between them and focuses on how his ideas influenced the development of literary elements in this collection.

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## CHAPTER I

### CATEGORIES OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S WORK

Flannery O'Connor has intrigued and flustered critics for over fifty years; she has been described as religiously insightful to mentally psychotic. Critics have looked at her from many perspectives and possible influences; Sarah Gordon, in *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination* points out that in addition to her Catholic faith, "other factors are at play—her southern upbringing, her femaleness, the early loss of her father, her serious illness, her complex relationship with her mother, her attraction to the banal and bizarre, her sense of humor, her early interest in satire. . . (47) and, as critic Jon Lance Bacon has recently argued in *Flannery O'Connor and Cold War Culture*, her assimilation of and response to the social and political issues of the cold war" (47). Josephine Hendin acknowledges the same situation; she talks about the motivations for writing that a person undertakes. In the case of Flannery O'Connor, she notes that the impulse, or necessity, came from being "Irish-American, a Southern woman, the offspring of an old Georgia family, and a victim of lupus, the wasting, degenerative disease that struck her at twenty-five and eventually killed her, than with being part of the Roman Catholic Church" (4). Controversy and argument has pulsed through Flannery O'Connor scholarship in pursuit of the best possible answer. Often scholars like Robert Brinkmeyer, Cynthia Seel, Ralph Wood have focused exclusively on her public goals as a writer and used these assumptions as a template in assessing and interpreting her literature, and at other times, other scholars like Carol Schloss, Josephine Hendin, Andre

Bliekaskan have exclusively employed psychological and sociological analysis in understanding her. If one is to understand and appreciate the work of Flannery O'Connor, then a template will help understand the author and her work. An analogy that would be helpful would be studying a volcano from satellite images. One would get an overall view of the energy on the surface, but not be aware of the intense, convulsive energy underneath the surface. Lupus erythematosus is an important fissure through which the convulsive energy churning in Flannery O'Connor's life flowed to the top and exhibited itself. This physical condition in O'Connor's life deserves more attention.

Flannery O'Connor, from her birth until her death at the age of thirty-nine in 1964, lived under the shadow of lupus; her father contracted and died from it at an early age and she suffered from the effects of the debilitating disease from the age of twenty-two until her death. During this period of her life she wrote most of her short stories and novels. For the collection of stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, she borrowed a phrase "everything that rises must converge" from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's book *The Phenomenon of Man* and incorporated it as the title. In this collection Flannery O'Connor presents personae who encounter or live with notable disabilities (physical and psychological), and who struggle with these limitations throughout the action of the different short stories. Towards the end of the composition of this collection, her battle with lupus was drawing to a close, eventually ending her life in 1964 at the age of thirty-nine. With her reading of and familiarity with the works of the Jesuit paleontologist, she develops the concept of progressive diminishment operating in convergence, which she explores through the literary elements (narrator, characters, action, themes) of the stories in the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. This template, if used by readers, helps them to

appreciate a new found focus discovered on how God works in humanity. In order to appreciate this proposition, it would be helpful to discuss the different views that have developed about her work over the years.

One school of O'Connor scholarship falls under the rubric of mythic or mystic. Some critics have viewed her work as Southern Gothic/grotesque; in this view her "diminished" people are seen as freaks, idiots, half-wits, deaf mutes, unruly women, conmen, and "adult" children, who are marginal members of society. She uses such personae for different reasons, for instance, as an expression of the author's feeling of isolation or opposition to society. Dr. Patricia Yeager thinks that the characters developed in many of O'Connor's short stories are basically protests against white, patriarchal Southern society. In Yeager's opinion, this view is largely negative, an image of Southern society gone awry. She argues for what she calls "an aesthetic of torture" in the short stories and declares that "the grotesque is a neglected trope in recent criticism of southern women's writing, but it is central to the southern experience. When a southerner writes in the mode of grotesque realism [sic], the body is metamorphosed in a way that expresses a character's or author's troubled relations to his or her social formulation" (*New Perspectives* 184). Frederick Asals believes that O'Connor loved to work in extremes; he notes "[I]t seems to me that central to the perceived power of O'Connor's writing is what Henry James called a 'rich passion. . .for extremes,' an attraction to polarities that reaches into every aspect of her work" (Asals 1).

Other mythic or mystic interpretations of O'Connor's work fall under the category of a confrontation between inner space with outer space, conscious vs. unconscious, natural vs. supernatural. In attempting to reconcile the visible with the invisible, this view, expressed by Dr. Ruth Johansen, focuses on the reconciliation of the friction between these dimensions by

reference to an intermediary such as a trickster god. The presence of this contrasting situation exists in what Johansen calls Flannery O'Connor's use of the "as/if territory." She states:

Through the shifting narrative voice and the metaphoric as/if territory, which functions as a structural hinge between levels of perception and consciousness, O'Connor links two levels of her narratives—the physical world of time and space and the mystical and metaphoric realm. For O'Connor's characters the as/if perception might be called a structural metaphoric territory and is fraught with ambiguity because it always threatens to confuse or at least complicate appearance and reality. (27)

The presence of the mythic or mystic situation allows for the presence of an activated agent—the Trickster. The Trickster can cross the boundaries of the as/if territory to influence characters in the short stories, and particularly in the latter short stories of the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, it is "a presence (sometimes embodied in a figure, sometimes only hinted through language and actions), which presides over the as/if territory, buttressing the spatial and psychological boundary conditions that dominate O'Connor's stories" (29). The traditional trickster god walks through the village and one half of the people say he is wearing a white hat and the other half that his hat is black. The Trickster is a choric manifestation that acts as a go-between in the course of the story's action, and sometimes his/her presence is seen and sometimes it is felt. Johansen's views are echoed in a way by Louise Westling and Cynthia Seel who feel that the mystery in O'Connor's works can be understood through analyzing ritual performances in Greek religious practices, such as the Mysteries at Eleusis. Seel notes how "Westling has already uncovered the subtle allusions of this archetypal pattern in O'Connor's fiction in her discerning study *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor*" (Seel 9). Seel proposes that "the feminine principle in O'Connor's fiction exists as a transcendental positive force, activated and imagined by ritual performances" (2). There

is a mysterious operative force working in O'Connor's literature, but it is not traditional Christian (Roman Catholicism).

Another view, relevant to the discussion of the relationship between Teilhard de Chardin and Flannery O'Connor, of her writing sees her work as essentially Christian in nature; some critics focus on her discussion of spiritual and religious themes in her work. Louis Rubin comments, "Miss O'Connor is in essence a religious writer. Knowledge of good and evil is at the heart of her stories" (26) and Robert Fitzgerald states, "I should say that this has been Flannery O'Connor's essential subject. . .it is a religious condition, common to North and South alike, common indeed to the world we live in" (393). They focus on what Sharon Gunton, the editor of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* called O'Connor's concern about "the contemporary Christian's loss of spiritual consciousness." She remarks: "She attributed this loss mainly to increased materialism and to an unqualified acceptance of modern rationalist thought. In theology, rationalism's doctrines state that human reason, without the assistance of divine revelation, is capable of discerning religious truth" (*Contemporary Lit. Crit.* Vol. 21, p. 254). An assertion shared by Henry T. Edmondson, who states that O'Connor is attempting to combat the influence of Nihilism. Edmondson asserts, "O'Connor understood, as have others, that Friedrich Nietzsche was the most important proponent of nihilism, a philosophy that seeks to dispense with God and traditional values in favor of a brave new world led by those audacious enough to wield their relentless 'will to power'" (xi). Robert Drake points out, "[Miss O'Connor] has no truck with fashionable *Angst*—Christian or otherwise. She apprehends man's predicament in terms of classical Christian theology" (346). These critics approach O'Connor's material from varied spiritual perspectives, but generally assume her acceptance of classical Catholic Theology. This

scholarly school of O'Connor scholarship is relevant because its proponents are some of the fiercest opponents of any profound philosophical/theological relationship between Flannery O'Connor and Teilhard de Chardin.

Critical analysis of O'Connor's work remained strongly focused on religious and theological perspectives after her death, but with the explosion in analyzing literature through gender, ethnic, and psychological angles, in 1970 a book appeared that marked a new approach to O'Connor scholarship, that of Josephine Hendin, who took exception to what she considered unquestioned motives in interpreting her work. Hendin notes, "In most discussions of her work, it has been customary to regard O'Connor as a more obvious Naphta, a spokesman for the Roman Catholic Church, and a writer of fugues on the doctrine of *felix culpa*. Although this has led to a number of insights into her work, I think it has also tended to distort—to reduce it to a series of illustrations of church dogma" (3). Hendin felt a psychological approach to interpreting her work ought to be instituted.

Proponents of a psychological approach to Flannery O'Connor believe that the social, physical, and psychological influences impinging on O'Connor in the South in the 1950s and 1960s are not given enough due in analyzing her novels and short stories. Josephine Hendin believes that for O'Connor, writing was not necessarily about communicating redemption, but a redemptive process in itself for her as a person, who was living in the South, as a Roman Catholic, from a proud Georgia family, being destroyed by a degenerative disease; she observes that "the impulse to write or to pray grows from some more complex force, a necessary [sic] that must be rooted in the concrete, the particular experience" (4). Although many people, scholars and O'Connor kin alike, balked at her analysis, it helped initiate a scholarship that looks at the social, psychic, and physical influences that helped shape

O'Connor's work. For example, Andre Bleikastan notes that a large gap appears "in the relationship between what an author thinks, or thinks he thinks, and what he writes" (Friedman 139). He focuses on O'Connor's public pronouncements of what she wanted her writing to do and what she actually accomplished. For Bleikastan, "what matters is not the extent to which O'Connor's tales and novels reflect or express her Christian faith, but rather the problematical relations between her professed ideological stance and the textual evidence of her fiction" (Friedman 139).

Richard Giannone indirectly points to this psychological bent when he notes how O'Connor drew from what he called "the importance of desert life and ascetic spirituality" in creating her stories; he implies:

The aim of the first Christian hermits was simple: to find their true selves that could bring them close to God. The means the hermits employed to reach divine intimacy was correspondingly austere. They fought evil in themselves through rigorous self-scrutiny to clear away the sin that separated them from God. The pitfalls and defeats along with the victories experienced in this inner combat yielded insights that have been for centuries the rich source of spiritual renewal. (1)

He notes that such practices influenced Flannery O'Connor, "who wrote to a friend on 16 March 1960: 'Those desert fathers interest me very much' (*Habit of Being* 382)" (1). This intense focus on engaging in rigorous self-scrutiny, especially in times of physical distress, attracted O'Connor at this point in her life due to her ongoing battle with lupus. The psychological connection between the physical and the spiritual, and how the two spheres are intertwined with each other crystallizes very sharply. A psychological strain in this school of thought is the examination and analysis of the disease that Flannery O'Connor suffered from psychologically and physically—lupus erythematosus. Kathleen Spaltro and Jennifer Proffitt discuss this possibility, and Proffitt, in particular, notes, "One must ask why, with the intense

scholarly interest in Flannery O'Connor's work, there has been so little written, and with such hesitancy, about her illness as influence on her writing. This absence of research into O'Connor's illness as source reflects a generalized, societal avoidance and discomfort with the intimacies of disability" (75). In hoping to address the absence of analyzing the influence of lupus upon her writing and in line with the aims of this school of thought on O'Connor, we will examine the connection between the growing intensity of her lupus in the last five to six years of her life, her efforts to deal with it, and Teilhard de Chardin's framework, and from these connections how such ideas manifested themselves in her writing in certain short stories in the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

Flannery O'Connor was a private individual who rarely showed her true feelings in public. She grew up in the mannered South, where a woman knew what to show and display in public, regardless of any turmoil. People have been afforded the opportunity for a partial glimpse of her private life through the publication of *Habit of Being*, a compendium of her correspondence from 1948 until 1964. Flannery O'Connor faced internal and external problems in the last ten years of her life as a writer. On one hand, she faced the internal problem of the ever growing presence of lupus in her life that was sapping her physical strength. In terms of external problems, she, like other Southerners, was witnessing and experiencing the wrenching changes of Black/White relations in the South. She, like other people, possessed an opinion on these changes and how they ought to be approached; in the last four years of her life, as the impact of lupus was growing, she focused on the writings of Teilhard de Chardin as a possible source for guidance and support in dealing with these internal/external issues. This dissertation hopes to add to the growing body of O'Connor scholarship that examines the impact of her physical condition in the last four to five years of

her life and to seek how the illness of lupus opened her to discovering a new context through the influence of Teilhard de Chardin's ideas on diminishment. With a connection established between the onslaught of lupus and O'Connor's efforts to understand and live with it through studying other sources such as Teilhard de Chardin, we will examine ideas and concepts developed by Chardin in *The Phenomenon of Man*, *The Divine Milieu*, and *The Future of Man* and how they might aid in interpreting her later stories. The ideas of Vernon Ruland and Mikail Bahktin will help develop a template for interpretation.

One of the problems in analyzing and interpreting the short stories is the rift among scholars such as Wood and Edmundson and Hendin and Blikaastan in terms of approach. Jill Baum-Gaertner offers a pointed insight when she states that "Flannery O'Connor's meaning is in her stories because it was in her life. She knew that one can never 'put meaning in.' It [that meaning,] is implicit in the characters in a work of fiction as much as in an individual's personal existence" (16), a point reflected in Flannery O'Connor's thoughts. O'Connor states in her essay "Catholic Novelists and Their Readers":

Whatever the novelist sees in the way of truth must first take on the form of his art and must become embodied in the concrete and human. If you shy away from sense experience, you will not be able to apprehend anything else in this world either, because every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses. (*Mystery and Manners* 176)

Baumgaertner's point is that for O'Connor, her fiction reflected the thinking process employed by O'Connor in using sources to understand and work out her purpose in life. The aim of this dissertation is to focus on how the presence and development of lupus in the last five years of her life caused Flannery O'Connor to evaluate her life and use sources to understand its impact on her. The presence of the lupus influenced her to read and ponder the thoughts of Teilhard de Chardin, which in turned helped develop an evolving

context—progressive diminishment operating in convergence—that helped her to deal with the disease, first, and foremost, and then over time, as was her *modus operandi*, weave its presence into her last short stories before her death.

CHAPTER II  
HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL INTEREST  
IN TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

By the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, Flannery O'Connor was living in a world totally different from the one she grew up in as a young girl and teenager. By 1959, O'Connor was thirty-four and experiencing change on a personal and public level. The Supreme Court of the United States had ruled in 1954 that equal but separate facilities for blacks and whites was unconstitutional, Martin Luther King, Jr. and others were agitating for equal rights in the South, the Soviet Union and the United States were locked in Cold War combat over ideology and territory, and O'Connor was surviving her tenth year of lupus erythematosus, which had forced her to move back to Milledgeville, Georgia to live with her mother. At this point in 1959, she was established as a writer with two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, recognized for essays that she had written about writing and being a Catholic novelist, and working to a degree on the short stories that would comprise her posthumous third collection—*Everything That Rises Must Converge*. In the stimulating tumult of 1954 to her death in 1964, she wrote the literature for which she has become famous.

In this ten-year time period, her writing (short stories, letters, lectures, and book reviews) manifested different purposes and goals. At times her writing would assert prophetic and evangelistic goals; for example, she talks about how “the novelist who

deliberately misuses his talent for some good purpose may be committing no sin, but he is certainly committing a grave inconsistency, for he is certainly trying to reflect God with what amounts to a practical untruth" (*Mystery and Manners* 174). At other times her writing would assert exhortative and edification goals, as in the case when she took on the editorship of *The Bulletin* in order to help Catholic readers discern quality literature. Towards the end of her life, her writing exerted a philosophical reflectiveness, brought on by the severity of her lupus, as reflected in a letter written to Alfred Corn, a college student at Emory University. In her letter, dated May 30, 1962, she mentions that "the intellectual difficulties have to be met, however, and you will be meeting them for the rest of your life. When you get a reasonable hold on one, another will come to take its place" (*Habit of Being* 477), and, in a nod to how Chardin had helped established this sense of philosophical reflectiveness, she mentions to Corn that the lack of absolutes doesn't bother her anymore

. . .because I have got, over the years, a sense of the immense sweep of creation, of the evolutionary process in everything, of how incomprehensible God must necessarily be to be the God of heaven and earth. You can't fit the Almighty into your intellectual categories. I might suggest that you look into some of the works of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (*The Phenomenon of Man* et al.). He was a paleontologist—helped to discover Peking Man—and also a man of God. (Ibid.)

This philosophical reflectiveness is reflected in a description of her overall Christian faith; she states to Corn that "what kept me a skeptic in college was precisely my Christian faith. It always said: wait, don't bite on this, get a wider picture, continue to read"(Ibid.). In the last five years of her life, as part of her philosophical reflectiveness, she embraces a Jesuit who unnerves his superiors with statements that appear to challenge orthodox teachings. Such an interest seems out of place in the traditional Catholicism that Flannery O'Connor learned in her childhood and teenage years, a heritage that scholars such as Ralph Wood and Marion

Montgomery think was very important to her goals throughout her life. Such an interest would seem out of place for an individual who grew up in a conservative environment.

Mary Flannery O'Connor did grow up in a very conservative environment. First, according to Jean Cash, the city was "totally segregated; even the Roman Catholic Church had four churches for whites and three for blacks" (2). Cash notes that third cousins on the O'Connor side of the family, Patricia and Winifred Persse, and Margaret Trexler, mentioned that "how little housework any white person had to do then, asserting that even white families with modest incomes could afford servants" (Ibid.). In terms of her religious upbringing, Cash notes that the small Roman Catholic community had an impact on her. First of all, "because her parents and other relatives in Savannah were devout, practicing Catholics, Mary Flannery O'Connor herself early developed strong faith" (4). Cash points out letters that O'Connor has written that point to the power of this early development; "what one has as a born Catholic is something given and accepted before it is experienced" (5). Flannery attended St. Vincent's Grammar School for Girls through the fifth grade, which was run by the Mercy Order of nuns; her cousins, the Persse sisters describe the atmosphere that they and Flannery were educated in. They described:

The parochial atmosphere as highly disciplined. In every classroom, the school day began with a formal prayer. Through the seventh grade, the same nun taught her class every subject. Behavior, they assert was regimented in a positive sense. The Persse sisters emphasize the distance they felt between themselves and the nuns and the fact that the nuns lived such restricted lives. (Cash 14)

Another influence on O'Connor's early religious life was the approach of the nuns to their students. Cash notes that "Nuns at St. Vincent's provided their students with religious instruction, preparing them for their first Communion. They used the Baltimore Catechism, then the official explanation of church doctrine in parochial schools" (14). In addition, "another part of the religious training was, according to the Persse cousins, that they early

participated in church ritual. They sang the complicated Latin masses, participated in a children's choir, and learn to sing anthems" (Ibid.). This beginning would seem an obstacle for someone like Flannery, to even approaching the thought of a person like Teilhard de Chardin, but she eventually overcame that obstacle, as evidenced by the numerous books of his in her private library, the numerous times she reviewed him in *The Bulletin*, and the numerous times he is mentioned in her letters and remarks to people in the last five years of her life.

Flannery O'Connor's adult world was convulsively moving forward. On the personal level, the increased discomfort of lupus manifested itself more and more in her life. On the public level, Civil Rights was erasing the lifestyle that many in her society assumed would never change. To Flannery O'Connor, friends, family, her audience, and her geographical identity were very important. But by 1959/1960, O'Connor was experiencing a psychological/spiritual crisis; her lupus had developed into the worst possible form possible and it appeared that her carefully developed religious/psychological framework did not provide answers to this crisis. A letter written to Dr. Ted Spivey reveals a possible source for addressing this crisis.

In that letter (May 25, 1959), she mentions that "next month, there is going to be a book out from the Helicon Press on Chardin—his thought. My editor [Robert Giroux] from Farrar, Straus, was down here to visit me last week and it turned out he knew him for about a month in New York, before he died. He said he was very impressed" (*Habit of Being* 334) Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was a French Jesuit priest, who was a paleontologist working in China. In the last four years of her life she conducted an intensive study of Teilhard's thoughts, and his influence on her became evident in looking at her changing physical environment on a private and public level.

The detection of lupus often takes years because it will mimic other diseases, and it strikes women nine times more often than men. After it was discovered, she moved to a farm in Milledgeville, Georgia that she and her mother owned together. Slowly the disease wore O'Connor down, but when O'Connor realized that the end was near, she often pointed out (mainly through her letters and essays on writing) how the imminence of death focused her writing in ways she never thought of before.

Though some critics do mention the presence of her life-threatening disease, they do not examine its possible implications for her outlook on life and writing. For example, Naomi Blivens observes, "The limitation I do find in these stories is that they seem more often than not the products of a very young imagination. Miss O'Connor's illness, which made her an invalid so early in life, undoubtedly prevented her from extending her observations and multiplying her experiences" ("Nothing but the Truth" 342). And James Grimshaw proposes that what O'Connor learned from her reading of Chardin was 'passive diminishment,' that is, serene acceptance of the status quo" (99). But the phrase "passive diminishment" may not be the best word to describe a relationship with a long-term disease?

A proper framework needs to be established in evaluating Flannery O'Connor's situation with her lupus. Scholars have evaluated this relationship in varying ways; some have dismissed it as having a negligible effect to being prominent in her work towards the end of her life. For example, Naomi Blevins dismissed it as retarding O'Connor's growth as an author. Ralph Wood claims that "O'Connor refused to make her illness the defining event of her life, a condition to be endlessly mined as the ore of her fiction" (214). Kathleen Prown calls the disease debilitating but suggests that it was a possible blessing in disguise; she mentions how "Louise Abbot recalls a far more practical benefit, namely freedom from household chores, which on a farm like Andalusia could be considerable. During their many

visits together, Abbot never remembered O'Connor doing more than the dishes" (15). Claire Kahane focuses on approaching the relationship between O'Connor's fiction and her lupus as part of the struggle that she faced in her living situation on Andulasia, the family farm in Milledgeville, Georgia. In looking at her characters, Kahane focuses on the fact that the characters are not undergoing noble redemption or spiritual cleansing, but problems that O'Connor was facing as an adult. Kahane notes, "If we look at the characters O'Connor chooses to pillory—children, who rebel against parental control, women, intellectuals—what becomes startling clear is that she addresses rage and contempt to characters who at least partially represent herself;" Kahane continues by pointing out that O'Connor "was a woman, an intellectual, a writer with meticulous concern for words, a child forced by illness to depend on her mother"(Friedman 128). She is joined in her analysis of the influence of O'Connor's physical condition on her literature by Josephine Hendin, who noted above the many root causes for O'Connor's engagement in the act of writing.

In contrast, scholars such as Sue Walker and Kathleen Spatlato differ with Hendin and Kahane's analysis of how the lupus affected O'Connor. They believe that the lupus was an acknowledged disability that O'Connor had to deal with and come to terms with in her life. They believe, especially in light of research done on disability and disability issues, that it is important to acknowledge the presence of lupus in O'Connor's later life and attempt to understand its impact on her later writing. Jennifer Profitt, in her essay "Lupus and Corticosteroid Imagery in the Works of Flannery O'Connor," states the observation, "One must ask why, with the intense interest in Flannery O'Connor's work, there has been so little written, and with such hesitancy, about her illness as influence on her writing" (75). Even though "normal" society professes more openness towards the concept of disability, old habits die hard. Sue Walker focuses on the fact that "Flannery O'Connor's bodily experience

with systemic lupus erythematosus marks both her life and her work” (33). If there is an interest in how O’Connor’s disease affected her life and work, then how is her disability defined and what sources might she look at for inspiration in dealing with it?

Kathleen Spalato sees O’Connor’s view of her disability as preparation for spiritual growth; in her opinion, “O’Connor understood her disability and her consequent death as necessary preparations for her spiritual growth,” and she further claims that this “perception also governed her fictional use of disability and of the grotesque to depict spiritual deadness and awakening”(33). Sue Walker, in her essay “The Being of Illness: The Language of Being Ill,” notes that O’Connor saw her illness as having a holy quality to it; she states that “placing sickness with a Christian tradition, Flannery O’Connor situates the carnal body within a framework that not only allows for the presence of grace but also brings a sense of acceptance that whatever happens is part of God’s ultimate purpose” (35). As proof of her view, Walker mentions a letter written to Cecil Dawkins in which O’Connor mentions, “Human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful. God has chosen to operate in this manner. We can’t understand this but we can’t reject it without rejecting life” (35). Both of these scholars would reject Hendin and Kahane’s assumptions that the disease was no more important than other factors. In fact, there is nothing passive about Teilhard de Chardin’s view of diminishment, and nothing passive about what Flannery O’Connor learned from this idea.

Scholars connect O’Connor’s disability to Teilhard de Chardin’s discussion of diminishment in books that O’Connor had reviewed for the *Bulletin*, a local church newsletter for the Catholic diocese located in the Milledgeville area. Sue Walker notes that “Karl-Heinz Westarp, Kathleen Spalato, and Sally Fitzgerald see O’Connor’s acceptance of

her illness in the light of Teilhard de Chardin's concept of passive diminishment" (34).

Spaltro suggests:

Where did O'Connor derive her own understanding of her lupus? Partially through reading Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, she seems to have resolved the anguish and fear that her disability undoubtedly generated and to have accepted the disease and its profound consequences. His ideas gave her a way of seeing disability and death as mysterious but necessary catalysts for her evolution as a spiritual being. (33)

However, while some of these scholars see Chardin as a literary influence, they hesitate to ascribe anything stronger because of the perception that O'Connor was an orthodox Catholic, and questions abounded about his drift towards heterodoxy. Spaltro agrees with Ralph Woods assertion that "her bodily sufferings resulted in her finding him an attractive, if dangerous, inspiration" (33). In agreeing with Ralph Woods, Spaltro adds this caveat about this relationship, "So long as O'Connor put Teilhard's ideas about spiritual evolution within an orthodox framework emphasizing the acceptance or rejection of grace as the crucial human action, she could value his insights about the unrealized spiritual potential of the body" (Ibid.). Instead of limiting a writer's experiences, given an understanding of Teilhard's work, sickness and pain can open new vistas of awareness for the writer.

An emphasis is on how O'Connor learned from her long-term illness and gained greater awareness of who God was and his presence in such situations. The term "passive" implies a resigned detachment to the situation instead of resolving it. A better expression might be progressive diminishment; progressive diminishment focuses on recognizing the presence of the diminishment, but attempting to learn from it certain insights. The term "progressive" implies learning all possible information about that situation. Since O'Connor was moving towards reflection at this stage of her life, "progressive" expresses how diminishment works within a Teilhardian worldview.

In his book *The Divine Milieu*, Chardin talks about one thing that all humans face and that is the experience of diminishment; he saw two types: external and internal. Diminishment thwarts a human being physically and psychologically. People react to the presence of diminishment in a variety of ways, and if they reflect upon its existence and intrusion into their lives, some will come to view it as another opportunity to encounter, discover, and understand God. Flannery O'Connor, in a letter to Janet McKane, February 25, 1963, states that "Pere Teilhard talks about 'passive diminishment' in *The Divine Milieu*. He means those afflictions that you can't get rid of and have to bear. Those that you can get rid of he believes you must bend every effort to get rid of. I think he was a great man" (*Habit of Being* 509). In the foreword to the book *Presence of Grace*, she talks about how the disease affecting Mary Ann Long, a young girl who died of cancer, brought home to her Chardin's words on diminishment; she observes, "She and the Sisters who had taught her had fashioned from her unfinished face the material of her death. The creative action of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ. It is a continuous action in which this world's goods are utilized to the fullest, both positive gifts and what Pere Teilhard de Chardin calls 'passive diminishment'" (*Mystery and Manners* 223). Here Flannery O'Connor is focusing on how reflecting about these situations helps a person to understand the true reality of life at this highly feared stage. As her lupus increases in its severity, O'Connor understands the magnitude of the phrase "the creative action of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ"; for Flannery O'Connor, death is an undeniable reality facing her. Chardin's ideas about how to view diminishment helps her to progress through this last stage of her life.

A critic (or reader) can use such information to discover a connection between the increasing physical and psychological intrusion of lupus and O'Connor's interest in Chardin's concept of diminishment in the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. A starting

point is what Vernon Ruland suggests a critic do when looking at a text. In *Horizons of Criticism*, Ruland states that a critic should make use of schools of thought. In the case of Flannery O'Connor, Ruland suggests that "the overt focus in this criticism is psychological, in the most comprehensive sense of an individual and social psychology: an analysis of all the significant inner forces within the literary work's total context" (106). He continues:

This includes first the novelist's creative act in relation to its genesis in his own conscious and unconscious life, and in his whole society. Second are the patterns of meaning in the work itself as an integral symbol of his imagination, and most obviously, the forces influencing character behavior in fiction. Third is the critic's experience of the work as an act of identification, displacement, projection, catharsis, and as an activation of social archetypal drives and expectations. (Ibid.)

Mikhail Bakhtin adds that "the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" (276). In the South, Flannery O'Connor faced a society with rigid rules and expectations about women, and whose rules and expectations were "enforced" on the local level in family, local community, and regional setting. The social psychology and socially specific environment in which Flannery existed influenced her perception and interpretation of lupus. By 1960, lupus was becoming the 800 lb. gorilla in her life, no matter how much she denied its presence, as in the letter she mentions to Maryat Lee [in March-April 1960], "Time [Magazine] can't hurt me, but I don't want further attention called to myself in this way. My lupus has no business in literary consideration" (*Habit of Being* 379-80). In seeking insight into what caused O'Connor's interest in Chardin, these suggestions by Ruland and Bakhtin are supported by Dr. Arthur Kleinman's analysis of the psychological status of a person suffering from a long-term illness.

Dr. Kleinman focuses on the fact that a disease must be studied and identified as part of a wider network than Western-trained health professionals might imagine. In his book, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*, he states that suffering and healing must be viewed as part of a cultural system. He notes:

In the same sense in which we speak of religion or language, or kinship as cultural systems, we view medicine as a cultural system, a system of symbolic meanings anchored in particular arrangements of social institutions and patterns of interpersonal interactions. In every culture, illness, the responses to it, individuals, experiencing it and treating it, and the social institutions relating to it are all systematically interconnected. (24)

We begin to understand this process by distinguishing the terms disease and illness. In his research on the relationship between patients and healers in Taiwan (both Western-trained health professionals and indigenous folk practitioners), Dr. Kleinman found that the terms mean different things to patients and healers, particularly Western-trained health professionals. He observed that “from the patient perspective, however, disease and illness are usually not distinguished. Most of the time patients are concerned with symptom relief together with treatment of psychosocial problems produced by the stress of illness [and, further] for most patients this includes a need for explanations of their health problems that are personally and socially meaningful and that usually requires that the practitioner explain the illness” (356). With this distinction in mind, the term applied to Flannery O'Connor's plight with lupus should be illness rather than disease. Illness more accurately describes the physical and psychological aspects of her situation.

In looking at the physical and psychological aspects of illness, Kleinman, in his book *The Illness Narratives*, examines how long-term chronically ill patients, like O'Connor, engage in self-reflective behavior in an attempt to understand the illness they are suffering. They examine it in terms of the past, present, and future. Not only are questions asked by the

individual sufferers, but also in the social network (family, relatives, friends) expressing concern and support for the sufferer.

These explanatory accounts are essential for the more immediate tactics of tacking through the rough seas of chronic illness; moreover, the long-term strategies for assessing the deeper, more powerful currents that influence the chronic course of disorder also requires continuous surveillance and information gathering. Thus, the chronically ill are somewhat like revisionist historians, refiguring past events in light of recent changes. (Kleinman 48)

The goal of the chronically ill person is to transform a “wild disordered natural occurrence into a more or less domesticated, mythologized, ritually controlled, therefore cultural experience” (Kleinman 48). What helps this individual reflect is what Kleinman calls “symbolic reality”; “symbolic reality is formed by the individual’s acquisition of language and systems of meaning. We know socialization, via the acquisition of language and other symbolic systems, plays a major role in the individual’s response to his behavioral field of interpersonal relationships and social situations” (*Patients and Healers* 41). In addition, Erik Erickson notes that the presence of this fatal disease, which had already taken O’Connor’s father’s life, could have moved her towards the final stage of life—*Ego integrity versus despair*. Erickson observes, “For he knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history; and that for him all human integrity stands or falls with the one style of integrity of which he partakes. . . . In such final consolidation, death loses its sting” (268). Identifying the type of lupus O’Connor suffered from helps to understand her mindset and response to the situation.

According to Cynthia Seel and Ralph Wood, lupus should not be considered anymore relevant or important than any other influence in O’Connor’s life. If we examine from O’Connor’s letters, historical documents, and other sources, we see a different picture. Flannery O’Connor contracted the disease in 1950 and lived with its limiting effects until her

death in 1964. Known as lupus erythematosus, this disease is a chronic autoimmune disease that treats the body's own tissue as a perceived foreign substance and attempts to destroy that tissue (Microsoft Encarta). Jennifer Profitt notes that the lupus O'Connor suffered from was a form of disseminated lupus and that it "is now recognized in two forms, either discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) or systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)"("Lupus and Corticosteroid Imagery" 76). O'Connor suffered from lupus SLE, the worst form of lupus. *Dorland's Illustrated Medical Dictionary* defines SLE as "a chronic, remitting, relapsing, inflammatory, often febrile multisystemic disorder of connective tissue, acute or insidious in onset, characterized principally by involvement of the skin (*cutaneous l. erythematosus*), joints, kidneys, and serosal membranes" (1072). The *American Medical Association Encyclopedia of Medicine* notes that SLE "causes a characteristic red, blotchy, almost butterfly-shaped rash over the cheeks and bridge of the nose," and that most sufferers of SLE "feel sick, with malaise, nausea, joint pain, and weight loss. There may be iron deficiency, *anemia*, neurological or psychiatric problems, *renal failure*, *pleurisy* (inflammation of the lining of the lungs), *arthritis*, and *pericarditis* (inflammation of the membrane surrounding the heart" (653).

In the 1950s steroids were used to treat most symptoms of lupus, but the different types of lupus known today were not then distinguishable. Also, the use of steroids was just being discovered at this time, so the great effort in controlling the disease was through trial and error. Profitt describes the treatment for lupus in the 1950s:

Treatment for lupus in the 1950s involved high doses of adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ATCH), derived from the pituitary glands of pigs. ATCH is a corticosteroid—one of the hormone glands produced by the outer (cortex) of the adrenal glands. Resting on top of each kidney, the adrenal glands are responsible for hormones that govern a wide variety of bodily functions including mineral and fluid regulation. (76)

Profitt continues noting that “ATCH is effective in reducing the inflammation associated with lupus. However, given high doses over the long term (as O’Connor’s was), ATCH produces a host of undesirable physical side effects: atrophy, Cushing syndrome, thrombocytopenia (splotched skin), anemia, bone deterioration, tumors, and insomnia—all of which O’Connor suffered” (77). In addition, the psychological effects of lupus can be many and varied, sometimes with troubling results. Profitt mentions that after starting her ATCH treatments, O’Connor mentions that “she is beginning to experience many of the drug’s unpleasant side effects, in body as well as temperament” (77). She mentions these side effects in a letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, Sept. 20, 1951, that “I am down to two moderate shots [of ATCH] a day from four large ones” and that “the large doses of ATCH send you off in a rocket and are scarcely less disagreeable than the disease” (*Habit of Being* 26). Since the 1950s, the detection, description, and treatment of lupus has greatly improved. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the *AMA Medical Encyclopedia* notes that three types of drugs are used to control lupus, for which there is no known cure. The Encyclopedia states that “*Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs* may be prescribed for joint pain, antimalarial drugs for the skin rash, and *corticosteroid drugs* for fever, pleurisy, and neurological symptoms” (653). In Flannery O’Connor’s case, such refinement was not possible. She mentions in her letters the constant battle with fatigue: only being able to work for two- to three hours at a time, the breaking out of hives and rashes just before going on a speaking engagement, the necessity of staying out of the sun, and in her later years of suffering—the problems with joint pain.

O’Connor could not avoid confronting this devastating disease. As Jennifer Profitt points out, “In writing she was also ‘reasoning and dealing with’ her experience with a debilitating, chronic, and ultimately fatal illness. It was directly from her illness, whether at a

conscious or unconscious level, that O'Connor borrowed much of her unique imagery. Through this imagery she processed her response to tragedy and the response of others to disability" (74). The crisis for O'Connor required developing a philosophical-theological outlook to handle the disruption caused by SLE. She needed new sources through which she could accommodate and live with this disease. Among these new sources, was the work of Chardin. As Kleinman suggests and what is clearly demonstrable in her letters, she engaged in self-reflection. In her letter to Janet McKane, dated March 31, 1963, she remarks, "The 'passive diminishment' is probably a bad translation of something more understandable. What he [Teilhard] means is that in the case he's talking about, the patient is passive in relation to the disease—he's done all he can to get rid of it and can't so he's passive and accepts it" (*Habit of Being* 512).

In her reflection on her condition, she considers Chardin's ideas about diminishment as a framework for handling her changing situation, and then, according to her standard *modus operandi*, incorporating these feelings, images, insights into the characters, action, themes, of her latter short stories. She always used individuals, scenes, and images from her native Georgia in her works. She mentions how the South became the beginning of her inspiration; she mentions in a letter to Maryat Lee, a prominent friend whose was considering moving back south, "So it may be the South! You get no condolences from me! This is a return I have faced and when I faced it I was roped and tied and resigned the way it is necessary to be resigned to death, and largely because I thought it would be the end of any creation, any writing, any work from me. And as I told you by the fence, it was only the beginning" (*Habit of Being* 224). As vexing and limiting as the cultural and political life of the South could be, it was a prime laboratory for her writing.

From 1960 on, the frustration of dealing with lupus and its consequences grew in her life; its presence becomes more prominent in her letters. Connor writes to Cecil Dawkins, in a letter dated March 3, 1959, about the effects of lupus and sunlight.

The sun is greatly restricting my activities right now and will continue to do so, I'm afraid. The doctor says I can't go out of the house without stockings, gloves, long sleeves and large hat. (Sunlight influences lupus and causes joint symptoms). The spectacle of me in this get-up all summer is depressing to my imagination. We are having green glass put in the car. (*Habit of Being* 322)

This exotic appearance made her more aware of the ways illness affects an individual physically and psychologically.

During the period of March-April 1960, her correspondence mentions lupus at least five times. As pointed out above, she expresses frustration at being asked about the disease; clearly she wanted any mention of her physical condition left out of critical appraisals of her work. Less than two weeks later, she introduced "A" (who has been identified as Betty Hester) to a new acquaintance: Elizabeth Fenwick. After a graphic description of Elizabeth, she adds "[s]he has lupus like me" (*Habit of Being* 384). On April 16, 1960 she remarks to "A" that she is unable to speak to the National Council of Catholic Women. "I broke out in galloping hives and the Doctor said I could not go. After receiving this information, the hives subsided. "Well, the system makes its own adjustments to circumstances" (*Habit of Being* 390). Lupus and its effects were growing in her awareness.

From 1959 to 1964, she made a concerted effort to read Chardin on diminishment, and also an attendant idea that he called convergence and the relationship between the two. Through this period she explored Teilhard's ideas on convergence as it relates to human development and then looks at his definition of diminishment. She notes the order in which a person ought to read, *The Phenomenon of Man* first, and then *The Divine Milieu*:

After reading both books [*The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*], I doubt his work will be put on the Index, though I think some of the people who latch upon his thought and distort it may cause certain propositions in it to be condemned. I think myself he was a great mystic. The second volume [*The Divine Milieu*] complements the first [*The Phenomenon of Man*] and makes you see that even if there were errors in his thought, there was none in his heart. (*Habit of Being* 430)

His development of these two notions, diminishment and convergence, offered Flannery a “positive” and intriguing perspective, discerning God in a new and illuminating way in her illness and its consequences. These ideas offered an answer to this crisis in her life and provided material for her stories in the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

She was introduced to Teilhard’s ideas by two biographies on his life and work, one by Claude Tresmontant in 1959 and another by Leon Cristiani (Nicholas Corte). At the same time, Chardin’s book *The Phenomenon of Man* became available in English. In her review of the book for *The Bulletin*, February 20, 1960, O’Connor points out some of his unique perceptions:

In his early years Teilhard was oppressed by a caricature of Christianity, one to a large degree prevalent today in American Catholic life, which sees human perfection as consisting in escape from the world and from nature. Nature in this light is seen as already fulfilled. Teilhard, rediscovering biblical thought, ‘asserts that creation is still in full gestation and that the duty of the Christian is to cooperate with it.’ (“The Phenomenon of Man;” *Presence of Grace* 87)

She also points out in her book review of Claude Tresmontant’s book *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, His Thought* that “asceticism in Teilhard’s view no longer consists so much in liberating and purifying oneself from ‘matter’—but in further spiritualizing matter...in sanctifying and supranaturalizing the real which has been given to use, by ‘working together’ with God” (“Pierre Teilhard de Chardin;” *Presence of Grace* 87). O’Connor recognizes major insights in Chardin’s works; for instance, human beings are involved in a unique creative process in which the old descriptions of existence are inadequate to describe. All of

creation is engaged in a process by which our consciousnesses are being raised to new awareness. With O'Connor, we look at diminishment within that creative process and so realize something unique about humanity.

This creative process, which Chardin called convergence, provided a way of understanding diminishment in human existence, not as an external force, but as an operation of the evolutionary process.

. . .on the one side, the friendly and favourable forces, those which sustain our endeavor and lead us towards achievement—'the passivities of growth.' On the other side, the hostile powers which laboriously obstruct our tendencies, hamper or deflect our progress towards heightened being, and thwart our real or apparent capacities for development: these are the 'passivities of diminishment'. (*The Divine Milieu* 47)

An instant of diminishment operating on a societal level was the presence of segregation in Southern society in the mid-twentieth century. While favourable forces such as the push for general education, the development of electricity on a wide scale, and general health improvement emerged in twentieth century America, the antiquated ideas of racism refused to die, thus hindering millions of people from achieving their potential.

In her increased attentiveness to him, Flannery O'Connor focused attention on Chardin's ideas in her reviews of *The Phenomenon of Man* (February 20, 1960) and *Divine Milieu* (February 4, 1961) in *The Bulletin*, the local Catholic diocesan paper. As a reviewer, it is interesting to note that she reviewed more of his works than any other writer between 1959–1964. As Karl-Heinz Westarp points out:

In O'Connor's private collection of books available in the O'Connor Collection at Georgia College we find copies of the following books directly related to O'Connor's interest in Teilhard: *The Phenomenon of Man*, *The Divine Milieu*, *Letters from a Traveler*, by Chardin; *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, His Life and Spirit*, by Nicholas Corte; *Teilhard de Chardin, A Critical Study* by Oliver Rabut; *Teilhard de Chardin, Scientist and Seer*, by Charles Raven; *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, His Thought* by Claude Tresmontant. With the exception of Raven's book, Flannery O'Connor wrote reviews of all these books. (93-94)

One must be mindful that before May of 1959, she had not heard of or read any of his material; by the end of August, 1964, she had read more, written or spoken about him more than any other modern thinker she had known. In addition, the title of her collection “Everything That Rises Must Converge” is a phrase of Teilhard’s which he uses in describing his theory of continuing evolution. John J. Burke, Jr., S.J. declares, “Perhaps the most noticeable inadequacy of the reviews, critical interpretations and general appreciations of Flannery O’Connor’s posthumous short stories, *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, has been the failure to take the title of her collection seriously” (41). He notes that scholars do not vigorously examine Chardin’s influence on her work.

Patricia Dineen Maida, in her essay “Convergence in Flannery O’Connor’s *Everything That Rises Must Converge*,” sets out to remedy this omission:

[A]n understanding of the origin of the title of the story reveals a link between content and form. In a commentary on *The Phenomenon of Man*, Miss O’Connor tells why the work is meaningful to her... It is a search for human significance in the evolutionary process. Because Teilhard is both a man of science and a believer, the scientist and theologian will require considerable time to sift and evaluate his thought, but the poet, whose sight is essentially prophetic, will at once recognize in Teilhard a kindred intelligence. His is a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it. Teilhard’s vision sweeps forward without detaching itself at any point from the earth. (552; *The American Scholar*, 618)

Maida sees a connection between O’Connor and Chardin as something more than just admiration for Teilhard. Chardin makes the point that matter generates spirit, and that in the twentieth century, an interaction between the two spheres cannot be denied. O’Connor focuses on the fact he has discovered what impulses motivate and push the human species forward in its development. He brings home what she describes as important to her writing over and over again—the necessity of dealing with the concrete. In *Mystery and Manners* she notes, “As a novelist, the major part of my task is to make everything, even an ultimate concern, as solid, as concrete, as specific as possible. The novelist begins his work where

human knowledge begins—with the senses; he works through the limitations of matter, and unless he is writing fantasy, he has to stay within the concrete possibilities of his culture” (155). O’Connor’s life circumstances help her to appreciate Chardin’s insight into the biological sources of human consciousness.

The focus on diminishment reminds us of the limitations of life. Human existence is about progress, growth and intellectual development; Teilhard also reminds us that this process includes for the individual, physical exhaustion, disabilities, aging, and the plagues our mortality is heir to. The most brilliant, beautiful, and powerful will succumb to the fragility of the body. Chardin helped O’Connor to see how we must view our physical decline.

In a letter to Dr. T.R. Spivey (30 November 1959) O’Connor reveals her interest in the relation between matter and spirit which Teilhard develops in his evolutionary theory:

I was rather horrified to see that I had put the word *merely* before the word *spiritual*. I did not intend to delegate the spiritual to an inferior status. I mean the spiritual by itself alone or the spiritual not embodied in matter. God is pure Spirit but our salvation was accomplished when the Spirit was made flesh. I meant to imply no more that the traditional teaching of the Incarnation as Catholics see it in the Church. When the Spirit and the flesh are separated in theological thinking, the result is some form of Manicheism. (*Habit of Being* 360)<sup>1</sup>

What is significant about her statement is this general agreement occurs some time before she becomes actively aware of Chardin’s book *The Phenomenon of Man*. She notes in the same letter to Spivey that “I haven’t read Pere Teilhard yet so I don’t know whether I agree with you or not on *The Phenomenon of Man*” (*Habit of Being* 361).

What begins as an agreement acceptable to traditional generalities about the Incarnation is specified in Teilhardian terms. In a letter to Thomas Stritch almost two years

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<sup>1</sup> In her letter to Dr. Spivey, O’Connor seems to note a new heretical idea—that of the fact that God is pure spirit, but salvation was not accomplished until the Spirit had become flesh in the form of Jesus Christ.

later she writes: "I'm much taken, though, with Pere Teilhard. I don't understand the scientific end of it or the philosophical but even when you don't know those things, the man comes through. He was alive to everything there is to be alive to and in the right way" (*Habit of Being* 448). In the last few years of her life, during the development of her illness, Flannery O'Connor mentions her interest and admiration for his writings. In a letter to "A," dated January 2, 1960, she asks if and when will "A" read Chardin's latest book; she asks "A" to let her know as soon as possible so that O'Connor can send her the book; O'Connor is referring to *The Phenomenon of Man*, since she was reviewing it for *The Bulletin*. O'Connor states, "Let me know when you get ready to read Teilhard's book and I will send it to you. It is hard to read if you don't know anything about chemistry and biology and I don't, but as you get on in it, it becomes very stimulating to the imagination" (*Habit of Being* 368).

By April of 1963, O'Connor had devoured whatever information on Chardin that she could; she had reviewed the two above mentioned books, a couple of reviews of Chardin's work by Nicholas Corte (*Pierre Teilhard de Chardin*) and Olivier Rabut (*Teilhard de Chardin*), who particularly had discussed Chardin's major ideas from *The Phenomenon of Man*, *The Divine Milieu*, and essays that later became the basis for *The Future of Man*. In addition, she mentions to an individual that she has also read Chardin's book *Creative Evolution* and is offering it to him as a way of understanding what she is doing; in a letter dated June 16, 1962, she writes to Alfred Corn, "If you are interested, the enclosed book (*Creative Evolution*, by Teilhard de Chardin) will give you one general line of reasoning about why I do. I'm not equipped to talk philosophy; this man is" (*Habit of Being* 480). For example, he talks about how "above are the molecules, formed by groups of atoms", which leads to ever increasing complexity (page 16), and then how "progress=rise of consciousness," "Rise of consciousness=the phenomenon of organization" (page 98). This

information is from the essay *L' Avenir de l'homme, vues d'un paleontologiste,*” which is one of the critical essays in *The Future of Man*. Clearly, Teilhard de Chardin was becoming a prominent inspiration for her writings at this stage of her life. As her familiarity with and passion for these writings grew, particularly *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*, and the major ideas of *The Future of Man* gleaned from her review of Rabut’s book, she develops the notion of progressive diminishment operating within convergence.

In stories from the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, the reader meets numerous characters, who suffer from one sort of malady or another, physical or psychological. The personae in this collection of short stories continue the trademark pattern of O’Connor developing physically imperfect, eccentric characters whose idiosyncrasies differentiate them from the society around them. Their characteristics open them up to pain and discomfort; Mrs. Chestny (“Everything That Rises Must Converge”) and Ruby Turpin (“Revelation”) are painfully aware of how much they fail to measure up to a “normal” Southern woman, particularly because of their obesity. Norton (“The Lame Shall Enter First”) is a young man who has lost his mother and cannot get a satisfactory answer about her fate from his father Sheppard, who, like Asbury Fox (“The Enduring Chill”), is an overbearing intellectual who believes in self-sufficiency. W.T. Tanner (“Judgement Day”) is elderly, a displaced Southerner who lives with his daughter in New York City; and O.E. Parker (Parker’s Back”) is an unhappily married itinerant who covers himself with tattoos.

In the last five years of her life, Flannery uses reflection to achieve a peace with her impending demise; the thoughts of Teilhard de Chardin readily lent themselves to this purpose. Lupus was cutting her life short and Chardin’s ideas were providing her a framework for dealing with her situation. Progressive diminishment operating in convergence emerges as a template that, first, and foremost, helps resolve issues resulting

from this fatal illness, and weaves itself into the fiber of the short stories in the collection

*Everything That Rises Must Converge.*

## CHAPTER III

### DIMINISHMENT AND THE TEILHARDIAN VISION

In the last five years of her life, Flannery O'Connor came to a fuller understanding of what diminishment meant. As the systemic lupus grew stronger and stronger, she sought to analyze and deal with it. Diminishment is a universal condition that all human beings experience because it is endemic to the human species; while other higher-brained mammals (e.g., elephants, monkeys) share a capacity with human beings in reacting to diminishment, what sets humanity apart in wrestling with diminishment is the ability to reflect upon it. As Chardin notes in *The Phenomenon of Man*:

Man, as science is able to reconstruct him today, is an animal like the others—so little separable anatomically from the anthropoids that the modern classification made by zoologists return to the position of Linnaeus and include him with them in the same super-family, the Hominidae. Yet, to judge by the biological results of his advent, is he not in reality something altogether different. (163)

Chardin goes on to say that “if we wish to settle this question of the ‘superiority’ of man over the animals (and it is every bit as necessary to settle it for the sake of the ethics of life as well as for pure knowledge) I can only see one way of doing so—to brush resolutely aside all those secondary and equivocal manifestations of inner activity in human behaviour, making straight for the central phenomenon, *reflection*” (164-65).

Teilhard de Chardin believes that evolutionary development is the best explanation for biological development; evolutionary development adequately explains how biological life began and has continued for millions of years. Chardin is not just content to explain the

biological development of species, including humans; he shows how this development has included psychic development also. Evolution occurs not just on a physical level, but also on a psychic level.

After following the evolutionary development of the cosmos and the biosphere to self-consciousness in humanity, Teilhard contests the idea that evolution has reached a peak with the development of self-consciousness, and then stopped. He presents the geological and biological evidence for evolution, according to which matter developed over millions of years. It began with the inorganic phase of atomic generation and molecular attraction, then developing organic microbial life, which developed into larger and more complex organisms. Physical evolution continued from this point to cellular life to all the creatures of the biosphere, then to an apex in homo sapiens about 50,000 years ago. At this point Teilhard argues that the evolutionary development of the cosmos continues on with a new impulse thrusting and growing out of the sphere of consciousness, the Noosphere, the generation of a higher communitarian consciousness:

I am simply saying, without leaving the physical field, that the greatest discovery made in this century is the realization that the passage of time may best be measured by the gradual gathering of Matter in superposed groups, of which the arrangement, even richer and more centralized, radiates outwards from an even more luminous fringe of liberty and interiority. The phenomenon of the growing consciousness of earth, in short, is directly due to the increasingly advanced organization of more and more complicated elements, successively created by the working of chemistry and life. (*Future of Man* 66)

From this growth to human self-consciousness, more and more energy is channeled into the realm of the mind. Chardin describes this transfer in the evolutionary process:

But although, since the Age of the Reindeer (that is to say, within a period of twenty or thirty thousand years) no progress is perceptible in either the physical or the mental faculties of Individual Man, the fact of organo-psychic development seems to be clearly manifest in Collective Man: and this, whatever we may think of it represents as true an advance as the organization of an added convolution by the brain. (*Future of Man* 69)

This process of ever increasing complexity points humans into organizing themselves collectively, so acquiring more effective powers of thinking and better communication than ever before.

This vision of Teilhard de Chardin is fully grounded in physical evolution, so that the “spiritual” is derived from and depends on the material. The force and direction of evolution depends on the mutual attraction of atoms, molecules, creating more and more complex unions up to the cortex and nervous system that produces self-consciousness in human beings. The God of this system is the attractive personal force who operates within the universe, directing it to its final fulfillment—a community of humankind based in love. Chardin states that this convergence of forces generate an expanding network of consciousness—a Noogenesis.

Chardin sees this process in the mechanical and technological developments in transportation, education, and communication. Material progress becomes the basis for this network of consciousness, which spreads across the globe. The World Wars of the first half of the twentieth century, from one perspective so destructive of community, from another actually accelerated the expansion of this consciousness. Large armies of men were mobilized in many nations and moved to widely diverse land masses and sparsely populated islands, resulting in an awareness among populations of the diversity on this planet. He also points out that in the same global event:

[E]conomically and psychically the entire mass of Mankind, under the inexorable pressure of events and owing to the prodigious growth and speeding up of the means of communication, has found itself seized in the mould of a communal existence—large sections tightly encased in countless international organizations, the most ambitious the world has ever known; and the whole anxiously in the same passionate upheavals, the same problems, the same daily news. (*Future of Man* 127)

This convergence and collectivization moves people into tighter and more complex relationships. Human beings, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, encounter this process and must react in a number of ways. According to Chardin, every new war only intensifies convergence “the more we seek to thrust each other away, the more do we interpenetrate” (*Future of Man* 127).

Advances in communication media continue to validate Teilhard's theory; they have extended the potential for communal interaction around the globe. Inventions such as the Internet, television, and cell phone technology and global organizations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, international corporations are instances of this convergence. People cannot but recognize that as a result of collectivization, interaction across space and time tightens the bonds of commonality and that the psychic energy in this interaction manifests a higher degree of consciousness. Traced through the millennia, Chardin points to a new configuration of Time and Space. He discusses how when self-consciousness appeared, it established the basis of a new evolutionary axis rising through Time and Space, making a connection “between the ‘moral or artificial’ sphere of human institutions and ‘physical’ sphere of organized Nature” (*Future of Man* 131). This phenomenon exists quite distinctly in the case of humanity, where this psychic rise takes the following forms:

1. The growth of a collective memory in which a common inheritance of Mankind is amassed in the form of written texts conserved in archives and libraries and other forms of accumulated experience and passed on through education.
2. The development, through the increasingly rapid transmission of thought, (i.e., radio, television, satellites, the Internet and World Wide Web), of what is in effect a generalized nervous system, emanating from certain defined centers and covering the entire surface of the globe. [sic]

The growth, through the interaction and ever increasing concentration of individual viewpoints, of a faculty of common vision penetrating beyond the continuous and static world of popular conception into a fantastic but still manageable world of atomized energy. (*Future of Man* 132)

All of this effort creates a psychic energy, which is being created and directed to the Noosphere. Chardin notes, “All around us, tangibly and materially, the thinking envelope of the Earth—the Noosphere—is adding to its intended fibres and tightening its network; and at the same time its internal temperature is rising, and with this its psychic potential” *Future of Man* 132).

A notable, most recent example of this development, which Teilhard would certainly applaud were he here, is the “World Wide Web”; a worldwide matrix of communication that is globally developed. Individuals can communicate with others around the world instantaneously. Teilhard's coinage for this kind of convergence on a cosmic scale is “planetisation,” the environment enhancing social contact and developing tighter and more complex relationships. Teilhard's term convergence is also used by many technologists to describe the application of technology to create vast communication networks. Cathy Price, in her study “Convergence: Mapping the Landscape,” applies the term:

For more than half a decade, the nebulous term “convergence” has been hyped as an unstoppable force that will rapidly thrust us into an unfathomable communications utopia. This ambitious vision includes endless possible combinations of converged network technology, services, devices, and ubiquitous access that could allow consumers and businesses to condense services, reduce clutter, cut costs, enhance productivity, and facilitate seamless communication. (Price 30)

Convergence then is not an amorphous (fuzzy, theoretical) term that Chardin invented to satisfy an intuition/premonition; but an insightful, visionary description of the growing net that is shrinking the world on a daily basis. Ms. Price continues, “Convergence is not just about technology, but it is about infrastructure, industry, government regulations, and

consumer behaviors. Several different levels of convergence—including network convergence, service convergence, and industry convergence are happening simultaneously” (30). Compare these comments with Chardin’s about how machines, particularly radio, television, and computers are paving the way for a kind of ‘etherised’ universal consciousness. In an essay from *The Future of Man*, dated January 1947:

The machine creates, helping to assemble, and to concentrate in the form of an ever more deeply penetrating organism, the reflective elements upon earth. I am thinking, of course, in the first place of the extraordinary network of radio and television communications which, perhaps anticipating the direct inter-communications of brains through the mysterious power of telepathy, already link us all in a sort of ‘etherised’ universal consciousness. But I am also thinking of the insidious growth of those astonishing computers which, pulsating with signals at the rate of hundreds of thousands a second, not only relieve our brains of tedious and exhausting work but, because they enhance the essential (and too little noted) factor of ‘speed of thought’(147).

This prediction of the computer’s influence includes the development a global community of interests and concerns. No event can exemplify the relevance and accuracy of Chardin’s observations than the epic earthquake and tsunami of Christmas 2004. In this tragic event, an earthquake of 9.0 on the Richter scale and accompanying tsunami destroyed large swaths of land and human inhabitants around the Indian Ocean. As Chardin predicted, instant communication of the disaster swept through the communications system, and in particular, the Internet acted as a generalized nervous system, spreading information about the disaster, linking up relatives with family in the area, and galvanizing and recruiting help for those affected by the disaster. Michael Coren of CNN reports that “the Internet has played an unprecedented role supplying aid, money and information in the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunamis. Hours after the waves swallowed coastline and swamped villages, an electronic movement was underway. Donations poured into aid agencies through Web sites.

Friends, relatives and strangers turned to the Web for information about missing relatives and tsunami survivors” (CNN.com, “Internet aids tsunami recovery”).

In this Noogenesis, Chardin posits a necessary principle that produces this evolution: “any two forces, provided both are positive, must *a priori* be capable of growth by merging together. An imminent God, who is identified with this direction and purpose, and the phenomenon of a continually evolving World are the two springs of energy, which make up this thrust, which necessarily result in an upward movement. As they rise, these forces, acting and reacting together, create a new vision, “cone of time” combining the vertical/horizontal movement with its oppositional features. As this cone approaches its apex, Teilhard’s “point omega,” the flow of human energy builds a community of knowledge and love—the culmination of this planetising convergence. In this vision diminishment represents the opportunity for human beings to transform the traditional division of body/soul, flesh/spirit into an organic whole. In her own multi-layered and eccentric way O’Connor implicates her personae in this evolutionary process of rising and converging. She does not violate the appearances and the effect is often that of a photographic negative, which the critic/reader—à la the directions of Dr. Ruland and Mikhail Bakhtin—must develop on his/her own.

Progressive diminishment involves the steps that an individual encounters when facing diminishment in the converging environment. This factor in a converging environment is recognized in its helping humanity “to cleave to God hidden beneath the inward and outward forces which animate our being and sustain it in its development,” this goal of this process “is ultimately to open ourselves to, and put trust in, all the breaths of life” (*The Divine Milieu* 52). One of the first steps is acknowledging the operation of Entropy (as pointed out by Chardin)—energy unavailable for useful work in a system undergoing change.

Entropy, in and of its nature, contributes to the ultimate diminishment, which is death. He notes, “The moment has come to plumb the decidedly negative side of our existences—the side on which, however far we search, we cannot discern any happy result or any solid conclusion to what happens to us. It is easy enough to understand that God can be grasped in and through every life. But can God also be found in and through death” (*The Divine Milieu* 52). The anarchy of entropy (death) countered by the rise of the Noogenesis, a larger awareness of a worldwide community and the effects of disease, old age, and disabilities in this environment offers human beings the opportunity to confront the divine in an authentic way. The presence of progressive diminishment operating in a convergent environment allows individuals to reflect on this dimension of our experience and assign a value to it. Chardin points to the need for this awareness of community when encountering diminishment. These are the steps that define progressive diminishment.

[T]he individual, faced by himself alone, cannot fulfill himself. It is only when opposed to other men that he can discover his own depth and wholeness. However personal and incommunicable it may be at its root and origin, Reflection can only be developed in communion with others. It is essentially a social phenomenon. (*Future of Man* 133)

As a reminder, and as pointed out by Arthur Kleinman, “Symbolic reality enables individuals to make sense out of their inner experience. It helps shape personal identity in accordance with social and cultural norms” (*Patients and Healers* 42). Such processes are what, according to Chardin, sets apart the human species from other developed species; instead of reacting by instinct, when we encounter physical/psychological diminishment with a serious consequence, we seek to understand its presence. Such questions such as: Why has this affected me now? How will this illness affect my life? What will this illness teach me about the value of my life in relation to family, society, and God? Of necessity, we have to

cope with decline, and we begin to reflect on strategies for dealing with the decline of status, mobility, and vitality. In such circumstances, we tend to reflect on our plight, largely in isolation. Often this leads to despondency and self-pity. Treatment of this condition requires the ministry of a caring society whose vision goes beyond making the sufferer comfortable. Achieving this ultimate goal in convergence involves turmoil of its own.

In Teilhard's long evolutionary view, the attractive force that drew the atoms and the molecules of the burgeoning cosmos together now exerts that force in the psychic network that eventually will lead to a universal community of humankind bonded by love. For him, this is an inevitable outcome of convergence and the Noosphere it generates. Human existence is grounded in material existence; and in the evolution of that materiality the imminent God is revealed. Out of the organization of the nervous system and the cortex, the psyche emerges with its power to know itself and to draw others. A component of the growth and tightening of relationships is the willingness to participate in this convergence, even or perhaps especially in the throes of diminishment.

Chardin discusses the ways in which the progressive diminishment process might further the process of convergence. He begins by dividing diminishment into external and internal diminishments:

The external passivities of diminishment are all our bits of ill fortune. We have only to look back on our lives to see them springing on all sides: the barrier which blocks our way, the wall that hems us in, the stone which throws us from our path, the obstacle that breaks us, the little word that infects the mind, all the incidents and accidents of varying importance and varying kinds, the tragic interruptions (upsets, shocks, amputations, deaths) which come between the world of 'other' things and the world that radiates from us. (*The Divine Milieu* 53)

These problems are secondary to the internal diminishments; “In a sense [external passivities] means little to us because we can always imagine getting them back” (*Divine Milieu* 53). By contrast, internal passivities are more insidious.

Internal diminishments, to Chardin, are far more threatening to human beings because of the kind of damage they inflict. They strike without warning and rob human beings of hope. One specific internal passivity described by Teilhard struck a particular chord with Flannery “Sometimes it is the cells of the body that rebel or become diseased; at other times the very elements of our personality seem to be in conflict or to run amok. And then we impotently stand by and watch collapse, rebellion and inner tyranny, and no friendly influence can come to our help” (*Divine Milieu* 54). In numerous letters in the late 1950s and early 1960’s, O’Connor wryly comments on the increasing imposition of the lupus illness and the side effects of the cortisone shots to control it; of a hospital stay in the winter of 1958 for her and her mother, she notes, “We spent a week in the hospital in a double room with identical colds and sore throats, taking identical red mycins. She after being cured of the disease had to be cured of the medicine. No medicines affect me anymore” (*Habit of Being* 269). In a letter to Maryat Lee, O’Connor was scolding her for experimenting with medicine she knew nothing about, O’Connor lets us know some of the serious side-effects of the disease upon her, “Have you had a blood count? Have you had a urinalysis? Have you had your bloody head examined? When I was nearly dead with lupus I had these sweats. They are a sign of serious chemical imbalance” (*Habit of Being* 448). Jennifer Profitt notes that for O’Connor, early in her illness, “taking medications became so commonplace that, good or bad, she grew to understand that her life and productivity as a writer were dependent upon them” (80). O’Connor understood this thought of Chardin’s well, when she comments in the

last year of her life, “So far as I can see the medicine and the disease run neck and neck to kill you” (*Habit of Being* 590). This type situation addresses a fundamental fear or concern that plagues humanity; even in the twenty-first century, our constitution breaks down, sometimes from genetic circumstances and sometimes from the improper use of our liberty. In either case, the sufferer must cope with the consequences. So diminishment operates within Teilhard de Chardin’s evolutionary view of creation. Diminishment, categorized as external and internal, is part of the tangential loss of energy in the evolutionary scheme of things and that part affects our response to this world.

Chardin notes that there are several ways that human beings respond to the presence of diminishment in their lives. For those who believe in Providence, one way is to “divert our activity onto objects, or towards a framework, that are more propitious—though still remaining on the plane of the human ends we are pursuing” (*The Divine Milieu* 59), if we have experienced a failure, as, for example, in the life of Job. Another way is to focus “our frustrated desires to less material fields, which neither moth nor rust can corrupt;” examples abound in history and the lives of saints and noble people, where an individual “can see the emerging ennobled, tempered, and renewed from some ordeal, or even some downfall, which seemed bound to diminish or lay him low for ever” (Ibid.) Finally, there is the most vexing way to respond to diminishment. Human beings view situations (accidents, premature deaths, weaknesses affecting the highest reaches of our being) that appear to have no value to them, and according to Chardin, “under blows such as these, man does not move upward in any appreciable direction; he disappears or remains tragically diminished” (*The Divine Milieu* 60). Chardin believes that such opportunities present the third way to respond to diminishment, what he calls “the most efficacious and the most sanctifying way” (Ibid.).

When we face situations where there is no visible advantage to be gained, we realize our true limitations. In facing such limitations, we reflect upon the presence of such a situation and reflect on what its significance might be. We realize the presence of a transcendence beyond ourselves that is bound up with the whole human collectivity.

As we lose ourselves to a greater otherness and diminish “in the destruction of our egoism,” we begin to “develop the center of our personality to its utmost limits.” This initial detachment allows us to sense freedom in ways never possible, but it is only a prelude to the ultimate definitive transformation—death. Chardin states that “it is the sum and type of all the forces that diminish us, and against which we must fight without being able to hope for a personal, direct and immediate victory” (61). He continues that “now the great victory of the Creator and Redeemer, in the Christian vision, is to have transformed what is in itself a universal power of diminishment and extinction into an essentially life-giving factor” (Ibid.). The end result is that the imminent divine force in diminishment is “hollowing out” the sufferer and so increasing the awareness of God’s presence in him; he states, “God must, in some way or other, make room for Himself, hollowing us out and emptying us” (*The Divine Milieu* 61). This is the goal of progressive diminishment; the individual recognizes the divine force operative in such situations and accepts help from others in a newly defined community created by the convergence process; as a result, new bonds of concern and communion are forged with the helpers. Those dealing with various diminishments in this spirit further convergence in their circle and, collectively, contribute to the evolving planetary community. Such is what happens to Julian in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” Ruby Turpin in “Revelation,” and O.E. Parker in “Parker’s Back.” In praying over diminishment, Chardin puts his reflection in an Augustinian mode:

It was a joy to me, O God, in the midst of the struggle, to feel that in developing myself I was increasing the hold that You have upon me; it was a joy to me, too, under the inward pressure of life or amid the favorable play of events, to abandon myself to Your Providence. Now that I have found the joy of utilizing all forms of growth to make You, or to let You, grow in me, grant that I may willingly consent to this last phase of communion in the course of which I shall possess You by diminishing in you. (*The Divine Milieu* 61-62)

Flannery's suffering from the long-term effects of lupus and her exposure to the thoughts of Teilhard de Chardin helped answer questions about the stage of life she was in the last five years of her life. It helped her continue her goal of sustaining, renewing, and reinterpreting her relationship with God, family, friends, correspondents, and readers at this point in her life. And in connection with her goals as a writer, when such sources offered her inspiration and support, she inevitably weaved such information into her writing.

As this higher consciousness develops, we can react to the presence of diminishment in new and different ways. A reaction may come from an striking change in our physical or social situation.. Another is a growing empathy and "enforced" awareness, which individual human beings share, even if they are unaware, in the unity of the human collective from radio, television, and most recently, the Internet. International organizations draw people together in the fight against hunger and poverty, in arbitrating issues of injustice and peace, and motivating diverse national to resolve political impasses. At home the NAACP and Southern Christian Leadership Conference were founded to oppose racism; UNESCO was developed to address issues of poverty and educational opportunity; and recently, in the last ten years, the Internet has to a degree fulfilled Chardin's vision of people being united in common knowledge and practices.

In Flannery's lifetime, a major challenge to the nation was the issue of civil rights. Many on both sides of the color line could no longer accept the second-class status of African

Americans. In turn, they marched and protested for equal rights. Because of the ever tightening social bond of humanity, such situations demonstrated the socialization and collectivization occurring in the community. Because people's expanding awareness of such issues, the notion of diminishment changes and evolves.

A critical theory that supplies a complementary frame to Teilhard's vision offers Tillich's "ground of being" perspective on God's presence in the literary work. In his study *Horizons of Criticism* Vernon Ruland posits the premise that literature and religion offer commonalities that contribute to a fuller understanding of the human condition. First, both religion and literary criticism focus on what defines the human condition; what "describes the religious drive as a person's master sentiments, giving comprehensive ultimate shape to all his experiencing, whereas the poetic drive would be a further concrete specification of the same basic drive. Thus, the governing entelechy in a poet's and his public's experiencing, in the form of the literary work itself, is the religious drive, given definite poetic specification" (Ruland 4). Both writer and reader, then, experience the motive power of religious aspiration in the personae and events of the literary works. Secondly, instead of confining the notion of God to a transcendental being who issues forth doctrines of belief and behavior, Ruland points out that theologians like Tillich or Rahner describe God "not as *a* suprapersonal being but as the unconditional ground, height, horizon of all being. Even if one were theologically to dispute such an immanent, relational approach, it has still achieved. . . nontheological currency in our culture" (Ruland 6). So if one accepts God as the unconditional ground or horizon of being, then, Ruland concludes, religion can be understood as a personal explicit or implicit drive, creed or value system. Teilhard's ideas on diminishment and convergence can be seen as part and parcel of the drive, creed, value system important to Flannery O'Connor

in the last five years of her life. The illness led her into a reflection that supports the observations of Kleinman and Erickson. Chardin's ideas dovetailed very well with this explicit and implicit drive, creed, value system of hers.

Ruland's methodology recognizes distinct spheres in the creation of the artistic product: the originative experience of the artist, the experience of the work itself, and the assimilative experience of the audience. In this triad Ruland recognizes the spheres of influence on the creative process offers this new paradigm for understanding the text:

Here an organism shapes its context and in turn is shaped by it. There is an ongoing, mutually conditioning transaction between the novelist experiencing, the novel experienced, and the critic experiencing. A work of literature still possesses its own organic formal identity; however it cannot be reduced to the experience it generates or is generated by. (Ruland 57)

The author and the reader, each in a different way, contribute religious sensitivity to the experience of the work. The relationship between religious experience and literary criticism, as it exists in this relationship applies to the process of literary production.

The literary work is created at a certain point of time and then begins to develop a life of its own as it exists over a temporal period. In this activity the religious experience and the artistic impulse fuse in "on a single consciousness, experiencing poetically-religiously, more or less as a pervasive style of being" (Ruland 3). From the writer's ground of being, much like the evolutionary process, a characteristic energy motivates the writer who brings that to the literary piece he/she creates. So in the convergence of the text writer and reader possess a common ground for contemplating and interpreting the literary creation.

At one remove from religion, theology is participatory reflection upon religious experience, as literary criticism is participatory reflection upon literary experience. Theologians and literary critics are expendable, derivative, parasitic by profession, but their task can be a creative one, especially in the act of selective methodological clarification. By the term participatory I insist each genuine theologian or critic must be

an engaged insider, reenacting sensitively the primary religious poetic experience itself, before he attempts to understand or assess it. (Ruland 4)

In the later stories of Flannery O'Connor, one aspect of her experience is her lupus; another aspect is her Teilhardian understanding of it. Both aspects serve to ground her writing and establish a leitmotif, so the reader can fashion an interpretation that balances the external and internal diminishments in her work. Ruland further states that an important consequence of this approach is the respect the religious thinker and the literary critic bring to the study of the literature. He maps out the way to engage the text as an insider; he is particularly drawn to French phenomenological critics who have used this strategy in analyzing a text. They "establish a firm continuum of consciousness between poet-poem-critic, much like that elaborated before in my own critical theory, and view the work as a semiotic moment in consciousness" (Ruland 80). The consciousness created and sustained by this continuum cannot be separated for examination. As Bakhtin amplifies, "As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's" (293). The religious critic cannot extract just religious moments or insights; neither can the literary critic just extract moments of literary insight from the religious. This warning is most apropos in dealing with O'Connor's texts.

O'Connor's experience also includes a range of personal, social, cultural and religious attitudes in the American South. It is not hard to tick off these aspects of her work and to decide on a single emphasis as the "master consciousness." Teilhard's vision, in fact, incorporates all these dimensions and does not allow for their separation. When Flannery

titles her collection, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," she offers this "master" consciousness to the reader.

Teilhard's work affirms the uniqueness of human nature that Christianity declares in the person of Jesus; he views the evolution of the cosmos as declaring presence of an imminent God. Evolution offers a scientific description of biological and noological development and includes progressive diminishment as an opportunity to participate in the growing convergence by the physical, psychic and social changes it brings.

Some of the personae in this collection of stories are impaired in ways that impact their lives and those near them. These disabilities are magnified by the changing social context around the sufferers. Willy nilly, they are engaged in converging and, in different ways, embrace or resist its impetus and direction. Chardin underscores the positive impact on this engagement: "this is why if Man at this moment finds himself faced with the burden not merely of submitting to the evolutionary process but of consciously furthering it, we may be sure that he will seek, and rightly, to avoid the responsibility and pangs which this entails if the objective does not seem to be worth the effort" (*Future of Man* 206). In "Revelation" when Ruby Turpin hears foreboding, yet true words of Mary Grace about her decrepit physical and spiritual condition. O.E. Parker of "Parker's Back" is forced to share his tattoos with people in his social environment. On his "Judgment Day" T.C. Tanner is violently confronted with his patronizing attitudes towards Negroes. Though these characters are not aware of the larger implications of these confrontations and the changing conditions of their lives, the process of convergence presents them with new realities and interaction they cannot avoid. However, the critic/reader becomes aware of the implications of the title as he/she encounters the stories in the collection.

## CHAPTER IV

### EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST CONVERGE

The title of this short story is a statement of Teilhard de Chardin about the material progress of evolution. John Desmond states, “This vision of human history developed by Teilhard de Chardin—a synthesis of biological and psychological evolution and the Christian conception of historical redemption—is one which strongly appealed to Flannery O’Connor and influenced much of her later work” (31). In this process, O’Connor discovered a way to address her concerns as a writer in the last five years of her life. From a critic’s perspective, this process would offer grounds for interpreting this short story and others in the collection. This process changed people and society in the short term and long term, either peacefully or violently. In either event they would have to face change; as Desmond notes, “For Teilhard, the drive toward synthesis is caused by the energy of union—love—and he warned strongly against isolation or refusal of reconciliation in any form, racial or individual” (Ibid). O’Connor discovered, through the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, a matrix conducive and compatible with her reflective goals in the period of 1959-1964. Her admiration for Chardin only grew as she approached death; in writing to Father John McCown (March 21 1964), four months before her death, she states that “the most important nonfiction writer is Pere Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. who died in 1955 and has so far escaped the Index [of Forbidden Books], although a monition has been issued on him. If they are good, they are dangerous” (*Habit of Being* 571). His ideas gave her a new perspective on and verve for life.

An incident in the summer of 1961 intensified O'Connor's interest in Teilhard, and helped crystallize for her this emerging context, progressive diminishment operating in convergence. Mary Ann Long was a young lady who had suffered from a cancerous tumor on the side of her faith; she had died at the age of twelve. Flannery O'Connor was asked by the Dominican nuns at the Our Lady of Perpetual Home in Atlanta to help write a foreword for a book on the life of this young girl. She was impressed by the way that this young girl faced her situation and wrote an inspiring essay about it. She saw in this young girl, someone who faced death with maturity and honesty. In her introduction to the book *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, she writes:

This [discussion] opened for me also a new perspective on the grotesque. Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is something under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing down that will soften their real look. When we look into the face of good, we are liable to see a face like Mary Ann's, full of promise. (Carter 17-18)

She mentions in the introduction of the book, as noted previously, "that the creative act of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ, and that "it is a continuous action in which this world's goods are utilized to the fullest, both positive goods, and what Pere Teilhard de Chardin calls 'passive diminishments'" (*Mystery and Manners* 223). George Kilcourse points out that this incident helped clarify for O'Connor Chardin's ideas on diminishment and became a source for her in writing "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and other stories to follow; he states:

The sisters had given Mary Ann 'the wealth of Catholic wisdom' by teaching her 'what to make of her death' (831).

No wonder Flannery describes the Christian's creative action as preparing for one's death in Christ. In the case of Mary Ann, O'Connor celebrates her as 'extraordinarily rich'—in grace. 'Mary Ann's diminishment was extreme, but she was equipped by natural intelligence and by a suitable education, not simply to endure it, but to build upon it' (828).

Such is the face of the good under construction in O'Connor's final short stories. (278)

Kilcourse attributes this change in O'Connor to her growing familiarity with Chardin's works. His emphasis on the human condition as grounded in materiality only increased O'Connor's attraction to him in dealing with her illness and serving as a potential source for future stories. Often in *Mystery and Manners*, she stated the absolute necessity of grounding any literary manifestation in the human concrete; when writing short stories, she insisted:

Fiction operates through the senses, and I think one reason that people find it so difficult to write stories is that they forget how much time and patience is required to convince through the senses. No reader who doesn't actually experience, who isn't made to feel, the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells him. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched. (91).

Richard Gianone aptly notes one link that draws the senses together, St. Paul's theology of the mystical body. Gianone notes:

Paul envisions Christ uniting all creation in Himself, with the crucifixion as the victory that sanctifies the feeble body so that 'in him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17). Teilhard and O'Connor understand Paul's mystical body not as an abstract solution to a riddle about God but as a moral catalyzing them to explore the world in original ways as scientist and fiction writer. (*Mystery of Love* 156-57)

Both of them, particularly O'Connor at this point in her life, understood that the physical condition of human existence contributes as much to understanding humanity in its surrounding context (other human beings, community, the supernatural) as revealed truth (doctrine). Spirituality is connected with materiality. Out of the growing complexity of matter in convergence, and with a developing awareness of this process, we develop a

capacity to appreciate this undervalued source for discovering and authenticating spirituality. She acknowledges this awareness when she declares that Chardin “in his early years was oppressed by a caricature of Christianity, one to a large degree prevalent in American Catholic life, which sees human perfection as consisting in escape from the world and from nature. Nature, in this light is seen as already fulfilled” (Martin and Luber 87). She further suggests how “Teilhard, rediscovering biblical thought, ‘asserts that creation is still in full gestation and that the duty of the Christian is to cooperate fully with it’” (Ibid.).

The short story “Everything That Rises Must Converge” focuses on Mrs. Chestny and her son, Julian, a college graduate and typewriter salesman, who live in the South during the time of the Civil Rights movement. O’Connor mentions in a letter that “I have also written and sold to *New World Writing* a story called ‘Everything That Rises Must Converge,’ which is a physical proposition that I have found in Pere Teilhard” (*Habit of Being* 438). Furthermore, she writes to Robert Giroux, her editor, (November 5, 1962), “I have seven stories but I don’t think there is enough variety in them to make a good collection. I still want to call the book *Everything That Rises Must Converge*” (*Habit of Being* 498). The selection of the title for the short story and book indicates the depth to which the views of Teilhard had penetrated her imagination. This story is a proper starting point for analysis of the stories in the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

According to Mrs. Chestny, Julian’s mother, the family had been prominent in the state during the Antebellum period, and also, for a while after the war. Mrs. Chestny mentions that Julian’s great-grandfather had owned a plantation and slaves, and that he had also been governor of the state. By the 1950s, the family had only a vestige of its former

grandeur. Julian lived in his mother's apartment, in a rundown part of the town. In contrast to Julian's educational status, his mother had only a high school education.

The action of the short story presents the weekly ritual of Julian's mother traveling to the Y for her exercise class. Julian's mother was a large woman, who had to lose twenty pounds "on account of her blood pressure," by order of her doctor. She travels to the Y on Wednesday nights for a reducing class, and Julian accompanies her because "she would not ride the buses by herself at night since they had been integrated" (*Complete Stories* 405). Blacks and whites mixing together did not appeal to Julian's mother. This Wednesday evening ritual always aggravated Julian in many ways; he reacted to it like "St. Sebastian [waiting] for the arrows to begin piercing him" (*Complete Stories* 405).

In preparing to leave for her evening at the Y, Julian's mother was fussing with a hat that she had bought just a few days ago. As Julian watched her, "she was almost ready to go, standing before the hall mirror, putting on her hat. The hat was new and had cost her seven dollars and a half" (*Complete Stories* 405). The way she fussed with the hat indicated that it was important to her, even though in his opinion, the hat looked atrocious. Julian's mother was sensitive to her physical appearance. In the South, as in most of the rest of the United States, culture was constantly telling women what defined a "normal woman." Peter Stearns points out that "diet discussions for women almost invariably emphasized aesthetic factors. Health, if mentioned as well, was a bit player in the drama of fat" (Stearns 82). He mentions a book written in 1959 that sums up the cultural situation of Flannery O'Connor, Mrs. Chestny, and, later on, Ruby Turpin in "Revelation." He states:

Thus a popular book in 1959 cited three reasons for strict dieting that seem ridiculously redundant save for the need to drive home the imperative of fashion: (1) so women can fit into current styles, particularly now that bathing suits are increasingly skimpy; (2) it

is 'desirable to avoid inordinate curves and shapes and protuberances, which do not look well in the more revealing garments'; and (3) fat is aesthetically unpleasant. (Ibid.)

As early as her senior year at Georgia State College for Women, Flannery O'Connor rebelled at the images that determined a woman's normality. Jean Cash notes that she wrote an essay entitled "Fashion's Perfect Medium" in which she "scores a direct hit on the universal concern of college students about their physical appearance. She describes sweaters so outsized that they cover the students' entire bodies. O'Connor illustrates the popularity of these oversized sweaters with clever cartoons" (69). A woman who was obese or crippled would struggle against such a message, and therefore need to compensate for such an influence. This cultural idea is reinforced when the narrator mentions that Mrs. Chestny "said ladies did not tell their age or weight" (*Complete Stories* 405). Since Southern culture imposed an uncomfortable awareness of her problem, she compensates in a manner that Chardin points out, that of imbuing certain objects with a special designation in order to demonstrate her uniqueness. Patricia Yeager alludes to this discomfort, as part of the patriarchal demands placed upon women. Even more explicitly, Yeager sees female authors fleshing out such characters as representative, "that southern literary bodies are grotesque because their authors know that bodies cannot be thought separate from the racist and sexist institutions that surround them" (*New Perspectives* 186). O'Connor was familiar with social protocol, such as dressing up with a hat to go out, but with changing times it no longer possessed the aura of respectability, even uniqueness, it had in the past. In the letter written to Cecil Dawkins, previously mentioned, O'Connor mentions the necessity of putting on a large brimmed hat and gloves in order to go in the summer sunlight and still control the

lupus. Her diminishment did not give her an aura of respectability, but rather marked her as peculiar.

To Julian, the hat was just another one of his mother's insufferable practices "that gave her pleasure and depressed him." In his view, "it was a hideous hat. A purple velvet flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out" (*Complete Stories* 405). Though the hat was an embarrassment to look at, Julian encouraged her to wear it to the exercise class. In this story, the hat relates to progressive diminishment operating in convergence. The hat is a new purchase, and a boost to Mrs. Chestny's spirits. As they leave the house, Julian tells her:

"Shut up and enjoy it," he muttered. "With the world in the mess it's in, she said, "it's a wonder we can enjoy anything. I tell you, the bottom rail is on the top." Julian sighed. "Of course," she said, "if you know who you are, you can go anywhere." "Most of them in it [reducing class] are not our kind of people," she said, "but I can be gracious to anybody. I know who I am." (*Complete Stories* 407)

Mrs. Chestny reveals that things are changing in the South; whereas once she knew her place and others knew their place, now everything is upside down. The bottom rail is the lower classes intruding on her and demanding the same rights that she has enjoyed all of her life. The intrusion is most poignant in the buses where African Americans now can sit anywhere they want. This convergence is changing the rules in society and creating a more equitable system.

Convergence provides a viable framework for the action in this story and illuminates the image of progressive diminishment in the movement of this story. Such a combination changes the perception of objects such as the hat in the story. In *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard de Chardin talks about how human beings focus on a framework that paints them in a more favorable light when struggling with a diminishment. People imbue certain things with

importance in order to distinguish themselves from others. The hat and the gloves are part of Mrs. Chestny's aura in the face of social changes; she insists on her rights with Julian. When he points out that knowing who you are only lasts a generation:

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." "Oh hell," Julian said. "Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state," she said. "Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh." (*Complete Stories* 407)

To Mrs. Chestny, how she dresses and appears in public is part of the image she has created in this new environment, in particular dealing with the reality of being poor and diminished.

Even though she wore a hat and gloves to the Y reducing class, she is still obese and "dumpy," just like the other women in the reducing class. She must conjure up a way to announce her uniqueness to the rest of this community. The hat announces Mrs. Chestny's superiority in the midst of decline. As long as Mrs. Chestny wears that hat, she lets Julian and others know that she is special, that she still embodies the Old South, an attitude shared by many Southern whites. Of course, it is ironic that their standard of living has slipped dramatically, as pointed out by the narrator in the description of the neighborhood, "The sky was a dying violet and the houses stood out darkly against it, bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness though no two were alike" (*Complete Stories* 406).

Julian, Mrs. Chestny's son, represents a favorite type that O'Connor plants in her stories. Julian, Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First," Asbury Fox in "The Enduring Chill," and Joyce Hulga in "Good Country People," are pseudo-intellectuals on whom O'Connor focuses the action. Julian is described through the eyes of the mother:

"My son just finished college last year. He wants to write but he's selling typewriters until he gets started. . . . "Well that's nice. Selling typewriters is close to writing. He can

go right from one to the other. . . .” “I tell him,” his mother said, “that Rome wasn’t built in a day.” (*Complete Stories* 410-11)

His mother has sacrificed much to help him get a college education; it is a vested interest she feels was worth the sacrifice. Julian feels his education has pointed him to the “right manner” of interpreting human behavior and distinguished him above the regular denizens of this town, including his mother. His “education” had liberated him from the close-mindedness that infected so many people in this region. Julian believed he possessed one trait that stood in sharp contrast to his mother, a “respect and sympathy” for blacks. He could “appreciate” the plight of the African American.

It was the regular discussion of this subject that always elicited anger and consternation between them; his mother possessed distinct ideas about how blacks should behave in the South and Julian believed that the disruption in the South was compensatory justice for “racists” such as his mother. Julian liked to think of himself completely divorced from the “idiocy” surrounding him. When his mother railed against integration and the ungrateful attitude of African Americans, he concocted ways to combat her attitudes. John Desmond refers to him as “a pseudo-intellectual who espouses the gospel of liberalism—toleration of all—but in truth his liberalism is only a reactionary response to his own ambivalent feelings towards his family’s history” (32). In response to his mother’s diatribes, “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 sin” (*Complete Stories* 409). Numerous times on the way to the Y, he would develop a myriad of plans to teach her a lesson:

He might make friends with some distinguished Negro professor or lawyer and bring him home to spend the evening. He would be entirely justified but her blood pressure would rise to 300. He imagined his mother lying desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her. Instead, he approached the ultimate horror. He

brought home a beautiful suspiciously Negroid woman. "Prepare yourself," he said. "There is nothing you can do about it. This is the woman I have chosen. She's intelligent, dignified, even good, and she's suffered and she hasn't thought it *fun*. Now persecute us, go ahead and persecute us. Drive her out of here, but remember, you're driving me too." (*Complete Stories* 414)

Julian's stand against racism seems motivated more from a desire to annoy his mother than from any more objective motive. Marion Montgomery comments on Julian's stand against "racism" in the South:

Julian's distortions are those that a self-elected superior intellect is likely to make through self-deception; his is an intellect capable of surface distinctions but not those fundamental ones such as that between childish and childlike readings of the world. In short, Julian takes himself to be liberated, older than his mother since he is more modern. (*Montgomery* 293)

Julian's commitment to protesting this action on the part of his mother and Southern society seems to impress no one, particularly the African Americans he attempts to converse with. Ralph Wood points out that "in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' and 'The Enduring Chill' O'Connor shows how secular liberators can be guilty of their own heinous sins" (Flannery O'Connor 4). In contrast, his mother preferred to believe that blacks wanted the status quo of the past, not the racial tension of the present.

Julian's mother never hesitated in expressing her distaste for uppity African Americans. To her, the best example of a fine black person was the old black woman who was her nurse. She reminded Julian of her "affinity" for African Americans people when she stated, "And I remember the old darky who was my nurse, Caroline. There was no better person in the world. I've always had a great respect for my colored friends," she said. "I'd do anything in the world for them and they'd me" (*Complete Stories* 409). Julian's mother assumed she shared the opinion of many white Southerners concerning blacks, insisting that they really did not desire equality with whites. When Julian points out, "That there are no

more slaves,” she responds with the belief that they were better off in the established social order that God had ordained in Southern society; she states in contrast to his statement, “They were better off when they were.” It’s ridiculous. It’s simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence” (Complete Stories 408).

Like many whites who lived in the South at this time, Julian’s mother firmly believed she could live in the past and never have to change her attitudes or opinions. Even if African Americans had served in the U.S. Army and had been integrated with whites, and even if the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled against separate but equal status for blacks and whites, people such as this would never abandon their view of the past. Clearly, for Flannery O’Connor, this attitude was one of the “external diminishments,” the socialized rules designed to inhibit the material, social, and spiritual improvement of people that Chardin stated must and will be removed by the converging process. In his essay “The Essence of the Democratic Idea,” Chardin notes that one of the characteristics that evolves biologically, and with clarity, out of the convergence process from the Biosphere into the Noosphere is equality; he notes:

Equality: the right of every man to participate, according to his aptitudes and powers, in the common endeavor to promote, each by way of the other, the future of the individual and the species. Indeed, is it not this need and legitimate demand to *participate* in the Human Affair (the need felt by every man to live co-extensively with Mankind) which, deeper than any desire for material gain, is today agitating those classes and races that have hitherto been left “out of the game.” (*Future of Man* 241)

O’Connor witnessed how little changed when she moved back to Georgia because of her illness. Jean Cash observes, “In 1945 she had left her hometown, and had gained emotional distance from middle Georgia during the five-year interim. Her illness, however, had forced her back to Milledgeville and to the care of her mother, Regina Cline O’Connor” (13). Her letter to Maryat Lee told of her feelings, “This is a return I have faced and when I

faced it I was roped and tied and resigned the way it is necessary to be resigned to death, and largely because I thought it would be the end of any creation, any writing, any work for me” (Habit of Being 224). Eventually, O’Connor found material in this desert to use. In this story and in others in this collection, individuals such as Mrs. Chestny and her son take the stage, front and center. The social practices they grew up with were slowly and grudgingly dying, but dying nevertheless. His mother refused to acknowledge the reality evolving in front of her; she vainly believed that things would eventually revert back to the status of yesteryear. In that belief she constantly attempted to persuade Julian the great value of his past family history.

The conflict over changing social and family conditions indicates the converging atmosphere enveloping Julian and his mother. In the story, social conditions are in turmoil, according to Julian’s mother. She utters a statement indicating convergence when she and Julian are having their umpteenth discussion on black/white relations. She tells him, “With the world in the mess it’s in, it’s a wonder we can enjoy anything. I tell you, the bottom rail is on top” (*Complete Stories* 407). Chardin remarks that one of the characteristics of a converging atmosphere is the fact that society has created a body of established knowledge and conduct, such as his observation of “the growth of a collective memory in which a common inheritance of Mankind is amassed in the form of written texts conserved in archives and libraries and other forms of accumulated experience and passed on through education” (*Future of Man* 132). As convergence proceeds, this body of knowledge and practice undergoes change from a status quo situation to an evolving new manifestation. Julian alludes to this change when he reminds his mother that “knowing who you are is only good for a generation” (*Complete Stories* 407). In reacting to this change, an individual could

embrace and empathize with it, or become what Chardin calls an immobilist—one who refuses to believe the converging process unfolding before her. An immobilist will try (passively or actively) to thwart the process, sometimes to her ultimate detriment. To Mrs. Chestny, her emphasis on family heritage and physical decorum acted as a stay against the changing social conditions wrought by convergence. It was important to maintain a certain level of appearance and decorum, in order that people could see her as a lady.

In this philosophical reflective stage of her life, Flannery O'Connor realized that progressive diminishment operating in convergence could offer a leitmotif that accomplished her goals as a writer. She could employ this structure in concrete situations to elaborate on themes she felt were important; as she often remarked, a writer needed to elaborate great themes and ideas in concrete situations. When Mrs. Chestny and Julian first get on the bus, she makes the comment to a fellow rider that "I see we have the bus to ourselves" (*Complete Stories* 411). In the convergent process, this conversation represents the status quo in this society; displacement and change have not occurred, and on the surface, everything seems normal and quaint. Mrs. Chestny and her white fellow travelers can feel comfortable in the illusion of believing that Southern society is the same, sweet creation she knew as a young girl. However, that illusion does not last long, because the bus picks up a Negro businessman.

The next phase of the convergent process takes place, and that is the enforced changes that have developed. The old status quo could not stand up against the progression of change and the ever developing force of convergence. As Chardin notes, as society grows closer together, changes must be enacted in order to achieve human potential, changes in society regulating human behavior. In this concrete situation, convergence achieves the kind of

change that Flannery O'Connor believed needed to be made in the social order. In this convergent setting, progressive diminishment takes place. In order to prick his mother's conscience and establish his identity as different from the rest of these bigots, Julian attempts to make conversation with the African American. Julian asks the businessman, who is hiding behind his paper, if he has a cigarette; the businessman motions to the sign at the front of the bus that states "NO SMOKING." Julian fails miserably in his attempt to strike up conversation. The businessman gets off at the next stop. The next individuals to get on the bus are a black mother and her three-year-old son, and in this scene Flannery O'Connor illustrates the relational process of progressive diminishment developing the actions of the personae, and, ultimately, themes in this story.

The mother and her son slowly sauntered down the aisle and eventually sit by Julian and his mother. The appearance of a black woman shouts volumes about the new state of affairs. When Julian first noticed her, he saw that

there was something a familiar-looking about her but Julian could not place what it was. She was a giant of a woman. 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. Her bulging figure was encased in a green crepe dress and her feet overflowed in red shoes. She had on a hideous hat. A purple flap came down on one side of it and stood up on the other; the rest of it was green and looked like a cushion with the stuffing out. (*Complete Stories* 415)

It takes a while, but the significance of this article dawns upon on Julian:

The vision of the two hats, identical, broke upon him with the radiance of a brilliant sunrise. His face was suddenly lit with joy. He could not believe that Fate had thrust upon his mother such a lesson. He gave a loud chuckle so that she would look at him and see what he saw. Justice entitled him to laugh. His grin hardened until it said to her as plain as if he were saying aloud: Your punishment exactly fits your pettiness. This should teach you a permanent lesson. (*Complete Stories* 416)

There in front of his mother, sat her double with the same physique, and concomitant diminishment—obesity, and, of course, the same ugly hat. Everything in which she believed was contradicted in the identically obese figure facing her. Josephine Hendin points out the numerous ways in which the African American woman resembles Mrs. Chestny: “She not only wears a Chestny hat, she too suffers from a heart attack, an attack of explosive anger at her humiliation, an attack that says quite clearly that she is as proud and as dissatisfied at the state of things as Mrs. Chestny” (107). Hendin continues by further pointing out that “all three are engulfed in a common horror: the agony of having to live with each other from day to day, the slow abrasive wrath that comes from a life of oppressing and being oppressed” (107). Hendin believes that convergence is occurring, and in a manner consistent with O’Connor’s unique sense of humor. She observes that in the writing of the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, “O’Connor takes one idea and ignores the intention and mysticism of Teilhard. It is perhaps a distinctively O’Connor ploy to write some of her most powerful tales of human cruelty and destruction under the banner of a mystical Jesuit” (98), an assertion that John Burke very much disagrees with, and with whom I am in agreement on how O’Connor uses Chardin’s ideas. For Flannery O’Connor, the incorporation of new ideas and thoughts into her writing was for the maintaining and vitalization of this unique gift bestowed upon her. If one examines her statements and purposes on and for writing, one sees that she sought to use this gift to bridge the gulf between God and humanity. Her writing sought to overcome prejudice, ignorance, and complacency. In this scene of the entrance of the African American woman onto the bus, the illusion of Julian’s mother that she belongs in a separate class is subtly destroyed and publicly exposed.

Processes of change have forced Southerners to recognize the status of African Americans and to allow full integration into the mainstream of society. Certain social realities can no longer be ignored. Situations develop that a few years earlier were unthinkable. As Patricia Maida notes, “The bus and its passengers form a microcosm, and the events that occur in the course of the ride comprise a kind of socio-drama” (2). The external diminishment in this episode is integration, which has reminded everyone of socially-enforced change; Maida notes that “integration emerges as the divisive issue. When Julian and his mother first board the bus, there are no African American passengers. But when a black man enters shortly afterwards, the atmosphere becomes intense” (1). African Americans, in a tangible way, are demonstrating convergence in a simple act. In this story, white Southerners are confronted with the fact that there is “no back of the bus” where African Americans had to retreat.

The two hats represent this converging commonality and articulate a new societal relationship. Two women wearing the same hat share their common affliction—obesity; the changes occurring in this society are not some random mutation, but indicate a clear direction. O'Connor was attracted to Chardin because he believed in an upward evolutionary development, (letters to Alfred Corn and reviews for *The Bulletin* [i.e., February 20, 1960 issue reviewing *The Phenomenon of Man*]). The characters do not necessarily realize the significant changes around and in front of them. Progressive diminishment operating in convergence intrudes on Mrs. Chestny's life and gives her the opportunity to encounter grace from a perspective of which she is totally unaware.

Flannery O'Connor, encountered grace from a new perspective at this stage of her life in editing the book on Mary Ann Long. In the foreword to the book she discussed how Mary

Ann Long exhibited grace in facing the greatest enemy of a Christian—death, a situation that resonated with O'Connor because of her fight with lupus. Through her religious training and natural qualities, Miss Long learned to handle death with aplomb and dignity; George Kilcourse is correct when he notes this situation represents the first time that Chardin's ideas really crystallized for Flannery O'Connor (*Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination* 275). Mary Ann is the mirror image to Flannery O'Connor in dealing with the cruelties of a deadly long-term disease; O'Connor recognizes in this young girl's plight many of the same problems and questions that haunted her. This situation showed her great themes and ideas must take on human concreteness if they are to impact readers. Grace is encountered in the grit and grime of everyday human affairs. A concurrent impact on O'Connor was that encountering grace was not reciting or defending correct doctrine, but in acknowledging the dignity and rights of all human beings in their journey towards Point Omega. Kilcourse notes that "allusions to institutional religion, the Holocaust, the welfare system, immigration, racial integration, class consciousness, and economics grow to become part of the matrix for her imagination" (279). People needed to understand the immediate relevance of God in their lives, and also to be treated as the image of his evolving presence, so she sketches out this new awareness on a bus going to the Y.

When the African American woman appears on the bus, as mentioned above, she is a mirror reflection to Julian's mother. Progressive diminishment is a process occurring in convergence that presents the opportunity to find God hidden in the inside and outside forces of life. In everyday life and over time, an individual confronting a diminishment (external or internal), necessarily begins the process of reflecting. In Mrs. Chestny's case, she confronts the African American woman. "She was a giant of a woman. Her bulging figure was encased

in a green crepe dress and her feet overflowed in red shoes” (*Complete Stories* 415). When Mrs. Chestny realizes that this black woman is wearing the same hat, “She kept her eyes on the woman and an amused smile came over her face as if the woman were a monkey that had stolen her hat” (*Complete Stories* 416). Whereas she had attached importance to the wearing of the hat as a certificate of excellence, a framework indicating her uniqueness, here was a clear statement that progressive diminishment presented her with—she is at the point on equal terms with the African American woman. Both women are grossly overweight. Moreover, the symbol Julian’s mother assumes makes her superior to people around her, instead is a marker of her mistaken assumptions. What she took to be as a symbol of Chestny superiority and pride becomes a mockery of it. The world of the stories melds the different classes; here is a new image for her readership. And Julian’s mother ignores the message the two hats sent, to her detriment.

This scene presents a powerful picture of changes occurring in this society; and progressive diminishment presents the opportunity to respond to, and accept the new community evolving among members of society. This new relationship illustrates O’Connor’s view of the link between *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu*. According to Karl-Heinz Westarp, in O’Connor’s review of *The Divine Milieu*, she suggests how to use these two books in analyzing relationships: “*The Phenomenon of Man* is scientific and traces the development of man through chemical, biological and reflective stages of life. . . . [*The Divine Milieu*] is religious and puts the first in proper focus” (Westarp 96). A third informative source on how this process fleshes out now and in the future in *The Future of Man*. Thus, in order to appreciate fully the significance of progressive diminishment operating in a convergent environment, it is helpful if one reads her stories with this

relationship in mind. Two individuals have existed in an oppressor/oppressed relationship, and now physical convergence is changing that relationship, to the point where both individuals can exercise decision-making, even with limited vision. Whereas Flannery O'Connor did not often vocalize her opposition to racism, the poignancy and power of this interaction presents racism as a doomed phenomenon. People who work against social and racial equality are like people who build their houses over a geological fault. They may think that stability and tradition are in their favor, but underneath steady and irreversible changes are taking place.

Mrs. Chestny is presented with the undeniable fact of another woman, who is diminished like her, dressed like her, has a son like her, and wears the same outlandish hat; and affords an opportunity to share a common bond. In front of her sits the woman with her little boy, who, "to Julian's disappointment, climbed up on the empty seat beside his mother. His mother lumped all children, black and white, into the common category, "cute," and she thought little blacks cuter than little white children" (*Complete Stories* 415). The African American mother followed her son and took the vacant seat near Julian and his mother; to Julian,

her face seemed almost gray and there was a look of dull recognition in her eyes, as if suddenly she had sickened at some awful confrontation. Julian saw that it was because she and the woman had, in a sense, swapped sons. Though his mother would not realize the symbolic significance of this, she would feel it. His amusement showed plainly on his face. (*Complete Stories* 415)

Here Mrs. Chestny is given an opportunity to empathize with her neighbor. Carver, "the little Negro was looking up at her with large fascinated eyes. He had been trying to get her attention for some time" (*Complete Stories* 417). When Carver, the little black boy, gets her attention, she remarks to another white woman, "Isn't he cute." Carver gets loose from his

mother and runs over to Mrs. Chestny, whom the narrator describes as “his love.” She responds to the boy with, “I think he likes me and smiled at the woman.’ It was the smile she used when she was being particularly gracious to an inferior” (*Complete Stories* 417). Her attempts to connect with the boy and his mother fail to break the barrier of tradition. She does not respond to the boy directly and condescendingly ignores the mother. Mrs. Chestny misses the opportunity for integrating the boy’s spontaneous offers.

This focus on racial elitism demonstrates how O’Connor’s attitude and definition of evil was changing in the last five years of her life. Quite a few scholars hesitate to draw a connection or influence of Chardin on O’Connor and some scholars deny a connection between O’Connor’s fiction and Chardin’s notions because they believe that convergence towards Point Omega and its attendant qualities of social equality, unity, and love undercut the classical Christian idea of evil. For example, Marion Montgomery views Chardin’s view on evil as a part of the evolutionary process that ultimately contributes something useful and constructive. When Montgomery analyzes *The Divine Milieu*, he notes that Chardin believes that evil “is an annihilation which makes for God’s entry into the world, in which man is one of the things” and that “the power of diminishment is a necessary force in the world’s spiritual evolution, since diminishment is an effect of the spiritualization of matter whereby God makes ‘room for himself, hollowing us out’” (36). According to Montgomery, man is just another thing that has developed evolutionarily, and thus, is not imbued with uniqueness. Anything that has changed humanity for the better is simply due to the evolutionary process. Montgomery views this situation as a way of making hell “a structural element in the universe, not a state of spiritual denial.” According to Montgomery, Flannery O’Connor would not incorporate Chardin’s ideas into her short stories because of his heretical ideas.

Flannery O'Connor was a conservative Catholic who believed in the traditional doctrines of the Church. If anything, progressive diminishment operating in convergence only enhances the classical Christian doctrine of accountability. Chardin aims for moral clarity when he observes, "Indeed, following logically upon our efforts to coordinate and organize the lines of the world, it is to an outlook recalling the initial intuition of the first philanthropists that our minds constantly return, with the elimination of individualist and racial heresies. No evolutionary future awaits man except in association with other men" (*The Phenomenon of Man* 246). The mainstream of Christian thought and teaching insists that racism oppresses people and inhibits them from achieving their potential; in turn, this sickness diminishes and inhibits the whole society from achieving its total potential.

Convergence, changing the social dynamic among the races, appears when Mrs. Chestny tries to relate to the boy in her usual manner:

The bus stopped and the Negro who had been reading the newspaper got off. The woman moved over and set the little boy down with a thump between herself and Julian. She held him firmly by the knee. In a moment he put his hands in front of his face and peeped at Julian's face through his fingers. "I see yooooo!" she [Julian's mother] said and put her hand in front of her face and peeped at him. The woman slapped his hand down. "Quit yo' foolishness," she said, "before I knock the living Jesus out of you." (*Complete Stories* 417)

In the statement "before I knock the living Jesus out of you," this mother makes it clear she will not tolerate behavior that the former "darky servant Caroline" would accept. In her physical statement she makes it clear that the boy will not ape for the white woman, but will be expected to keep his distance. When their bus stop was next, Julian appeared relieved, because his mother would be forced to discontinue her attempts. To his dismay, the African American woman and her child were getting off at the next stop also. He could only imagine what his mother would do.

When they arrived at the bus stop, all four of them got off. Julian's mother foraged through her purse for a nickel, and when she could not find one, she looked for a penny. She found it and called to the little boy, "Oh, little boy!" "Here's a bright new penny for you," (*Complete Stories* 418). This ultimate act of condescension, aggravated by Mrs. Chestny's earlier smile, was like a spark igniting gas fumes. When Julian's mother did this, the 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" (*Ibid.*). The large black woman swung her big pocketbook at Julian's mother and flattened her. Julian shut his eyes and heard the loud exclamation "He don't take nobody's pennies." He opened his eyes to see his mother sprawled out on the ground.

This climax has piqued the interest of scholars over the years. Ralph Wood refers to Mrs. Chestny as Julian's "unenlightened parent" and declares, "Though conventionally prejudiced, Julian's mother is capable of the love that matters most: she cares deeply about her uncaring son. And despite her verbal scorn for blacks, she is not a vicious racist" (Flannery O'Connor 117). Wood sees the offer by Mrs. Chestny as an act of "innocent glad-heartedness," and the resultant attack as "blinded by a racial rage that is unable to distinguish a kindly from a condescending gesture, the black woman strikes Julian's mother to the ground, giving her a fatal stroke" (*Ibid.*). Alice Walker paints a different picture of how Mrs. Chestny is understood and the black woman portrayed. She writes in *Our Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* about the incident when Julian rushes to her side after being knocked down by the black woman; when Alice Walker's mother responds to the incident and offers sympathy, Walker notes:

“That’s what her son felt, too, and *that* is how you know it is a Flannery O’Connor story. The son has been changed by his mother’s experience. He understands that, though she is a silly woman who has tried to live in the past, she is also a pathetic creature and so is he. But it is too late to tell her about this because she is stone crazy.” “What did the black woman do after she knocked the white woman down and walked away?” “O’Connor chose not to say, and that is why, although this is a good story, it is, to me, only half a story. *You* might know the other half. . . .” “Well,, I’m not a writer, but there was an old white woman I once wanted to strike,” she begins. “Exactly,” I say. (51)

In order to examine Mrs. Chestny’s motives, one must strike a balance between perspectives. Her gestures towards the boy and his mother are both condescending and kindly. And in the story, she gravitates between these perspectives. She operates from the perspective of blissful ignorance that has never sought to understand the inequities facing African Americans in this society. The narrator takes note of this aspect of Mrs. Chestny’s mentality; for example on their trips on the bus, for Julian “she might have been a little girl that he had to take to town,” (*Complete Stories* 406), and when the black woman sits down beside her that Julian “for a moment. . .had an uncomfortable sense of her [his mother’s] innocence” (*Complete Stories* 416)? And yet, in the same breath, the narrator observes that Mrs. Chestny, in becoming aware of the similarity of the hats, looks upon the woman “as a monkey that had stolen her hat” (*Complete Stories* 416). In addition, Mrs. Chestny, on several occasions, states strongly and clearly her opinion on African Americans seeking equality in the South; before getting on the bus, in talking about the changing circumstances around them, she states, “It’s ridiculous. It’s simply not realistic. They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence” (*Complete Stories* 408). Mrs. Chestny appears to know more than her innocence suggests, yet an attendant thought is that perhaps she mouths the pieties on her class and time without reflection, while her actions are more kindly.

The title of the story underscores the evolutionary principles that Teilhard calls convergence—the enfolding that characterizes the noosphere. As opportunities and circumstances allow and afford the black community an awareness and access to rights and equality, convergence entails displacement and disruption of the status quo. This process also helps the reader understand the organicity functioning within the story, offering plausible interpretations of how the characters function and feel. Julian’s mother is unaware that times have radically changed, and does not adjust her behavior. Even though Chardin felt that convergence would necessarily and eventually unite human beings in a sympathetic bond of communality, convergence need not, in fact, will not introduce change with sweetness and sympathy. To Patricia Maida, the connection between Chardin and O’Connor seems on the surface misplaced; in that O’Connor “describes a bus ride in which there is no real communication between people, no understanding, and no harmony,” and she asks, “How does this correspond with Chardin’s prophecy of harmony between men at the point of convergence” (3). She notes that the perceived difference lies in that “Chardin looks to the future;” “Miss O’Connor is concerned with the present and its consequences in the future (Ibid.). More accurately, Chardin starts by looking to the past in order to discover the future. The two writers are concerned with the activities of humanity in an ever changing physical environment. The mother and the son have potential to fulfill or not fulfill themselves in the new converging environment. And herein lies one of the values of how convergence, in conjunction with progressive diminishment, helps to interpret the story—the place of community and the process of reflection in the action of the story and the lives of the characters.

With his mother lying on the ground, Julian faced a very cold reality. For the longest time, he could count on his mother's presence and use her as a foil for his self-created martyrdom. He could constantly demonstrate his moral superiority to her; now those opportunities ceased to exist. And Julian faces a situation that offers no support of any kind. After his mother has been knocked down, Julian is stunned by her mutterings that suggest that she has reverted to her childhood, when she cries, "Tell Caroline to come and get me." He cries, "Mother! Darling, sweetheart, wait!" as she lies there with "one eye, large and staring, moved slightly to the left as if it had become unmoored" (*Complete Stories* 420). The story ends as follows:

"Wait her, wait here!" he cried and jumped and began to run for help toward a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him. "Help, help!" he shouted, but his voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. The lights drifted farther away the faster he ran and his feet moved numbly as if they carried him nowhere. 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. (*Complete Stories* 420)

To this point Julian has "seemed" the prophet of the new age; unlike his mother, he appears to have "risen and converged." In truth, he has rhetorically done so; in fact, he has never engaged in any efficacious effort to rise and converge. Running to her side, he reverts to his first allegiance—to his mother and her support. He has dreamed of an allegiance with the new society, but he has taken no action. Convergences are occurring in spite of his mother's traditional prejudices and Julian's inaction. Julian faces his own progressive diminishing moment—the loss of his mother.

Julian faces a physical loss that he had not counted on facing for a long time. Here was an external diminishment that radically changed his life; Julian is undergoing progressive diminishment. Here Julian faces the impact of change in his world; he is

suddenly and radically out of place. The one individual that served as a barrier for him against the harsh realities of life has now been removed and it has left him dazed and groping. Some critics have interpreted this final scene as a new dawn of reality and hope for Julian. For Leon Driskell and Joan Brittain, Julian has used his mother to postpone “his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow,” the responsibility of engaging, experiencing, and interacting with the community; and now that his mother has died, he is faced with the fact that he has depended upon her more than he cares to admit. As he sits there looking at his mother, he notices the condition in which,

the mother’s eye-openings and the shattering of the world in which she knew who she was, is more than she can bear, but mercifully her mind breaks and she returns to the security of the “old days” when she was a pampered child, cared for and loved. Julian had no such comfort. Ill suited though he is for the decisions of the latter part of the twentieth century, he must learn to acknowledge reality, for he can no longer feed his self-esteem by shocking his mother with “liberal” actions. Like so many of Miss O’Connor’s characters, Julian is brought face to face with his weaknesses and the moment of truth can offer nothing but hope. (Driskell 106)

Julian faces the one aspect of diminishment that human beings find so vexing and that is a situation that makes no sense. He now faces a situation that Chardin describes as “under blows such as these, man does not move upward in any appreciable direction; he disappears or remains tragically diminished” (*The Divine Milieu* 60). In such a situation, we witness “the destruction of our egoism” and face the potential “to develop the center of our personality to its utmost limits” (*The Divine Milieu* 61). The ultimate purpose of facing a situation that makes no sense is to create a great victory in which the Creator/Redeemer, through the Christian vision, transforms “what is in itself a universal power of diminishment and extinction into an essentially life-giving factor” (Ibid.). In the everyday grit and grime of human existence, human beings must realize a transcendence which binds them together in a

new type of community, if they hope to sustain motivation to survive. This is the goal and potential that human being face with progressive diminishment. Driskell and Brittain observe that Julian is being pushed towards a new paradigm, by seizing the opportunity to reflect in an expanded communal setting. Henry Edmundson III views Julian's actions as representative of O' Connor's admonition that "personal virtue and social change should not be separated" (118). Edmundson views Julian as sitting and watching "his mother—afflicted as she is with inherited bigotry—suffer the stress of seeing a black woman wearing the same hat she is sporting," and "takes delight in her predicament. He deliberately antagonizes her by sitting close to the Negroes on the bus, thus severely aggravating her consternation" (118). In Edmundson's view, Julian's lecture to his mother and the resultant action presents no redeemable value except to point out that O'Connor warns that "social reform undertaken rashly and angrily may be more destructive than helpful" and "that the promotion of public virtue must be accompanied by a commitment to personal character. The reformer cannot deflect responsibility for his own integrity by demanding that the rest of society change instead" (119). What Edmundson and Driskell point out is that the "liberal actions" of Julian (sitting next to African Americans, lecturing his mother on her attitude, attempting to strike up conversations) is not sufficient without an honest motivation to truly empathize with people.

Progressive diminishment, working in a converging environment, then points Julian in the direction of truth, but does not magically change him. The folding-in of the matter upon itself (ever evolving into wider webs of awareness—towards the Noosphere) forces individuals to face new realities they ought not to ignore. As John Burke notes, in the last scene Julian is a far cry from the individual who boasted that he "had cut himself emotionally

free of [his mother] and could see her with complete objectivity” (43). The key to understanding what has happened to Julian is that, according to Burke, “that which distinguished the noosphere, the level of life that man enjoys, from the biosphere, the previous level of life, is reflection, the ability of man to reflect upon himself (Ibid.). Julian, through this reflective process, moves from viewing himself as an island among fellow human beings to realizing the importance of community. Patricia Dineen Maida notes this process:

Julian deludes himself into thinking that no one means anything to him; he shuts himself off from his fellows and becomes the victim of his own egotism. In his immediate situation he is his own worst enemy and the cause of his failure; but ultimately, he is less than a man—and, in this sense, his position is tragic. (4)

The potential for tragedy is certainly there, but Julian, and beyond him, the reader, is given the potential opportunity to reflect in and practice new insights in a new community, yet to be determined; what he (and the reader) does with that opportunity is the key to determining if this situation is truly tragic. Specifically, the reader can step back from the story and understand the significance of the two women wearing the same hat in the same identical section of the bus. Because of the enfolding action of evolution, convergence has changed the status quo and caused new potential awareness among all the members of the community, characters and readers.

That potential occurs when his mother falls to the ground and Julian is positioned to recite as custom his lecture on not being surprised at the black woman’s reaction. But her condition scares him and he responds,

Stunned, he let her go and she lurched forward again, walking as if one leg were shorter than the other. 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, “Mama, Mama!” He turned her over. . . . “Wait

here, wait here!” he cried and jumped up and began to run for help toward a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him. (*Complete Stories* 420)

The cluster of lights in the distance represent that potential new community that Julian seeks in his hour of despair. Only now does Julian recognizes the value of his mother’s company; running towards the lights points toward the necessity of community in a converging environment. He reunites with his mother, in spite of their differences on race. Julian starts off the short story with a “perceived” strong sense of self-identity that covers a sense of insecurity. At every opportunity he constantly had reminded his mother of his superiority on certain issues. This pose is shattered when his mother lays dying in the street.

In assessing the motivation of Julian and other characters in the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Richard Gianone asserts that “in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* guilt marks the entry point for each character’s participation in Teilhard’s convergent flux. Guilt provides the psychological impetus for the character to struggle for union with others and the world” (*Mystery of Love* 158). He further contends that “guilt transforms egoism into charity by helping the mind break the habit of centering upon itself” (*Ibid.*). In the plot and action of the short stories of the collection, “O’Connor’s high-toned scoundrels and overbearing do-gooders experience such a rupture in themselves. The hard effects of unwelcome knowledge that strike in the early fiction, however, soften in the last book into an inner diminishment, a desirous void, which makes room for God” (*Mystery of Love* 159). Gianone, like Burke, is correct in describing the convergence mechanism, but wrong in describing guilt as the dominant impulse for Julian’s actions.

What makes the recognition of progressive diminishment operating in convergence important to the action of this story is that it shows how ordinary and natural it is for Julian to

respond to the loss of his mother and to reflect and act on the potential for community, the evolving world in which he lives. He may or may not find it, but he is driven towards it. It is necessary for him to do so, as part of his natural evolutionary development. To this point Julian has not examined his commitment to this new way of thinking, nor given of him self. Losing his mother in a violent event has shattered that complacency and offered an opportunity to examine his lot in life. Julian's total reaction is not the result of some intense vision or Julian's weaknesses, but the self-reflection that has developed out of the evolutionary process. The diminishment in Julian's life and the loss of his mother pushes him towards this new life potential. At the end of the story, the evidence indicates a change taking place in his life. At the beginning of the story, he mouthed the right platitudes about convergence, but lacked credibility in his motives. Now, bereft of the one pillar of support in his life, progressive diminishment propels him towards community. He is, in Patricia Dineen Maida's words, part of a story that possesses "mythic and universal proportions in terms of the treatment of how an individual faces reality and attains maturity" (Maida 2). At the end of the story, "Julian jumped up and began to run for help toward a cluster of lights he saw in the distance ahead of him" (*Complete Stories* 420).

Julian's opportunity to "fulfill himself as a person and to be of use to a society in need of reform" is engendered legitimate in this process. The phrase "everything that rises must converge" means that human beings are developing to a telos. In this way Chardin makes Christianity relevant in the twentieth century. He explains in *The Phenomenon of Man*:

Neither in the play of its elemental activities, which can only be set in motion by the hope of an "imperishable"; nor in the play of its collective affinities, which require for their coalescence the action of a conquering love, can reflective life continue to function and to progress unless, above it, there is a pole which is supreme in attraction and consistency. By its very structure the noosphere could not close itself either individually

or socially in any way save under the influence of the centre we have called Omega. (291)

To Chardin, the evolutionary process moves toward an apex, which offers human beings true community. “On the thinking being that we have become through hominization, it is now possible for it to radiate from Center to centers—personally” (*The Phenomenon of Man* 291). What scholars such as Edmundson, Burke, Giannone, and Driskell see as particular and out of the ordinary, Chardin views as a natural extension.

What emerges is an evolutionary process in human beings through the enfolding of convergence. Julian and his mother are eventually exposed to an aspect of convergence in the latter part of the twentieth century, and they respond to the changes in their lives. If we recognize the personae in this story are in need of community, and that the convergent opportunities occurring create, willy-nilly, the seeds of that community, then we see the glimmer of hope in the conclusion. O’Connor states that she has found a “new physical proposition in Pere Teilhard. Throughout this collection of stories, she dramatizes the unfolding process that focuses the importance of community, both positively and negatively. In most of the stories, the circumstances of progressive diminishment operating in convergence illuminate the process for the readers. This relational process enunciated by Teilhard de Chardin produces organicity in the collection possess and presents the reader with the human condition, as Flannery O’Connor viewed it towards the end of her life.

CHAPTER V  
THE ENDURING CHILL

The short stories “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and “The Enduring Chill” have the same leitmotif; they both involve a strained mother/son relationship. The mother is an average member of society, while the son considers himself an intellectual, an incident disrupts the relationship, and the children face diminishment. As Ralph Wood notes, just like Asbury, “Julian, the protagonist in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” is another white liberal who turn a rightful demand for racial justice into a wrongful demand for moral congratulation” (116). It would appear then that the same interpretive strategy used in “Everything That Rises Must Converge” would hold true for “The Enduring Chill.” And the result would be a cookie cutter approach that would not do the text justice. Instead of focusing on progressive diminishment within convergence on a societal level as in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” in this story, the focus is more on its operation within a familial context.

The “Enduring Chill” is an example of how Chardin’s ideas on diminishment gave Flannery O’Connor a context in which to deal with her lupus, and allows her to incorporate motifs from this context into the short stories in the collection “Everything That Rises Must Converge.” This short story is also an instance of new ways in which she developed what Richard Giannone calls “her spiritual comedies.” In order to appreciate this development, we can use the critical framework provided by Vernon Ruland and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Some scholars assume that a universal moral emerges from every story in this collection, because Flannery O'Connor said that should be done. Julian and Asbury are eccentric characters, yet find illuminating grace in a converging atmosphere. Jeffrey Folks comments on Flannery O'Connor's reading of the manuscript to a local literary gathering in Milledgeville. In focusing on the ending in which Asbury Fox discovers that he will not die, Folks comments:

Mary Tate has described the local literary evening at which O'Connor read her just completed manuscript of "The Enduring Chill": "As she read, she savored every humorous line and watched to be sure that we laughed in the appropriate places" (32). Like Asbury's mother, who, at the news that Asbury's disease is not life threatening, experiences the only smile of unqualified joy in all of O'Connor's fiction. (Kessler 48)

O'Connor is able to 'laugh,' in her case because she sees more than her audience does; on one level, this story is the umpteenth time that a pompous intellectual receives his/her due comeuppance; on another level, this story acts as a cathartic release from the confines imposed by her lupus.

Such comments by Folks on the punishment of the pompous intellectual protagonist seem plausible, but Josephine Hendin questions whether these assumptions should go unchallenged. They severely limit the possible interpretations of O'Connor's text as an author and unnecessarily put readers into interpretive boxes. Vernon Ruland points out in *Horizons of Criticism* that he would approach a novel as part of an interrelated, interpretive process made up of the writer, the created work, and the reader. By engaging in such a process, the reader becomes part of a continuum that seeks to incorporate different schemes of interpretation in order to arrive at an insightful analysis. For example, Josephine Hendin's assertions that O'Connor should be looked at through psychological and sociological lenses would be helpful in a short story such as "The Enduring Chill." Such flexibility would answer

questions such as why are there so many autobiographical connections between Asbury Fox and Flannery O'Connor and could these connections be understood from a psychological perspective in which her disease and its consequences figure prominently?

The influence of her long-term illness was growing dramatically the last four years of her life, and as Ralph Wood has pointed out, the pain that she suffered and the social changes she witnessed confronted her with questions that her belief system could not adequately answer. Arthur Kleinman points out that people construct workable schemes and plausible explanations for the long-term illness that is being endured. Patients tend to focus on a broader interpretation of a serious problem and prefer the term "illness" with its attendant implications to sickness. Perhaps, scholars such as Ralph Wood, Cynthia Seel, and Kathleen Prown downplay the influence of O'Connor's lupus because they perceive it as a disease and not as an illness, which allows a wider context of interpretation and analysis. Kleinman describes the therapeutic process:

Healing rituals move through three separate stages. The sickness is labeled with an appropriate and sanctioned cultural category. The label is ritually manipulated (culturally transformed). Finally a new label (cured, well) is applied and sanctioned as a meaningful symbolic form that may be independent of behavioral or social change. (*Patients and Healers* 372)

Flannery discovered a new context from her reading of Chardin's ideas on diminishment, in regards to her lupus, and saw it, not as just a way of sketching redemptive relationships with God, but also as a way of resolving the chaos surrounding the last four years of her life. For the writer, two concerns never changed: her desire to make God relevant to modern society and her concern for family and friends.

As her illness grows, Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man* and *The Divine Milieu* help her develop an approach to these two objectives. Progressive diminishment operating in

convergence could be used in a pointed way, as in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” to point out the folly of honoring the status quo and ignoring its problems, when a better solution appears beneficial to everyone, while at the same time, on a deeper level, commenting on problems and situations that threaten one’s personal sanity. If one compares Asbury’s progress in understanding his sickness with Chardin’s description of progressive diminishment in *The Divine Milieu*, one sees an almost identical pattern. O’Connor uses progressive diminishment humorously and cathartically to comment on Southern living, particularly her familial milieu, and keep her own sanity in the midst of her long-term illness, especially in dealing with her pesky mother Regina O’Connor. It was not uncommon for O’Connor to express such a purpose for her writing; she mentions in *Mystery and Manners* that “I have to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts. Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal”(162). As revealed in her letters, she often commented humorously on how she couldn’t determine what side was winning in making her sicker, her illness or her treatment.

“The Enduring Chill” centers on Asbury Fox, who views himself as a New York intellectual, different from his rural relations in looking at life and social issues. Asbury has returned to his hometown of Timberboro, Georgia, after becoming ill in New York City; he lived in New York City because he felt it stimulated his creativity. This, despite the fact that none of his short stories or plays were developed, finished, or sold; in fact, his closest connection into writing was working part time at a bookstore. As he pulled into Timberboro, he gazed upon the railroad station. Robert Brinkmeyer suggests that the narrator is

“characteristically O’Connor’s—harsh and ironic, detached and sternly religious” (83), and he continues, “Like most of O’Connor’s narrators, this one heightens character and situation in order to suggest that more than mere everyday concerns are at stake in the story; the backdrop and meaning of the story, the narrator suggests, stretch into the divine, the realm of ultimate matters” (Ibid.). According to Brinkmeyer, an example of this characteristic is when Asbury gets off the train and “gives his impression of the landscape” (Ibid.):

The sky was a chill gray and a startling white-gold sun, like some strange potentate from the east, was rising beyond the black woods that surrounded Timberboro. It cast a strange light over the single block of one-story brick and wooden shacks. Asbury felt that he was about to witness a majestic transformation, that the flat of roofs might at any moment turn into the mounting turrets of some exotic temple for a god he didn’t know. (*Complete Stories* 357)

Brinkmeyer suggests the idea that this description offers an ominous tone in the sense that one could say that it establishes the presence of O’Connor’s concept of God as looming above and beyond, and according to Brinkmeyer, producing action that is “fraught with withering irony, aimed particularly at Asbury’s pretentiousness” (84). It seems a plausible and obvious assumption, but one wonders if, at the same time, another aim is commingling with it that possesses a more personal motivation for Flannery O’Connor. She took this train ride numerous times before the fateful day in Christmas, 1950, when she knew she was coming back to Milledgeville to stay permanently. This time she would not leave Milledgeville.

In telling the story, it seems that Brinkmeyer is correct about the narrator’s approach to Asbury’s arrival. Just as Asbury thinks that a mystical moment might reveal occur, he soon gazes upon his mother. Their reunion did not exactly spark fond remembrances:

She had given a little cry; she looked aghast. He was pleased that she should see death in his face at once. His mother, at the age of sixty, was going to be introduced to reality

and he supposed that if the experience didn't kill her, it would assist her in the process of growing up. He stepped down and greeted her. (*Complete Stories* 357)

Asbury was not excited about being back in what he called the wilderness. He has been sick for at least the last four months of his stay in New York City. In fact, the situation had deteriorated so much that Fox assumed his death was imminent; he "had become entirely accustomed to the thought of death, but he had not become accustomed to the thought of death here" (*Complete Stories* 358). Asbury attempted to hold out against having to return to his former home in the South but his sickness and financial hardship forced his decision. As he describes it,

He had felt the end coming on for nearly four months. Alone in his freezing flat, huddled under his two blankets and his overcoat and with three thicknesses of the New York Times between, he had had a chill one night, followed by a violent sweat that left the sheets soaking and removed all doubt from his mind about his true condition. Before this there had been a gradual slackening of his energy and vague inconsistent aches and headaches. (*Complete Stories* 358)

Asbury Fox was prone to the dramatic and was convinced that his suffering was the price to pay for his artistic inclinations, just as other great artists had suffered for their art. This material possesses numerous autobiographical connections with Flannery O'Connor. Flannery O'Connor had moved from Georgia to the University of Iowa, where she completed her MFA in writing, then had moved to New York City area to begin her artistic career. Then she returned home.

The return to Milledgeville after a five-year absence was not easy. In her letters the move back to Milledgeville and the South was a mixed blessing; in some ways, returning vexed, animated her writing ability. Jean Cash opines that when O'Connor moved to Yaddo, a famous artists' colony located in Saratoga Springs, New York, she was "vastly relieved to have found a place to write other than Iowa City—which she was ready to leave after three

years—or Milledgeville, where she would have returned somewhat unwillingly to the bosom of the Cline family, who, including her mother Regina Cline O'Connor, had little understanding of or sympathy for aspiring genius”(109). Often, Flannery, who appreciated her mother’s attentiveness, while others thought it overbearing, expressed mild exasperation at the limited intellectual potential of Milledgeville. One time she notes that “I am much amused by the local reaction to my appearing in *Esquire* [‘Why Do the Heathen Rage’]. You would think that at last I was going places. I didn’t know so many people took the thing” (*Habit of Being* 526). Sometimes she watched the political show in the local area and could only shake her head at the energy put into asinine antics; she mentions to Maryat Lee:

Did I tell you that the Ku Klux Klan met across the road Saturday night before last. They burned a cross—just for the sake of ceremony. We could have seen it out of our upstairs windows but we didn’t know until it was over. You ought to be down to observe mid-August politics in Georgia. You would return with curled hair. (*Habit of Being* 489)

Returning to Milledgeville also dredged up painful memories forgotten in five years of living away. For Flannery O’Connor, this experience deals with an irreversible situation; she has to face lupus and accept it. In a letter to Janet McKane, dated 31 March 63, she notes in regards to Teilhard de Chardin that “the ‘passive diminishment’ is probably a bad translation of something more understandable. What he [Teilhard] means is that in the case he’s talking about, the patient is passive in relation to the disease—he’s done all he can to get rid of it and can’t, so he’s passive and accepts it” (*Habit of Being* 512). Flannery O’Connor must work out a resolution for this deteriorating condition. Certainly, Asbury’s sickness, “the chill,” if you please, is not physically comparable to Flannery O’Connor’s struggle with lupus; with so many autobiographical allusions operating within the story, there is, as Andre

Bleikastan suggest, an incongruity between the obvious moral of a haughty intellectual being humbled, as Ralph Wood views in the following comment:

Asbury's body will not be purified by the nonfatal illness he is so disappointed to have contracted, thus being deprived of the death that would mark "his greatest triumph" over his smothering mother. Instead, his enduring chills and fevers will require him to live in lasting dependence upon her. But there is at least a chance that he will find the purity of heart that beholds God himself. For at the end of the story, Asbury enters the purgatorial life that has the power to cleanse all his unrighteousness, whether racial or filial, as the Holy Ghost descends upon him—not as a dove carrying the olive branch or peace but as a fierce bird bearing the icicle of judgment. (*Flannery O'Connor* 116)

Such an answer seems too obvious and too pat; one wonders if a deeper, psychological purpose in this story exists. With her return to Georgia, Teilhard's progressive diminishment and Kleinman's definition of "illness," we can discover a deeper meaning in the text.

In Chardin's discussion of progressive diminishment, he talks about the one response that vexes most humans, and yet leads to the greatest degree of understanding God and life. When a human being faces an unexpected loss or tragedy, this makes no sense and is not beneficial in any way. This story incorporates aspects of O'Connor's situation as she struggled with this illness in the last five years of her life. In circumstances similar to Asbury Fox, she was uprooted from a part of the country she liked and forced to return to her hometown. O'Connor details in a letter to Maryat Lee, her initial fears upon returning to Milledgeville, "This is a return I have faced and when I faced it I was roped and tied and resigned the way it is necessary to be resigned to death, and largely because I thought it would be the end of any creation, any writing, any WORK from me" (*Habit of Being* 224).

Jean Cash points out:

Since O'Connor—alienated by both her individuality and genius—had never been particularly comfortable in Milledgeville, she, on her return had to make compromises

and adjustments that would enable her to continue to develop and use her unique talents. She had to accept the limitations imposed on her by lupus erythematosus, restrictions that partly influenced her writing schedule and certainly controlled her travel away from Milledgeville. (134)

In the letter, quoted above, O'Connor indicates that she eventually accepted her place in Milledgeville, and that it even stimulated her writing. She comments that the return "was only the beginning" (*Habit of Being* 224) for this development. However, there is a tension O'Connor experienced in her development as a writer and human being in this society facing convulsive changes. Returning to her old home reignited the old issues and attitudes that she conveniently had forgotten, particularly the racial issues up front and close between her mother and the Negro workers. In *Habit of Being*, Sally Fitzgerald notes how in a letter Maryat Lee says: "Flannery permanently became devil's advocate with me in matters of race, as I was to do with her in matters of religion. Underneath the often ugly caricatures of herself...I could only feel that she shared with me the sense of frustration and betrayal and impotency over the dilemma of the white South" (193). O'Connor, responding to Maryat Lee, hints at the stupidity of maintaining segregation in Georgia:

It is often so funny that you forget it is also terrible. Once about ten years ago while Dr. Wells was president, there was an education meeting held here at which two Negro teachers or superintendents or something attended. The story goes that everything was as separate and equal as possible, even down to two Coca-Cola machines, white and colored; but that night a cross was burned on Dr. Well's side lawn. And those times weren't as troubled as these. The people who burned the cross couldn't have gone past the fourth grade but, for the time, they were mighty interested in education. (*Habit of Being* 195)

The return to the status quo of race relations remained a burr under O'Connor's saddle; in the middle of the twentieth century, to even think that some human beings ought to still be treated as unequal, simply based on skin color, seem outdated and archaic. In

returning to a geographical area stricken with such practices, O'Connor knew she needed to develop coping strategies with her new situation.

Now back in Milledgeville on a permanent basis, she engaged in constant reflection, particularly in her letters to different friends (1960–64) on what the disease has meant for her. In her letters to “A” and others, she discusses how the illness has intruded on her life and affected her daily plans, what she must wear if she ventures out of the house, and how she could operate most efficiently. Her illness was not just an accepted fact, but an opportunity to learn more about the human condition, even if she did not warmly embrace such lessons. According to Jean Cash, O'Connor always seemed to exhibit a sense of rebellion, even as a child in Catholic school; O'Connor employs the leitmotif of progressive diminishment operating in convergence to humorously and cathartically depict familial relations in “The Enduring Chill.”

In “The Enduring Chill,” Asbury Fox got off the train after it arrived in Timberboro and walked to the car with his mother. The event is depicted as:

The train glided silently away behind him, leaving a view of the twin blocks of dilapidated stores. He gazed after the aluminum speck disappearing into the woods. It seemed to him that his last connection with a larger world were vanishing forever. Then he turned and faced his mother grimly, irked that he had allowed himself, even for an instant, to see an imaginary temple in this collapsing country junction. (*Complete Stories* 358)

The hope that the town has grown and changed fades, and reality sets in. Asbury has a sense of an ending at the sight of the train leaving and never coming back for him. Given what we know about O'Connor's pleasure at living up in Connecticut, one wonders about her feelings as she writes this scene. On the surface of the scene, it appears as a lesson about to

be learned by a half-baked intellectual; yet, a psychological resonance must exist as she and Julian realize what the future holds.

One of the tasks that Asbury worked on as he “knew” the end was drawing near, was preparing two notebooks in which he had listed his final thoughts:

While he was still in New York, he had written a letter to his mother which filled two notebooks. He did not mean it to be read until after his death. It was such a letter as Kafka had addressed to his father...He knew, of course, that his mother would not understand the letter at once. Her literal mind would require some time to discover the significance of it, but he thought she would be able to see that he forgave her for all she had done to him. (*Complete Stories* 364)

The purpose of the letter was to let his mother know how she had hurt him and that he forgave her. In his self-dramatizing misery he hoped that through the letter she might experience a painful realization, the only thing of value he had to leave her. In O'Connor's humorous and cathartic version of progressive diminishment, Asbury is reflecting on the pain and suffering that is whittling away at his life; he is trying to make sense of what this sickness could be teaching his mother. In a way, he is focusing on the prayer that Chardin recommends in *The Divine Milieu*, that as he (Asbury) is decreasing, God make his mother aware of what she has wrought. For Asbury, “writing this, he had reached the pit of despair and he thought that reading it, she would at least begin to sense his tragedy and her part in it” (*Complete Stories* 364). The connection here is that O'Connor uses Asbury's dramatization to cathartically vent her irritation with the hovering antics of her mother. Just like Asbury's mother, Regina O'Connor really never understood Flannery's motivation for writing and never hesitated in voicing her opinion on what were appropriate, monetary topics.

Throughout the story, employing a humorous, cathartic concept of diminishment within convergence captures the poignant humor that pulsates through this story. Another

example of this is Asbury's attempt in an earlier visit to identify with the Negro workers on the family farm. "Last year he had been writing a play about the Negro and he wanted to be around them for a while to see how they really felt about their condition" (*Complete Stories* 368). Like Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," his concern was more to spite his mother than to relate to their plight. In order to gather information, he visited Randall and Morgan, in the barn milking the cows; he tried to establish a rapport with them, defying his mother's rules by smoking a cigarette in there. Randall reminded him that his mother did not allow any smoking in the barn because it would affect the milk. He then gave them cigarettes and then lit them. "It was one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing" (*Complete Stories* 368). Unfortunately, the next day two cans of milk were returned because they smelled of tobacco smoke. Though Asbury insisted it was he who did the smoking, Asbury's mother blamed the two Negroes. Asbury, like many zealous opponents of racism, only harmed, rather than helped the Negroes.

A few days later he devised another scheme to identify with the plight of Randall and Morgan. While they were pouring the milk into the cans, Asbury "picked up the jelly glass the Negroes drank out of, and, inspired, had poured himself a glassful of the warm milk and drained it down" (*Complete Stories* 369). Randall protested by saying, "She don't 'low that." "That *the* thing she don't low" (*Ibid.*). In a nod to the changing social conditions, Asbury responds, "Listen, the world is changing. There's no reason I shouldn't drink after you or you after me!" (*Ibid.*). Asbury had offered the glass of milk to Randall, and then to Morgan when he came into the barn. Both of the Negroes refused to drink; this obstinacy did not deter Asbury in his attempt to "identify" with their oppressed condition. He continued to drink the

milk over a period of several days. The “insufferableness” of life in Timberboro was simply too much for him in this earlier visit; he had left to go back to New York City two days early.

As he became sicker, Asbury contemplated the end of his life. In *The Divine Milieu* Chardin talks about how progressive diminishment can turn into a life-giving event. An individual reflects on the pain he/she is undergoing in a diminishing situation and in that reflection become aware of his relationship with God. In Asbury’s case he “creates and imagines” a legitimate purpose in his suffering and ultimate demise. This thought pulsates through his mind; his thoughts turn to the process:

So far as he was concerned, he had died there (New York), and the question now was how long he could stand to linger here. He could have hastened his end but suicide would not have been a victory. Death was coming to him legitimately, as a justification, as a gift from life—that was his greatest triumph. Then too, to the fine minds of the neighborhood, a suicide son would indicate a mother who had been a failure, and while this was the case, he felt that it was a public embarrassment he could spare her. (*Complete Stories* 370)

Everything was set for Asbury to leave this earth in grand style. He thought his death would have extensive significance and impact on those around him.

In developing the characters, scenes, and themes for this short story, Flannery O’Connor found sources in her Georgia situation. An important question to ask is, did she have a similar purpose in stories that possess identical characteristics such as “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and “The Enduring Chill.”? Can one look at the same results that appear to happen to the two self-serving intellectuals in the two short stories (Julian and Asbury) and conclude as some scholars do, that the two individuals have achieved honest redemption?

In “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” Julian realizes the hubris of his attitude towards his mother and displays honest sorrow at her passing and his loss. One can look at

the end of that short story and empathize with his situation and hope that he achieves a cathartic resolution to his newly developed circumstances. In "The Enduring Chill," O'Connor obviously dramatizes Asbury Fox's constant stupidity; he doesn't understand dairy farming or dairy farmers. And his attempted camaraderie with the black help on the farm is sheer bravado in antagonizing his mother. Towards the end of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the opportunity for genuine reflection confronts Julian in his circumstance, whereas no genuine opportunity exists for Asbury Fox. The numerous points of contact between O'Connor's personal life and this short story suggest Hendin's thesis that a psychological analysis must be attempted to honestly examine O'Connor's purposes in this short story. And, certainly, O'Connor's physical and social situation at this point in her life lend themselves towards such an endeavor.

As attested by her correspondence with Maryat Lee, her return to Milledgeville caused excitement and consternation. The social milieu she had forgotten returned full force to confront her. In addition, the constant prodding, poking, and ingesting of medical attention at this point was also driving her crazy, as attested by critics such as Sue Walker and Jennifer Proffitt and letters written to Cecil Dawkins and Janet McKane. When his mother suggested that when Asbury got well, "I think it would be nice if you wrote a book about down here. We need another good book like *Gone With The Wind*." She continued, "Put the war in it. That always makes a long book" (*Complete Stories* 370), it was not a random comment. Jean Cash suggests that such a statement possesses significance to O'Connor because such a statement was attributed to her mother by people interviewed by Jean Cash. Cash mentions the observations of people such as faculty members Helen Greene and Rosa Lee Watson; "Helen Greene remembers Regina's 'genuine understanding of economic problems and the

ability and spirit to tackle them” and Rosa Lee Watson’s “strongest impression of Mrs. O’Connor was that she, like the rest of her family, ‘was oriented toward making money’” (161). In these lines one senses a characteristic not immediately noticed and that is the friction operating within familial ties. On one hand, Flannery is appreciative of her mother’s care and concern, yet at the same time, irritated with a focus on the practical necessities of life, to the point of suggesting topics for her writing that will make money. Such interspersing of these comments by the narrator reveal a deeper meaning in that O’Connor is expressing frustration with the antics and unenlightenment of her mother, aunts, uncles, and other relatives. This friction shows itself when O’Connor notes in her letters that relatives were always giving her practical advice on writing, and how she always hated the Civil War extravaganza that Milledgeville hosted every year.

Throughout this short story, one sees how progressive diminishment becomes a vehicle for O’Connor’s imaginative, eccentric proclivity towards analyzing human pathos with her trademark brand of skepticism and humor. At the same time, it allows her a cathartic opportunity to cope with the consequences of lupus at this stage of her life. She satirizes the progressive diminishment process in Asbury Fox’s situation, and the result for her is a cathartic process. When an individual is battling an illness, their desire for being well is not limited to regaining physical health, but also mental and spiritual health. For Flannery O’Connor, the distortion of Asbury Fox seeking a resolution to his created tragedy, via progressive diminishment, allows her to apply a psychological cure to her illness at this particular moment. An example of this process occurs when Asbury, on the brink of “dying,” seeks spiritual help.

Asbury implores his mother to arrange a meeting with a local Jesuit priest; Asbury thinks that any Jesuit priest he meets down here will be similar to a priest he knew in New York City named Ignatius Vogle, S.J. Asbury saw Father Vogle at a party in the apartment of his friend Goetz; in a roundtable conversation Asbury had asked Vogle's comments on the illusiveness of achieving self-fulfillment. Vogle said that there was the possibility of the New Man being assisted "by the Third Person of the Trinity" (*Complete Stories* 360). When Asbury's mother initially opposes his request, he commands his mother,

"I want a priest," he announced. "A priest?" his mother said in an uncomprehending voice. "Preferably a Jesuit," he said, brightening more and more. "Yes, by all means a Jesuit. They have them in the city. You can call up and get me one." "What is the matter with you?" his mother asked. (*Complete Stories* 371)

In Asbury's opinion, a Jesuit "would be able to discuss something besides the weather." In picturing the kind of priest he would talk to, Fox pondered that "this one would be a trifle more worldly perhaps, a trifle more cynical. Protected by their ancient institution, priests could afford to be cynical, to play both ends against the middle. He would talk to a man of culture before he died—even in this desert! Furthermore, nothing would irritate his mother so much" (*Complete Stories* 371). The priest provides Fox with a nasty shock.

The next day a burly figure arrived at the front door and was led into Asbury's room by his mother. The figure declared himself to be Father Finn from the neighboring town of Purgatory; at last Asbury welcomes someone of intelligence to talk with about the issues of life. Asbury declares:

"It's so nice to have you come," Asbury said. "This place is incredibly dreary. There's no one here an intelligent person can talk to. I wonder what you think of Joyce, Father?" The priest lifted his chair and pushed closer. "You'll have to shout," he said. "Blind in one eye and deaf in one ear." "What do you think of Joyce?" Asbury said louder. "Joyce? Joyce who?" asked the priest. "James Joyce," Asbury said and laughed. The priest

brushed his huge hand in the air as if he were bothered by gnats. "I haven't met him," he said. "Now. Do you say your morning and evening prayers?" (*Complete Stories* 375)

Asbury appears confused as to Father Finn's difference from his concept of a Jesuit. The priest is not at all interested in worldly conversation, but is focused on the duties of his office. He has been summoned to a deathbed and it is his responsibility to prepare the dying man for last rites.

Father Finn offers Asbury comfort about possible lapses in faith, but does not veer from his duty as he understands it. The priest's comments about purity explain his ultimate duty when he states, "We all do but you must pray to the Holy Ghost for it. Mind, heart and body. Nothing is overcome without prayer" (*Complete Stories* 376). On the surface, this rebuke seems appropriate and normal for an individual such as Ashley Fox. Many scholars view this process as necessary medicine in order for Fox to achieve possible redemption. In addition to Ralph Wood's earlier comments, Robert Brinkmeyer sees the presence and rebuke of Father Finn to Asbury as "reduced to anger and belligerence to get his message across: There is no other way to break through Asbury's shell" (88). Brinkmeyer further sees this rebuke as:

The narrator thus brings Asbury to a moment of disturbing self-knowledge through an encounter with self and otherness that shatters Asbury's pretensions. On one level, then, the story validates the narrator's authoritative power; Asbury is chastened, violently, by a narrator whose forceful and judgmental stance is perhaps best embodied in Father Finn's commanding presence. (87)

According to these scholars, Asbury, like Julian, is confronted with a reality that does not coddle him in his misery and repeats the opportunity to force him to face judgment and redemption. The problem is that when one looks at Father Finn's confrontation with Asbury, it is disconcertingly hard to assume Richard Gianone's statement about each character

coming to a point of self-revelation through guilt, especially to assume that Asbury is facing an opportunity of true repentance. We cannot take this confrontation seriously when Finn remarks to Asbury, “You’ll have to shout,” “Blind in one eye and deaf in one ear” (*Complete Stories* 375). Josephine Hendin sees the situation differently; she observes that in contrast to Ignatius Vogle, Father Finn, as Asbury’s potential savior, “turns out to be another ineffectual male, a stock personage in O’Connor’s world” (113). Whereas Julian’s confrontation with diminishment brings about a real opportunity for reflection and change, Asbury’s opportunity is a setup. If one honestly looks at all Mr. Finn’s statements and questions, they are nothing but pro-forma, old school, Irish pastor stuff, then one has to agree with Hendin’s observation—he is nothing more than a caricature.

The result may appear the same as in the story “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” which is appropriate, if a critic, like Brinkmeyer and Wood, simply relies on O’Connor’s pronouncements. The situation certainly follows “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” where a pretentious intellectual (Julian) is challenged with his pompous attitudes. Brinkmeyer observes, “that the narrator’s voice appears to sound like Father Finn is significant, for it signals the bringing together of O’Connor’s Catholicism and fundamentalism into an uneasy unit, an angry Catholicism” (87-88). And yet, such an assumption seems too obvious. The confrontation between these two individuals is not of serious merit; so can there be a deeper intent fathomed in the short story? Josephine Hendin offers a valid insight when she observes that in regards to O’Connor’s writing, that “most critics have not only ignored the voice of the artist, they have refused to see the believer behind the belief. They write about O’Connor’s ‘message’ as though her religion had nothing to do with her life. They entirely divorce theology from human experience” (4). Father Finn

represents the standard answers that many religious people felt comfortable with; such bromides worked for them and they saw no reason for change. His caricature allows O'Connor to express her frustration with such conformed thinking. Such a depiction would not be an isolated theme that O'Connor enunciated; in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," she uses the confrontation between the Misfit and the Grandmother to shake people out of their religious lethargy.

Lupus had deprived Flannery O'Connor of her independence and made her dependent on her mother for physical comfort. If one looks at the physical context in which Flannery existed, then one sees an attitude of gratefulness for her mother's help, but at the same time, irritation over her limiting conditions. Because of her love and dependence on her mother and relatives, O'Connor could not get too personal, because as Jean Cash observes, in returning to Milledgeville, O'Connor "had to make compromises and adjustments that would enable her to continue to develop and use her unique talents" (134). Underneath this scene with Asbury and Finn, O'Connor vents her frustration at her limiting physical condition and its consequences.

Father Finn represents the pat answers that conventional Catholicism felt comfortable with. In the text of this story, his mother happily talks about the sex life of the cows and gives Asbury certain clichéd answers when he complains about his sickness; she notes that when she first sees him, that "if you would get out in the sunshine, or if you would work for a month in the dairy, you'd be a different person" (*Complete Stories* 361), or that he should write about the Civil War, because people are interested in it. And in Flannery's case, documented by letters, interviews, and other sources, she lives in conventional society, or as Chardin called them—immobilists, up to her neck. Father Finn simply accepts the tenets of

the Church and does not question them; in his opinion, such commands were transmitted from God to designated human beings. Such unquestioning devotion drove O'Connor, who had spent her adult life questioning, analyzing, and examining her faith in order to maintain its vitality, crazy. People seem perfectly content to plow along and never change; lupus showed her that in order to maintain some semblance of health, one must adjust to circumstances in life. At the end of her life, as she is reflecting on its significance and accomplishments, she insists that writers and readers must constantly test their faith. In *Mystery and Manners*, she states:

There are those who maintain that you can't demand anything of the reader. They say the reader knows nothing about art, and that if you are going to reach him, you have to be humble enough to descend to his level. This supposes either that the aim of art is to teach, which it is not, or that to create anything which is simply a good-in-itself is a waste of time. Art never responds to the wish to make it democratic; it is not for everybody; it is only for those who are willing to undergo the effort to understand it. (189)

Jean Cash mentions such thinking as a reason why Flannery O'Connor took on the role of reviewer for *The Bulletin*, a local diocesan paper. In her reviews of certain theologians and novelists O'Connor expressed her opinions, and according to Cash, "she was equally averse to too much adherence to dogma and to too much sentimental sugarcoating" (300). The immobilist insists on the status quo of society and that any hints of change must be squelched at all costs. Father Finn is not malicious or superior; he is carrying out his office as he sees it. He does not pay attention to Asbury's physical condition and is certainly not interested in intellectual jousting with him. In fact, when Father Finn states that he is deaf in one ear and blind in one eye, it is a subtle, exaggerated, caricature for O'Connor's analysis of some traditional Catholics during the 1950's and 1960's. Throughout this story, progressive diminishment operating in convergence offers an explanation similar to the

leitmotif of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," in that an immature intellectual views himself as superior to other people in his hometown, until he confronts a crisis brought on by a diminishing situation and faces an opportunity to change his behavior. In the context of this short story, Josephine Hendin's observation:

What if from girlhood, you have known you loathe the Southern Belle you are supposed to become? What if you have felt 'other' and 'different' in a milieu that is horribly embarrassed by anything unconventional? And what if your business later on is dying slowly, being filled with impotent rage at your own weakness (12).

This portrayal reflects a deeper motivation for writing this short story. Asbury Fox, his mother, and Father Finn are markers and reminders of the enduring chill that Flannery O'Connor is reminded of when she returns to the South to spend the rest of her days. O'Connor must adapt a strategy for facing this stultifying, stimulating, and sometimes, strangling milieu to which she returned.

After the discussion with Father Finn ends in an altercation, Asbury remains frustrated with people who do not play his game and believe his "sincerity." He thinks of himself as an intellectual; he is in fact "a mama's boy." If anything goes wrong, he knows that he can run home to Mama for protection. Unlike his intellectual counterpart Julian, his actions give no credence to the possibility that he realizes his shortcomings. Julian faced his diminishment (the loss of his mother) and began the process of reflecting on its impact in his life, and then began the torturous process of convergence; Asbury Fox does not seriously engage this opportunity for insight.

The fact that his persona does not seriously exhibit any effort suggests a deeper motive for writing this short story. The way that Flannery O'Connor uses this leitmotif in this short story is an example of how this process really blended with her writing goals in the last

five years of her life. She is concerned with advocating a new approach to discovering God, but also with maintaining her sanity in a debilitating situation, like any individual dealing with a long-term illness. Progressive diminishment operating in convergence demonstrates its value in the day-to-day grit and stress of life. She finds a vehicle with which to connect her readers in new and different ways. She not only uses Chardin's ideas to motivate her audience to understand the reality of God, but also to alleviate some of the frustration being felt by the impingement of her ever growing illness.

Throughout the collection of her letters in *The Habit of Being*, she discusses the frustration with the effects of the lupus illness and its strain. We find examples of this refrain in two letters where she describes of the ever intrusive protocol for alleviating her lupus and its side effects. In a letter dated 17May 61 to Elizabeth Fenwick Way, a fellow sufferer with lupus, she says: "If I weren't doing so well right now, I might come up and consult him [Dr. Sprung, a Providence, R.I. lupus specialist] but I have been doing better have been doing better these last six months than any time since I have had the stuff" (*Habit of Being* 440) and, six months later, she was facing an operation for a hip that had bothered her for some time; in that letter to Maryat Lee, dated 20 January 1962, she writes, "I am on the trail of a new operation. This one they take a piece of bone out of your leg (bone with blood vessels in it) and graft it into your hip bone and that furnishes a blood supply to that hip" (*Habit of Being* 462).

Asbury's sister Mary Ann offers a perspective on this character; in a conversation with her mother she states:

"Grow up, Mama," Mary George said, "I've told you and I tell you again: what's wrong with him is purely psychosomatic. "No, his mother said, "it's a real disease. The doctor

says so. "Mark my words," his sister continued, "all he's going to be around here for the next fifty years is a decoration." (*Complete Stories* 373)

In the text, clearly he enjoys remaining in his adolescent state; he refuses to grow up and use his sickness for self-reflection. Even though he possesses more intellectual background than the people around him, he revels in his stubborn belief of his superiority. Displacement has not and will not teach him anything; he enjoys wallowing in his ill health.

Finally, when this charade has just about gone on long enough, Flannery O'Connor pulls the rug out from under the suffering saint, which in a way lends support to a more psychological reason for writing this story. Does anyone really take Asbury Fox serious in this story? After his actions, thoughts, and speech, nothing suggests he is even interested in redeeming himself. When Asbury is sure of his impending doom in a matter of days, if not hours, Dr. Block pulls up in his car. Asbury's mother leads him to Asbury's room, and when Dr. Block enters, he raised his hands "over his head in the gesture of a victorious prize fighter." He has discovered the cause of Asbury's sickness, undulant fever, aggravated by drinking unpasteurized milk. Asbury drank the milk when he visited the two Negroes a second time to convince them of his solidarity with their cause. Dr. Block relayed to Asbury that the sickness would visit him from time to time again, but would not kill him. In understanding the nature of his sickness, Asbury describes his reflective process:

When the sound of their footsteps had faded on the stairs, Asbury sat up again. He turned his head, almost surreptitiously, to the side where the key he had given his mother was lying on the bedside table. His hand shot out and closed over it and returned it to his pocket. The eyes that stared back at him were the same that had returned his gaze every day from that mirror but it seemed to him that they were paler. They looked shocked clean as if they had been prepared for some awful vision about to dawn on him. (*Complete Stories* 382)

Whereas Asbury Fox appears to be seriously reflecting on his bout with sickness, Asbury's reflection is not on the tragic end of a dedicated artist, but on a fool sick from drinking unpasteurized milk. This reflective process followed by Asbury results in an "awful vision." With the remission of his fever, his old life is over and he looks forward to a new one. Then he feels "the beginning of a chill...like a warm ripple across a sea of cold."

The end of the story brings forth certain observations. According to Ralph Wood and others, Asbury Fox is an individual who undergoes a rite at the end of the story in order to achieve redemption. Wood notes:

At the end of the story, Asbury enters the purgatorial life that has the power to cleanse all his unrighteousness, whether racial or filial, as the Holy Ghost descends upon him—not as a dove carrying the olive branch or peace but as a fierce bird bearing the icicle of judgment. (*Flannery O'Connor* 116)

Such observations fit what Flannery O'Connor staunchly named as her intentions as a Christian writer. After all, the same plausible interpretation would apply to Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge." A self-righteous intellectual thinks himself better than everyone else; circumstances arise that befall that person and humble him. Critics who talk about the mystery and intriguing manner of O'Connor's writing style are apt to assume the efficacy of her publicly stated goals without any question.

The reader cannot ignore connections between Flannery O'Connor's life and this story, because it offers a clue to understanding the intent of this story. Asbury returns to Timberboro from New York City, the family lives on a farm similar to Andulasia, the mother knows cattle as Regina O'Connor knew cattle, the mother's comments on things that Regina would comment on in regards to the writer's subjects are simply too many coincidences to pass over. These parallels create the gnawing feeling that "The Enduring Chill" is an apt

metaphor for the resulting situation created by the pervasive presence of this illness on Flannery O'Connor's situation. She uses progressive diminishment in convergence in this story to express her frustration with the limiting confinement of her physical and social milieu (in this case, the familial environment) in order to keep her sanity and maintain the equilibrium demanded of a woman in Southern society. The primary difference between this goal in this story compared to the story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" is that the focus is more personally focused. What the reader takes from this short story is that even in the midst of a grave situation, sometimes the everyday happenings in life can grate on a human being. Coping strategies are a part of the human experience in facing different types of trials; progressive diminishment operating within convergence helps Flannery O'Connor to maintain a sense of humor and inform reflection in a difficult situation. To Flannery O'Connor, Chardin's ideas are not just applicable on a global scale explaining human action, but they are applicable in the day-to-day stress of life. This applicability and flexibility prove attractive to her, a feature she mentions to Alfred Corn, who appears to be facing a crisis of faith on different levels, "I don't suggest you go to him for answers but for different questions, for that stretching of the imagination that you need to make you skeptic in the face of much that you are learning, much of which is new and shocking, but which when boiled down becomes less so and takes its place in the scheme of things" (*Habit of Being* 477).

In the midst of progressive diminishment she explores a personal, humorous, cathartic angle on human suffering. Asbury Fox serves as a foil for Flannery O'Connor in accommodating human behavior amidst trying circumstances. Jeffrey Folks, to some degree in conjunction with Ralph Wood and Richard Gianone, concludes that the smile on Flannery O'Connor's face that night at the meeting is because another self-dramatizing intellectual has

received his comeuppance for assuming a condescending attitude towards other people. But underneath the surface of the short story, the psychological anguish of Flannery O'Connor over her limiting situation is searching for crevices in which to unleash the pent up anguish building inside her. Chardin's ideas on human development allow O'Connor flexibility in commenting on humanity, both on a societal and familial level. Perhaps the smile on O'Connor's face that night was not, as Jeffrey Folks and others observe, another example of a moral lesson taught, but the satisfaction of psychologically resolving a grim and frightening dilemma.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE LAME SHALL ENTER FIRST

“The Lame Shall Enter First” defies interpretation and has remained a thorn in the side of critics who attempt to interpret it. Andre Bleikastan notes the conundrum here when compared to Flannery O’Connor’s public pronouncements about writing; he observes, “What matters is not the extent to which O’Connor’s tales and novels reflect or express her Christian faith, but rather the problematical relations between her professed ideological stance and the textual evidence of her fiction” (Friedman 139). In her essay “On Her Own Work,” she states:

I often ask myself what makes a story work, and what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I’m talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. (*Mystery and Manners* 111)

In this story, this aim is out of place with regard to the plot; the father ignores or humiliates his son in front of a stranger. The father never admits his wrong, until it is too late, and this results in his ten-year-old son hanging himself. A reader finds strong dissonance in O’Connor’s ending. The context she finds in Teilhard and her struggle with her illness suggests a resolution of this problem.

A problem that critics encounter is the rigid application of principles to the story. Richard Gianone concludes that every eccentric character in this collection finds grace,

willingly or unwillingly! Bliekanstan believes that O'Connor's literature is primarily a desperate cry against the cruelties of life in the face of a deteriorating long-term disease.

The plot of the story is the relationship between Sheppard, a full time recreational director in the city, who serves as a part time counselor at the local juvenile reformatory and his biological son Norton, who is about ten, and Rufus Johnson, a fourteen-year-old delinquent whom Sheppard met at the reformatory. Sheppard and Norton lost the mother of the family about a year ago and have been struggling with its aftermath. Rufus Johnson attracts the attention of Sheppard because he has an IQ of 140 and a clubbed foot. "Johnson was the most intelligent boy he had worked with and the most deprived" (*Complete Stories* 447). Sheppard eventually invites Johnson to live with him and Norton in the hope that a good home and proper living conditions will help rehabilitate the reform school boy. Johnson lives with Sheppard and Norton, and even though he has shelter, clothing, and food available to him, he continues his delinquent ways by breaking into homes and pilfering items. Norton has never pleased his father, and Sheppard sees Johnson as a project worth saving. Sheppard tries, in various ways, to "rehabilitate Johnson," but ultimately fails; in the meantime Norton and Johnson have struck up a friendship that puts them at odds with Sheppard. Eventually, Johnson is caught breaking and entering and is hauled off to prison. As Johnson is hauled off, screaming at Sheppard, Sheppard realizes his failure, but then remembers Norton, whom he had left in the attic. He runs up to the attic looking for Norton in an attempt to make up for lost attention. Unfortunately, Norton has taken a rope and tied it around one of the rafters and hanged himself in an attempt to rejoin his mother.

In analyzing such a perplexing story, progressive diminishment in convergence can offer a plausible interpretation to the action, characters, and themes and can establish a

middle ground between Gianone's and Blika's observations. It helps to make sense out of a story that contradicts O'Connor's stated goal as a writer, that is making sense of humanity's relationship with the Divine. Josephine Hendin notes:

The perfect daughter who lives on in her mother's memory, the uncompromising Catholic. O'Connor has become so for so many of her readers, and the more enigmatic writer of those strange and violent tales. From the tension between these disparate selves—between O'Connor as Catholic daughter and O'Connor as writer—you begin to get some idea that you are almost inclined to think that Flannery O'Connor's greatest and most spontaneous fiction was her life. At any rate, it seems to me that both her peculiar Catholicism and her violent art grew from the contradiction she lived. (5)

In the first few pages of the short story, all three main characters in this short story share one sort of diminishment or another. And once again it is interesting that this valuable information is revealed when Sheppard and his son Norton in their kitchen engage in their separate activities. As O'Connor states in her essay, "Writing Short Stories," "I myself prefer to say that a story is a dramatic event that involves a person because he is a person, and a particular person—that is, because he shares in the general human condition and in some specific human situation" (*Mystery and Manners* 90).

In the kitchen the two of them are sitting at the breakfast table. Sheppard looks at his son and announces, "Norton, I saw Rufus Johnson yesterday. Do you know what he was doing?" (*Complete Stories* 445). Sheppard goes on to tell Norton that Rufus was rummaging through garbage cans looking for food; [Norton] "looked at him with a kind of half attention, his eyes forward but yet not engaged" (*Ibid.*). Sheppard tells his son Johnson's background, about his mother being in the penitentiary. When Sheppard mentions how lucky Norton was to have a good mother, Norton responds physically and emotionally:

A knot of flesh appeared below the boy's suddenly distorted mouth. His face became a mass of lumps with slits for eyes. "If she was in the penitentiary," he began in a kind of racking bellow, "I could go seeeee her." Tears rolled down his face and the ketchup

dribbled on his chin. He looked as if he had been hit in the mouth. He abandoned himself and howled. (*Complete Stories* 447).

The loss of his wife also affected Sheppard, though not as explicitly as Norton. “Don’t you think I’m lonely without her too? I do, but I’m not sitting around moping. I’m busy helping other people. When do you see me just sitting around thinking about my troubles?” (*Complete Stories* 449). Both of them are enduring the kind of diminishment that Chardin says does not make sense; it is a diminishment that seems to offer no sense of opportunity for development or understanding. Events such as the untimely death of the mother are “blows such as these, [in which] man does not move upward in any appreciable direction; he disappears or remains tragically diminished,” (*The Divine Milieu* 60).

In this conversation with his son, Sheppard mentions the prominent diminishment that Rufus Johnson possesses—the clubfoot. “Think of everything you have that he doesn’t! Suppose you had to root in garbage cans for food? Suppose you had a huge swollen foot and one side of you dropped lower than the other when you walked” (*Complete Stories* 447). Sheppard is attracted to Rufus because he sees potential that seems sadly lacking in his son Norton; he firmly believes that social conditions are the prime ingredient in any successful upbringing. He notes that “Rufus’s father died before he was born...His mother is in the state penitentiary. He was raised by his grandfather in a shack without water or electricity and the old man beat him every day. How would you like to belong to a family like that” (*Complete Stories* 446-47). In addition, he wears a battered shoe over his maimed foot “with a sole four or five inches thick. The leather parted from it in one place and the end of an empty sock protruded like a gray tongue from a severed head” (*Complete Stories* 450).

Rufus Johnson experiences and views his diminishment in the same manner as Mrs. Chestny in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” as a certificate of his uniqueness, except that this uniqueness is presented ironically. As Chardin notes in *The Divine Milieu*, people focus on frameworks or objects that are more propitious, that give them a sense of value. The uniqueness of the clubfoot serves two purposes for Johnson; it is a defense against those who would try to change him and it reminds him of the force driving his life. When he finally shows up at Sheppard’s house on a stormy day and walks in, Norton looks at him and squeals how his father is going to give Johnson a new shoe; Johnson replies that he can get his own shoe and that the shoe is a weapon, “If I kick somebody once with this, it learns them not to mess with me” (*Complete Stories* 453). Also, to Rufus the shoe provides him with an explanation of his criminal activity. When Sheppard talks to him at the reformatory and asks him why he does the things he does, Rufus replies, “Satan, he has me in his power” (*Complete Stories* 450). His diminishment is a symbol of the special bond between him and Satan. In short, he does not see his diminishment as a diminishment, so he cannot learn from it.

Johnson and Sheppard explicitly defy the thrust of convergence. Sheppard uses the scientific method to draw help people like Rufus to his understanding of the universe. His philosophy appears when he and Rufus first meet; he tells Rufus, “You’ve got into a lot of senseless trouble but I think when you understand why you do these things, you’ll be less inclined to do them” (*Complete Stories* 450). In an ironical twist on Teilhard’s concept of knowledge, Sheppard thought he could save Johnson if he could get the boy interested in the “stars.” When he talked with Johnson every Saturday:

He roamed from simple psychology and the dodges of the human mind to astronomy and the space capsules that were whirling around the earth faster than the speed of sound and would soon encircle the stars. Instinctively he concentrated on the stars. He wanted to give the boy something to reach for besides his neighbor's goods. He wanted to stretch his horizons. He wanted him to see the universe, to see that the darkest parts of it could be penetrated. He would have given anything to be able to put a telescope in Johnson's hands. (*Complete Stories* 451)

Chardin states in *The Phenomenon of Man*: "As a first approximation [the future of knowledge] is outlined on our horizon as the establishment of an overall and completely coherent perspective of the universe" (248) [and] "since its birth, knowledge has made its greatest advances when stimulated by some particular problem needing a solution; and its most sublime theories would have always drifted, rootless, on the flood of human thought if they had not been promptly incorporated into some way of mastering the world" (249). Sheppard felt that his approach would solve all problems. Robert Brinkmeyer points out:

Sheppard is O'Connor's (and her narrator's) typical intellectual—a person smitten with intellectual pride who believes not in the Lord but in himself and the rationality and potential of the human mind. It is the quality of Johnson's mind—he has an IQ of 140—that attracts Sheppard to him and that inspires Sheppard's effort to reform him while ignoring the needs of his own not-so-bright son, Norton. (Brinkmeyer 92)

Rufus Johnson, on the other hand, was equally determined on his path to hell. Throughout the story, Johnson never veers from his final destination. In the attic one night, Johnson is looking through the telescope that Sheppard bought for him, with Norton looking on. Sheppard is hoping that such activities will convince Johnson of the silliness of his outlook, but nothing will ever change his view:

Something in the depths of Johnson's eyes stirred. All day his humor had been glum. "I ain't going to the moon and get there alive," he said, "and when I die I'm going to hell." "It's at least possible to get to the moon," Sheppard said dryly. The best way to handle this kind of thing was with gentle ridicule. "We can see it. We know it's there. Nobody has given any reliable evidence there's a hell." "The Bible has give the evidence," Johnson said darkly, "and if you die and go there you burn forever. (*Complete Stories* 461-62)

Many times Johnson would stick to his guns about the influence of Satan upon him. He insists that the deformed foot was his personal link to Satan and would always be a reminder of that link. Rufus will not consider changing his view of himself or his destination. The epic battle between Sheppard and Johnson often leads scholars to see these two individuals as the center of attraction in the story. As Jeffrey Folks notes:

The role of the differently abled as characters in O'Connor's fiction is not limited to self-exploration, for she repeatedly presents these characters as especially capable of communicating purpose and belief to others. Like the famous character of the Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Rufus Johnson in "The Lame Shall Enter First" is burdened with a form of mental torment which is symbolized by his lameness and his "meanness." The character of Sheppard, who "had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton," is the object of Rufus' efforts to shock into self-understanding. (86)

In this statement is an attempt to interpret the story based on these two dominant characters. Johnson and Sheppard are examined in terms of how this struggle between them affects each other and is there a moral or theme that can be learned from this struggle. It is a logical and propitious insight that a scholar would make, and, yet, if we look at the actions and development of these two characters, this observation leaves us queasy. We need to observe another character, Norton, the ten-year old child.

In contrast to his father and Rufus Johnson, Norton initially does not possess a clear sense of where he is going, but his interaction with Rufus raises an overwhelming desire to rejoin his mother, who died unexpectedly over a year ago. In the initial encounter between Rufus and Norton, Johnson enters the home, roams around the house, enters the deceased mother's room, removes some of her garments and begins to play with them. Norton strongly disapproves, and when Sheppard comes home, Norton vents that disapproval. "The child suddenly came to life. His face swelled with fury. 'He went in her room and used her comb!' he screamed, yanking Sheppard's arm. 'He put on her corset and danced with Leola, he. . .'"

(*Complete Stories* 458). Later on, after Sheppard had bought a telescope for the boys to use, when the boys are looking through the telescope, Norton shows no interest until the day when Rufus mentions where he can find his mother. When Johnson and Sheppard start their discussion of their views about the afterlife, Norton seizes on the possibility of seeing his mother:

“The Bible has give the evidence,” Johnson said, darkly, “and if you die and go there you burn forever.” The child leaned forward. “Whoever says it ain’t a hell,” Johnson said, “is contradicting Jesus. The dead are judged and the wicked are damned. They weep and gnash their teeth while they burn,” he continued, and it’s everlasting darkness.” Norton lurched up and took a hobbled step toward Sheppard. “Is she there?” he said in a loud voice. “Is she there burning up?” He kicked the rope off his feet. “Is she on fire?” (*Complete Stories* 461)

In contrast to the stubborn resistance of his father and Rufus Johnson, Norton shows an interest in dealing with the diminishment in his life. The irony is that while Norton is “not as sure as” his father and Johnson in what they believe, he is sure of wanting to solve this dilemma. His father focuses on life as just existing in the physical realm, and as a result, as Dorothy Tuck notes, “what Sheppard does not realize is that Norton, who has all the material advantages, feels himself more radically disadvantaged than Johnson” (57), and further, this interest drives Norton towards hanging himself from the attic beam, because, according to Driskell and Brittain, “Norton destroys himself, not because of physical or emotional neglect, but spiritual neglect” (99).

Time and time again, Norton seeks help from his father in dealing with the loss of his mother. Norton is tragically ignored by his father each time. He engages in the reflection brought on by the death of his mother and tries to resolve its impact on his life, but never fully develops because of his father’s ignorance of him.

In the most powerful instance of abandonment Sheppard is so focused on eliminating the physical need of Rufus Johnson that would pry him away from criminal activity, he fails to see the disaster in ignoring Norton's dilemma. He takes Rufus Johnson to get a new orthopedic shoe for his clubfoot, puts clothes on his back, and covers for him when the police come to question Rufus about a couple of burglaries. One night after Sheppard had attended a city council meeting and dropped the boys off for a movie, upon coming back to the house, he and the boys discovered a police car waiting for them. The police wanted to question Johnson, but Sheppard vouched for the boy. Later on, Sheppard questioned Johnson about the incident and Johnson denied that he was at the house. Sheppard said that he believed Johnson because "I believe you because I believe you've got the brains and the guts not to get in trouble again. I believe you know yourself well enough now to know that you don't have to do such things" (*Complete Stories* 468). When Sheppard leaves Johnson's room, he closes with the statement "I love you, son," and passes by Norton's room. The door is open and Norton "sat up and beckoned to him" (*Complete Stories* 469). Norton is seeking community with his father, perhaps to tell him about Johnson's activities that night, and hopes to talk to him. Sheppard quickly looks at him, but ignores him. The opportunity for communication has passed, never to return. Norton realizes that his father will never prize him, and thus "the child sat for some time looking at the spot where his father had stood. Finally his gaze became aimless and he lay back down" (*Complete Stories* 469).

Norton desires an answer and changes because of the discussions between Rufus and Sheppard; he finds hope in what he learns. "The Lame Shall Enter First" is one of O'Connor's more difficult stories to fathom. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins (September 6, 1962) O'Connor saw problems with the story and with the character Sheppard. "The story doesn't work

because I don't know, don't sympathize, don't like Mr. Sheppard in the way that I know and like most of my other characters" (*Habit of Being* 491). Sheppard never shows any kind of sympathy towards his son and constantly sees Rufus as superior to his son in deeds and conversation. Whereas Sheppard uses cunning and manipulation in a "good way," hoping to gain control of Johnson's future, Johnson uses cunning to engage in criminal activity. The machinations of these two individuals combine to lead to the denouement in the story. Cynthia Seel makes two pertinent observations that focus on Norton. First, Seel calls the ending of "The Lame Shall Enter First" "an extremely problematic ending" (171), and, secondly, she offers a pertinent framework in which to judge the characters of this story when she notes, "While the story's setting is realistically rendered, all characters nevertheless function at the level of ritual and dreamscape" (149).

Norton is an exemplar of Bishop, the young son of Rayber, a social worker in *The Violent Bear It Away*. In O'Connor's second novel, written in the 1950s, Bishop is the retarded son of Rayber who follows a young prophet Tarwater around. In the climatic scene, when Bishop allows Tarwater to baptize him, believing that this action will lead to salvation; Tarwater drowns him. In this short story, Norton engages in his own quest for dealing with his diminishment. As Chardin notes in *The Future of Man*, "It is undeniable that in Man the external drive of Life tends to be transformed and turn inward to become an ardour for Life" (*Future of Man* 205), something he also refers to as "the within." Chardin notes that "Things have their within, their reserve" (*Phenomenon of Man* 54) and that "it is impossible to deny that, deep within ourselves, 'an interior' appears at the heart of beings. This is enough to ensure that, in one degree or another, this 'interior' should obtrude itself as existing everywhere in nature from all time" (*Phenomenon of Man* 56). Norton may not be able to

fathom all of the particulars affecting him, but he knows something is amiss in his life and he seeks to remedy his situation. As O'Connor put it, "in us the good is something under construction" (*Mystery and Manners* 226); Norton is drawn to resolve the anguish in his life. In spite of the humiliations by his father and the cunning of Rufus Johnson, he finds a way to redeem himself in the face of his pain. Where his mentors learn nothing from their experiences, Norton finds hope and acts on it.

In the first scene he, Johnson, and Sheppard are up in the attic playing with the telescope that Sheppard had bought for the boys. Johnson took an avid interest in the telescope. Sheppard "sat down on a straight chair a few feet away," as Johnson looked through the telescope. "Within a week he had made it possible for this boy's vision to pass through a slender channel to the stars. He looked at Johnson's bent back with complete satisfaction" (*Complete Stories* 459).

The telescope is used to discover elements in the cosmos and to construct a coherent picture of the universe. The telescope searches immensity, while the microscope, which Sheppard purchases for the boys later on, searches the infinitesimal. This process of searching the immense and the microscopic, recalls the principle of convergence that Teilhard describes in his work. Sheppard however wants to control what the boys will learn through using it. In this supervised environment Norton shows no interest whatsoever in the telescope. His father encourages him to do so and he reluctantly agrees. When Johnson tells him that there is nothing to see, he doesn't look. Suddenly, however, things change when his father asks the boys if they want to be astronauts and go to the moon, and Johnson responds, "The Bible has give the evidence," and if you die and go there you burn forever" (*Complete Stories* 461). Suddenly, the child takes notice. Norton asks if his mother is there, and

Johnson responds that she is, if she lived a sinful life. What happens is that “ironically, while Sheppard seeks to win the mind of the delinquent through books and a telescope, Rufus wins Norton’s mind with the Bible and a telescope: the instrument of science is subverted to what Rufus would regard as greater truth”( Driskell 95).

In the second scene Sheppard finds Johnson and Norton reading a Bible that Johnson had stolen from a store. Now, Norton’s whole attitude has changed; his face “was bright and there was an excited sheen to his eyes.” The boys had been reading in the Bible and talking about the need to repent in order not to go to hell; Sheppard insisted that they cease such conversation because they could not believe in such drivel at all:

Sheppard laughed. “You don’t believe in that book and you know you don’t believe in it!” “I believe it!” Johnson said. “You don’t know what I believe and what I don’t Sheppard shook his head. “You don’t believe it. You’re too intelligent.” “I ain’t too intelligent,” the boy muttered. “You don’t know nothing about me. Even if I didn’t believe it, it would still be true.” (*Complete Stories* 477)

In this scene, there is a distinction between Sheppard’s view of Norton and Johnson’s view of him. Whereas Sheppard did not have the time to stop and talk to his natural son, Johnson makes sure that it is he who stole the Bible, and not Norton. As Driskell and Brittain point out, “Norton and Rufus take precautions to assure Norton’s salvation: when a Bible must be stolen, Rufus steals it in order that the child not jeopardize his chances of heavenly reunion with his mother” (93). In this conversation a change takes place. Before, it was Johnson who had the answers to Norton’s questions, but since the telescope arrived, it became Norton’s best friend. When Sheppard catches the two boys reading the Bible and discussing the need for salvation, this time it is Norton who prompts Rufus to seek salvation. Norton knows that dealing with this diminishment means reuniting with his mother in Heaven; Norton knows the solution to his diminishment and offers that solution to Rufus. Norton’s actions point to

the psychic needs that must be satisfied. In his childish way, Norton has discovered where his mother is and how he can join her. Johnson has pointed Norton in a direction; obviously, Johnson's motives were not altruistic, but Norton believed him because his interpretations of Rufus' Bible readings placed his mother among the stars.

O'Connor's work with the story of Mary Ann Long also sheds light on the way Norton acts on impulse. Mary Ann was a young lady who suffered from a physical, cancerous tumor on her head and died at the age of twelve. O'Connor felt an empathy with the young girl, because both of them were suffering from a terminal disease. This young girl, who faced death with maturity and honesty, impressed O'Connor:

The story was as unfinished as the child's face. Both seemed to have been left, like creation on the seventh day, to be finished by others. The reader would have to make something of the story as Mary Ann had made something of her face. She and the Sisters who had taught her had fashioned from her unfinished face the material of her death. The creative act of the Christian's life is to prepare his death in Christ. It is a continuous action in which this world's goods are utilized to the fullest, both positive gifts and what Pere Teilhard de Chardin calls "passive diminishment." Mary Ann's diminishment was extreme, but she was equipped by natural intelligence and by a suitable education, not simply to endure it, but to build upon it. (*Mystery and Manners* 223)

This incident sheds light on Norton's dealing with his diminishment and his struggles with his loss and in some ways, his death is at once "successful" and pathetic.

Even though Norton is not an adult, he consciously wrestles with the serious physical and psychological diminishments facing him. Moving from Chardin's contention that all things, particularly conscious things (i.e., humanity), possess a "Within," a change takes place in what motivates human beings. Chardin notes in *The Future of Man*, "It may be said for a long time, under pressure of the external forces engaged in concentrating it, the Human developed in a fashion that was mainly automatic—spurred on principally, in Bergson's expression, by a vis a tergo, a 'push from behind'" (276). Now, instead of being pushed from

behind, “when intelligence, which originally, as has been well said, was simply a means of survival, became gradually elevated to the function and dignity of a ‘reason for living,’” (Ibid.), “so that in line with, and gradually replacing, the thrust from behind or below, we see the appearance of a force of attraction coming from above” (*The Future of Man* 277). The allusion to this change is noted when Sheppard passes by the attic and sees Norton looking through the telescope at the stars and frantically waving his hands, shouting, “She’s there!” he cried, not turning around from the telescope. “She waved at me!” (*Complete Stories* 479). Norton’s tragedy is that he did not possess the community to help sort out fact from fiction. Mary Ann viewed her cancer as tragic, but thanks to the nuns taking care of her, she was able to face her short future with dignity and grace. Norton, on the other hand, struggles with the absence of his mother; he has no education or support to deal with the diminishment. There is no community in which to reach out for help, yet he engages the problem associated with his progressive diminishment. The status quo embraced by Sheppard and Rufus becomes grotesque and evil because it offers nothing to Norton’s diminishment and distress. O’Connor says in her introduction to the book *Reflections on Mary Ann*:

This [discussion] opened for me also a new perspective on the grotesque. Most of us have learned to be dispassionate about evil, to look it in the face and find, as often as not, our own grinning reflections with which we do not argue, but good is another matter. Few have stared at that long enough to accept the fact that its face too is grotesque, that in us the good is some thing under construction. The modes of evil usually receive worthy expression. The modes of good have to be satisfied with a cliché or a smoothing down that will soften their real look. When we look into the face of good, we are liable to see a face like Mary Ann’s, full of promise. (17-18)

Norton would be an easy figure to miss, as Bruce Gentry points out. Dr. Gentry observes that to a lot of critics “the emphasis is [so] thoroughly upon Sheppard that many readers miss, as Sheppard himself does, the redemptive experience of Norton’s death” (158).

These readers miss Norton's attempts at resolving his problem, while Sheppard and Johnson are locked in mortal combat. In focusing on Norton, a reader avoids the problems that Gianone and Bliekastan focus on. In Gianone's opinion, the focus should be on Sheppard at the end of the story because he is a primary character, and according to Giannone, the primary characters must learn of convergence and redemption because of the presence of guilt, a point seconded by Folks. The compulsion of guilt helps lead us to a new sense of self-understanding. Folks notes that "in his recognition of his son Norton (in a crisis of 'agonizing love' described as 'like a transfusion of love') Sheppard is brought at least to the beginnings of self-understanding, for Sheppard, suddenly 'paralyzed' by his thought, must at last see that he, not the lame and delinquent Rufus Johnson, is in greater need of healing" (86). If one looks at Sheppard's conduct through the short story, the reader hesitates to credit redemption for Sheppard at the end of the story. He has humiliated and treated his son with indifference, and now, because of his failure with Johnson, he automatically wants to make up time with Norton. And with regards to Bliekastan's view, it is hard to believe this story features only depression. It focuses on a depressing state of affairs. Maybe Sheppard and Johnson are unworthy, but Norton illustrates the drive to find fulfillment, however bizarre. However lame, Norton is the first one to enter.

The tragedy here is that in a choice between a situation where he had enough food, clothing, and shelter and a situation that offered an answer to this long, grieving problem in his life, Norton chose the guidance of Rufus Johnson over his father. Rufus Johnson offers Norton a solution to the displacement felt in his life; a displacement that impacts him as much as the air he breathes and the food he eats. Chardin clarifies so explicitly that human beings may be creatures developed out of a physical process called evolution, but the psychic

characteristics that religion, particularly Christianity, declare important to the human species are as integrated and necessary as the developed brain and the fifth limb of the hand—the thumb, to human development and endurance. Evil is sometimes not the intent acts designed to hurt or destroy people; sometimes evil is diminishments life develops and ignores. As Driskell and Brittain point out, “Sheppard offers his son a physical existence with no meaning beyond what can be measured; Rufus offers an immaterial existence and immeasurable bliss” (95). Norton, like Mary Ann, eventually finds a tragic solution in this converging world.

## CHAPTER VII

### REVELATION

From her letters, we can see that O'Connor began work on the last three stories of the collection during the last three years of her life. George Kilcourse notes that "at precisely the moment when O'Connor admits that ours was not an age of synthesis and 'past time for a new synthesis,' she discovers Teilhard," and he further observes that "Flannery O'Connor's creativity, stirred by Teilhard, flowers in four stories that lead from the environs of sin to renewed hope in the life-giving unity of humanity linked by bonds of unimagined love" (274-75). Kilcourse includes "Everything That Rises Must Converge" along with the three short stories discussed hereafter. Starting in 1960, she began reading, reviewing, and commenting on Teilhard's material. By the time of her death in August, 1964, she had read *The Phenomenon of Man*, *The Divine Milieu*, and *Creative Evolution*. It would be fair to say that Teilhard interested her intensely towards the end of her life, as much as any other writer. In a letter to Dr. T.R. Spivey, dated 9 April 1960, she states:

Now, about Teilhard. The *Phenomenon of Man* is not a book about animals in the first place but about development. There is nothing in it about animals except the section on the development of the primates. The man is a scientist, writing as one. This is a scientific age and Teilhard's direction is to face it toward Christ (*Habit of Being* 387-88).

Her deepening fascination with the Jesuit is readily apparent in the last three short stories of the collection.

These stories (“Revelation,” “Parker’s Back,” “Judgement Day”) employ her understanding of progressive diminishment in convergence and its effects on their action and characters. They reflect the clarity and maturity of Chardin’s ideas in the new context which Flannery O’Connor used in coping with her illness. On both a private and public level, she answers questions about disability and racial issues in her last days. Kilcourse comments that since “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” that “allusions to institutional religion, the Holocaust, the welfare system, immigration, racial integration, class consciousness, and economics grow to become part of the matrix for her imagination,” and, that, according to Kilcourse, her final four short stories, “written in the wake of her enthusiasm for Teilhard, usher readers into prophetic precincts” (279).

On the issue of race, scholars such as Melvin Williams and Clare Kahane have taken the position that O’Connor was racist at heart and only used black characters in her stories in order “to precipitate a white reaction” (Williams 132) and “extend stereotypes; beyond their predictable boundaries,” but remaining caught within the biases of her cultural context” (Kahane 198). While not agreeing with these scholars’ conclusions, such stalwart supporters like Ralph Wood have been disturbed by O’Connor’s hesitation about speaking out more forcefully on the issue. Wood relates an incident that documents his uneasiness. On June 12, 1963, Medgar Evers was shot in the back and killed in his driveway by Byron de la Beckwith, an assailant eventually convicted of the crime. Eudora Welty, a contemporary Southern writer, published a story in *The New Yorker* called “Where is the Voice Coming From,” a fictional account of the white assassin’s thoughts on what drove him to kill Evers. According to Wood, Welty shows the assailant “to be a paranoid fanatic, a self-justifying coward, a ne’er-do-well redneck who resents black prosperity, a man of such small soul that

he cannot discern the link between his guilty conscience and the heat that bears down on him" (Wood 93); for example, in the first paragraph of the story, the character states, "I says to my wife, 'You can reach and turn it off. You don't have to set and look at a black nigger face no longer than you want to, or listen to what you don't want to hear. It's still a free country.' I reckon that's how I give myself the idea" (*New Yorker* 24). An example of that hesitation is reflected in two letters that Margaret Earley Smith notes that O'Connor wrote about Welty's article. When the story first came out, Smith notes that O'Connor "is taken with the story: 'Nobody else could have gotten away with it or made it work but her I think. I want to read it again' (*Habit of Being* 533) But a few weeks later, O'Connor appears to have a change of heart" (Whitt 68). In the second letter she responded to Welty's perspective in a letter to Betty Hester, "What I hate most is its being in the *New Yorker* and all the stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips over typical life in the dear old dirty Southland. The topical is poison. I say a plague on everybody's house as far as the race business go" (*Ibid.*). Julie Armstrong, in her essay "Blinded by Whiteness: Revisiting Flannery O'Connor and Race," states that a person has to realize the times in which O'Connor wrote; O'Connor resented obvious acts of discrimination and unjust treatment of African Americans, but because of her affiliation with the white power structure in that society, she had a hard time fully understanding African American problems. Armstrong states:

Her fiction fits squarely into the pattern of color obsession/color blindness that Toni Morrison identifies. O'Connor condemns white characters who try to enhance their status by putting down and then measuring themselves against African Americans, yet she also takes for granted her own racialized constructions of plot and language; Blacks are found most commonly as "enablers," to use Morrison's terms, and blackness is employed as a readymade, but not fully questioned, trope. (83)

Flannery O'Connor lived in a tumultuous time where changes were occurring locally, regionally, and nationally and also in her own life. She honestly wanted things to change, but in a mannerly, permanent fashion.

From 1960 onward, the effects of her long-term disease were becoming more pronounced. As alluded to earlier, Ralph Wood suggests that one ought to consider the timeframe in which O'Connor was responding to the racial situation around her. Wood notes the context in which she wrote these letters:

We must remember that O'Connor penned them during the spring and summer of 1964, as she lay dying. Her literal pain and her spiritual frustration must have been enormous. I suspect that O'Connor was ill tempered with anyone who sought to draw her attention to the immediate horizon of the race question, when, as a mortally ill woman, she sought to fix her gaze on the tree line of eternity. (96)

She found Chardin who helped her to focus on these two areas of human behavior, especially in light of the Civil Rights convergence.

In these last three stories, particularly "Revelation" and "Judgement Day," she presents African Americans as equals or better; they perceive life better than the whites in these stories. In the new evolving, converging, social order of these short stories, they act and operate as equals to the whites; even though the whites do not recognize this converging environment. In this manner, the ideas of Chardin enhance in a new way the relevance of accountability important to the Christian message. He mentions that as humanity moves up the evolutionary scale, ideas such as equality and hope must guide decision-making. In *The Phenomenon of Man*, Chardin makes clear the folly of racism:

Also false and against nature is the racial idea of one branch draining off for itself alone all the sap of the tree and rising over the death of other branches. To reach the sun nothing less is required than the combined growth of the entire foliage. The outcome of the world, the gates of the future, the entry into the superhuman—these are not thrown open to a few of the privileged nor to one chosen people to the exclusion of all others.

They will open to an advance of *all together*, in a direction in which *all together* can join and find completion in a spiritual renovation of the earth, a renovation whose physical degree of reality we must now consider and whose outline we must make clearer. (244)

Chardin's teaching underscores the importance of reflection in understanding the impact of diseases. In *The Divine Milieu*, Chardin notes that as a diminishment increases, it "hollows out" the sufferer and so can increase the awareness of God in the situation. The individual learns that reflection on progressive diminishment can transmute the limiting situation into a life-giving event. This notion helped O'Connor to see the sacred in all aspects of life. Meaning is not just located in doctrinal pronouncements, but also in day-to-day existence. In describing the last four years of her life, Kathleen Spalato and Sue Walker note that for Flannery O'Connor her illness and spiritual growth were connected. This discovery opened O'Connor to exploring diminishment in human relationships through her stories.

In her essay "Home To Her True Country: The Final Trilogy of Flannery O'Connor," Diane Tolomeo suggests that the violence occurring in the life of these characters is positioned differently in these last three short stories than in her previous work. Tolomeo notes that "in her last three short stories, 'Revelation,' 'Parker's Back,' and 'Judgement Day,' written during her final illness, there is a remarkable shift in her use of shock tactics to create an awareness in her readers" (336) No radical changes in terms of themes occur in these last three stories, but the timing of a "physical or psychic assault on the character" is different. The physical and psychic assaults occur early in the story, leaving time for reflection on the events by the characters and the readers.

In conjunction with the change in timing, a corresponding change affects the reader. We view the assault early in the story, and like the character, there is a similar effect in that "he, too is no longer left with a final devastating image which stuns him momentarily before

he closes the book and either contemplates its meaning or turns to something similar" (336). Tolomeo points out that the reader cannot just "wipe from his mind" the situation he/she has encountered, where in some situations a violent act happens right before the conclusion. A case in point is "A Good Man is Hard to Find," where the Misfit kills the Grandmother near the end of the story. By introducing the violence early in the last stories, O'Connor has "confronted [the reader] with the implications of what he has just encountered" (336).

One of O'Connor's favorite literary devices that assumes a heightened prominence in these latter short stories is doubling or mirroring. In these stories this device brings into sharp relief the crux of the problem facing the protagonist in a changing, converging environment; that protagonist is uncategorically presented with the necessity of change, and opportunity to change, and must react to that situation.

In "Revelation," the primary characters are Mrs. Ruby Turpin and her husband Claud, who own a farm, and Mary Grace, an acne-scarred college student, home for the summer. The action of the plot affects these three characters in a way that allows the reader time to reflect on their causes and their ramifications for the characters. The physical assault in this story allows Ruby Turpin to ponder the implications of Mary Grace's physical description of her as a warthog and also moves the reader to study Ruby Turpin's response. In this short story and the other two, the reader is subtly and firmly encouraged to reflect on the character's plight.

In "Revelation," after a cow kicked him, Mrs. Turpin and her husband Claud have journeyed to the local doctor's office to have his injury looked after. Mrs. Turpin is an obese woman and she looks for a chair in which to sit. She notices different types of people around her in this small crowded office. Mrs. Turpin possessed an air of righteousness upon entering

the room, and immediately begins setting up her own hierarchy of assigning value to human beings. George Kilcourse observes that “from the moment she steps into the crowded, claustrophobic doctor’s waiting room at the beginning of the story and sizes up the seating situation, it is apparent that this overweight farm wife has an enormous ego to match” (283), and Suzanne Morrow Paulson chimes in, “When the story opens, Mrs. Turpin, a woman of great size, ‘sized up the seating situation,’—thereby immediately exhibiting a hierarchical habit of mind” (60). She has constructed a framework which assign a value to people and which places her a notch above most others in the office. She noticed a stylish lady with her daughter and when a chair became open,

Mrs. Turpin eased into the vacant chair, which held her tight as a corset. “I wish I could reduce,” she said and rolled her eyes and gave a comic laugh. “Oh, *you* aren’t fat,” the stylish lady said. “Ooooo I am too,” Mrs. Turpin said. “Claud he eats all he wants to and never weighs over one hundred and seventy-five pounds, but me I just look at something good to eat and I gain some weight,” and her stomach and shoulders shook with laughter. “You can eat all you want to, can’t you Claud?” she asked, turning to him. Claud only grinned. . . . In the same room the stylish lady with whom she had struck up a conversation “had on red and gray suede shoes to match her dress”; according to Mrs. Turpin, she was an acceptable pleasant looking individual. The same could not be said for her daughter Mary Grace. Mary Grace, who is sitting next to her mother, is a fat girl of eighteen or nineteen, scowling into a thick book which Mrs. Turpin saw was entitled *Human Development*. The girl raised her head and directed her scowl at Mrs. Turpin as if she did not like her looks. She appeared annoyed that anyone should speak while she tried to read. The girl’s face was blue with acne and Mrs. Turpin thought how pitiful it was to have a face like that at that age. (*Complete Stories* 490)

So we meet Mrs. Turpin and Mary Grace, who have been described with physical abnormalities. Both women represent, in different ways, appearances that can affect standing in society. According to Peter Stearns, the impact of popular culture on the appearance of women became an obsession in the 1950s and 1960s. He notes, “The image of fat as essentially evil, the result of personal failure but the cause of additional failures in the outside world, reinforced the link between prosaic diet literature and the need for a moral

counterweight in a society of consumer indulgence” (122). Flannery O’Connor understood the pressure of having to appear a certain way in public; she would talk about dreading a public appearance; in the time leading up to the public event, she would break out in hives and be forced to back out. In addition, having to wear hats, sunglasses, and arm-length gloves to protect her from sunlight lent an eccentric cast to her appearance. Sunlight would cause the lupus to act up and scar her. In a letter to Betty Hester (“A”) in November of 1955, O’Connor writes, “I have decided I must be a pretty pathetic sight with these crutches. I was in Atlanta the other day in Davison’s. An old lady got on the elevator behind me and as soon as I turned around she fixed me with a most gleaming eye and said in a loud voice, ‘Bless you darling!’ I felt exactly like the Misfit and I gave her a weakly lethal look. . . .” (116-17).

Like Mrs. Chestny in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” Mrs. Turpin selects qualities that give her a sense of superiority over others. People often respond to diminishment by centering on qualities that are not susceptible to “rust and moths,” moral and “spiritual” in nature. To distract from her size, like a good Christian, she “focused” on her inner beauty and felt fortunate to have attained some status in her society. In the same manner, from a different perspective, Mary Grace’s virtue is intellectual process, as witnessed by her reading *Human Development*, along with her mother’s constant griping about how “she just keeps right on studying. Just reads all the time, a real book worm”(Complete Stories 498). In this way both women comes to terms with their physical diminishments; in Mrs. Turpin’s case, it helps to justify her obesity. For example, when she would lie in bed at night and think about where she fit in the grand scheme of things, she would often wonder what she might have chosen if given the opportunity to choose. She would use this exercise as a way of justifying her status before God, because if Jesus had

given her the choice of being a white trashy woman or upright black woman, she would have chosen the upright black woman.

“Please, Jesus, please,” she would have said, “just let me wait until there’s another place available,” and he would have said, “No, you have to go right now and I have only those two places so make up your mind.” She would have wiggled and squirmed and begged and pleaded but it would have been no use and finally she would have said, “All right, make me a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one.” And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black. (*Complete Stories* 491)

Ruby Turpin believed that being made a nice, clean, respectable black woman was demonstrating the sacrifice she was willing to make out of devotion to Christian virtues. She would go to this extreme to remain faithful to Jesus, and at the heart of that commitment was her fidelity to her self-image. She would endure discrimination, but it would demonstrate to Jesus the purity of her faith. She believed any real Christian would choose this option over the lifestyle represented by poor white trash.

Mrs. Turpin represented many Southerners that O’Connor knew, who believed that a paternalistic relationship between blacks and whites always existed and would never change. Mrs. Chestny in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” represents individuals who treat blacks as second-class, yet in her correspondence O’Connor feels uncomfortable with the tactics of James Baldwin and Maryat Lee, who believed in confronting Southern society with its sins. In the movement of convergence, life is progressing towards a final condition that embraces love, unity, and equality. Progressive diminishment offers the opportunity to discover and align one’s self with this development.

At the beginning of the story, Mrs. Turpin represents what Teilhard de Chardin calls an immobilist, that is, a person who is satisfied with the status quo. Teilhard declares:

These latter, the “immobilists,” though they lack passion (immobility has never inspired anyone with enthusiasm), have commonsense on their side, habit of thought, inertia,

pessimism and also, to some extent, morality and religion. Nothing, they argue, appears to have changed since man began to hand down the memory of the past, not the undulations of the earth, or the focus of life, or the genius of Man or even his goodness. . . . For the sake of human tranquility, in the name of Fact, and in the defence of the sacred Established Order, the immobilists forbid the earth to move. Nothing changes, they say, or can change. The raft must drift purposelessly on a shoreless sea. (*Future of Man* 11-12)

Ruby Turpin is a passive immobilist in the sense that she will treat “niggers” with respect when it is necessary, but in her heart she holds to the establishment of the sacred order and the Southern status quo. She does not openly agitate for its maintenance, but insists on its appropriateness among the important people in her hierarchy, notably the stylish lady. The narrator as appropriate interjects interior monologue, in which Ruby Turpin thinks about the people around her. African Americans need to realize the social dominance of the genteel members of the white race and accept it as a matter of fact. As Suzanne Morrow Paulson notes, “This all-knowing woman of ‘experience,’ grateful to be herself, ‘a good woman,’ easily accepts white rationalizations about blacks and the lower classes, such as the notion that it is proper to deprive them of the world’s goods” (61). Mrs. Turpin has lived her life content with this status quo. She defends the established order on the assumption things will never change in the environment, and in her comments to the stylish lady, she cites the societal pecking order:

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people, not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them; then next to them—not alone, just away from—were the white trash; then above them were the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belong. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger homes and more land. (*Complete Stories* 491)

Nevertheless, Ruby Turpin cannot ignore developments in the cultural milieu. Even when she lay in bed and thought about the classes of people and their order of importance, she could not help but recognize exceptions to the rules:

But here the complexity of it could begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it. (*Complete Stories* 491-92)

So, in spite of her established beliefs, society and societal codes are changing. In this environment Ruby Turpin would learn the implications of those new rules for communicating and governing the established social order. Blacks were achieving relative economic and social progress in the South. And this convergence is driving people like Ruby Turpin and T.C. Tanner (“Judgement Day”) towards equality. Julie Armstrong’s observation that “readers notice and ask about white characters who are allowed realizations that black figures are only allowed to facilitate, about white characters given access to the holy, while black figures occupy the realm of the humorous, the sexual, the animalistic, and the filthy” (80) does not describe the place of African American characters in this story and “Judgement Day.”

From the moment that she and Claud bounded into the cramped waiting room, Ruby Turpin decides on the value of persons in that room. Mrs. Turpin never hesitated in judging other people, evaluating people against her standards. She and the stylish lady talk about the chores and workers on the Turpin’s farm. She complains about hiring “niggers” to do chores. Mrs. Turpin gripes how they are not satisfied with a job, but have to be coddled and waited on in order to get them to work.

Claud he has to go after them and take them home again in the evening. They can't walk that half mile. No they can't. I tell you," she said and laughed merrily, "I sure am tired of buttering up niggers, but you got to love em if you want em to work for you. When they come in the morning, I run out and I say, 'Hi yawl this morning?' and when Claud drives them off to the field I just wave to beat the band and they just wave back." And she waved to illustrate. (*Complete Stories* 494)

Mrs. Turpin and the stylish lady agree that "niggers" and white trash are at the bottom of the barrel in terms of value to society. In their eyes, such people are to be tolerated, so long as they don't upset the status quo. Mary Grace, the stylish lady's daughter, has been listening to their conversation all this time.

As Mrs. Turpin and the stylish lady continue their gossip about people in the waiting room, Mrs. Turpin makes the observation that she is grateful for her place in creation. As she listens to the gospel song in the background, she reflects on her philosophy. She is the type of individual who tries to help everyone in need, regardless of color or status:

If Jesus had said, "You can be high society and have all the money you want and be thin and svelte-like, but you can't be a good woman with it," she would have had to say, "Well, don't make me that then. Make me a good woman and it don't matter else, how fat or how ugly or how poor!" Her heart rose. He had not made her a nigger or white trash or ugly! He had made her herself and given her a little of everything. Jesus thank you! She said. Thank you thank you thank you! Whenever she counted her blessings she felt as buoyant as if she weighed one hundred and twenty five pounds instead of one hundred and eighty. (*Complete Stories* 497)

She comments to the stylish lady that she was very grateful for everything she possessed.

When she cried out "Oh thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!" (*Complete Stories* 499), the book struck her directly on the head, just above her eye.

After throwing the book, Mary Grace lunged, going for Mrs. Turpin's throat. In the confusion that followed, Mary rattled her victim very badly. "Go back to hell where you came from, you old warthog," she whispered. Her voice was low but clear. Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target" (*Complete*

*Stories* 500). The words struck daggers in Mrs. Turpin's heart; Mary Grace had indicted Ruby Turpin with a ugly, vivid image that gripped her imagination.

Critics have analyzed in different ways the event that begins Ruby Turpin on a soulful journey of introspection. Some view the attack as eye-opening justice for a woman who feels superior to other human beings and others as a mystical, ritual journey that reconfigures the nature of Ruby Turpin. These different interpretations are helpful in examining the progressive diminishment operating within convergence as a turning point in Ruby Turpin's life.

Cynthia Seel, like Ruth Johanson, views the attack as the incident that makes Ruby Turpin open her eyes to the illusion that she has lived for so long. Seel believes that Mary Grace is the catalyst that sets Turpin down on "the ritual journey." Seel believes that the ritual rites initiated in the Mysteries at Eleusis serve as a model for analyzing the fiction of Flannery O'Connor. Seel observes that the ritual journey consists "of three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation," and that "such a ritual 'journey' was performed at a point of life crisis—birth, death, marriage, coming of age, and so on"(18). Seel notes:

When Ruby peers into the demeanor of "the raw-complexioned girl" in the doctor's office (an area of healing) she finds "the ugliest face [she] had ever seen any one make," and one that seemed as if it were conveying that she had known and disliked [Ruby] all her life. . . . "Why, girl, I don't even know you," Mrs. Turpin said silently. But Ruby knows Mary Grace more intimately than she has known anyone. The philosophy major who will shortly hurl a book entitled *Human Development* in the direct vicinity above Ruby's left eye, is, in fact, the inverted mirror-image of the erstwhile "philosopher of human advancement," Mrs. Turpin, herself. (17)

This connection here begins Ruby Turpin on her ritual journey through the above mentioned stages. A connection exists between the women, but not in the manner that Seel states. Like Mrs. Chestny's encounter with her double, Ruby Turpin encounters Mary Grace

as her mirror image. When Mrs. Turpin is talking to Mary Grace's mother about clocks, and the tone of her voice provokes a reaction from Mary Grace. The narrator states:

The daughter slammed her book shut. She looked straight in front of her, directly through Mrs. Turpin and on through the yellow curtain and the plate glass window which made the wall behind her. The girl's eyes seemed lit all of a sudden with a peculiar light, an unnatural light like night road signs give. Mrs. Turpin turned her head to see if there was anything going on outside that she could see, but she could not see anything. (*Complete Stories* 492-93)

The narrator describes how Mary Grace looks through Ruby Turpin, as if there has always been some connection between them, and the key to determining this connection is Mrs. Turpin's assessment of Mary Grace when she first views her. When she sees Mary Grace's interaction with her mother, and she responds by feeling "an awful pity for the girl, though she thought it was one thing to be ugly and another to act ugly" (492). Their physical appearance fails to measure up to Southern codes of appearance and conduct. In calling Mrs. Turpin a "warthog," Mary Grace reflects an ugly view of this large woman. Mrs. Turpin senses that her evaluation of Mary Grace has spun back on her head, and in the end she is a "warthog," an ugly, despicable animal. Confronted with this image, Mrs. Turpin, like Mrs. Chestny, is forced to reflect on her diminishment. This process has the power to change her life.

After the attack, the Turpins return to the farm. Ruby changes into more comfortable clothes; she struggles to understand why this young lady had singled her out for insult when there were other less desirable people in the office. The image of the razorback hog unnerved her considerably:

"I am not," she said tearfully, "a wart hog from hell." But the denial had no force. The girl's eyes and her words, even the tone of her voice, low but clear, directed only to her, brooked no repudiation. She had been singled out for the message, though there was trash in the room to whom it might justly have been applied. The full force of this fact struck

her only now. There was a woman there was neglecting her own child but she had been overlooked. The message had been delivered to Ruby Turpin, a respectable, hard working, church-going woman. (*Complete Stories* 502)

In her interpretation of this attack, Dr. Ruth Johansen claims that this encounter, and the ensuing discussion of Ruby with herself, motivates Ruby Turpin to see herself in a new light and respond accordingly. Dr. Johansen claims that O'Connor was drawn to using of "figures who extend grace in bizarre and shocking ways" (93) and,

in order to penetrate the defenses of the proud, to embody the mysterious actions of grace, indeed, to disclose a radically different kind of hope—hope in the miraculous rather than in any human progress, or in impersonal providence—she uses an increasingly insistent presence or agent in these second collection stories who, through his or her grotesqueness or inversion of conventional assumptions, potentially subverts the protagonist's pride and distorted vision so that he or she might see whole. (93)

In "Revelation," she sees Mary Grace as that figure, who forces Ruby Turpin to see herself from a novel point of view. Dr. Johansen notes "that although the reader knows little about Mary Grace that doesn't pass through Mrs. Turpin's consciousness, it appears that O'Connor has exchanged religious obsession for skeptical humanism in this mediating agent" (99). Mary Grace, as the trickster, through what Johansen calls "a bizarre eruption of grace," has forced Mrs. Turpin to reverse her estimate of "her position in the universe." But there is a better reason for Ruby Turpin to engage in self-examination.

Ruby Turpin and Mary Grace are constantly eyeing each other and initiating thoughts about each other verbally, non-verbally, or through interior monologue. What draws these two women together is their diminishments and the activities that obfuscate the awareness of their shortcomings, Mrs. Turpin would be willing to be a "classy black woman," instead of white trash, so that Jesus could see her unhesitating sacrifice for him, while Mary Grace uses superior knowledge and intellect to compensate for her grubby appearance. The connection

strengthens between the two women when Ruby Turpin gazes at Mary Grace and suddenly realizes how “ugly” she is. Cynthia Seel is correct about a bond existing between the two women; Mary Grace is a mirror for Ruby Turpin, but Mary Grace does not initiate Ruby’s spiritual journey. With the words, “Go back to hell where you came from, you warthog,” Mary Grace has shattered the carefully constructed framework that conferred superiority on Ruby Turpin. She assumed that proper beliefs and conduct was all sufficient to convince Jesus of her righteousness, but her failure to realize the equality and uniqueness of all people in this community left her failing to make the grade. Ruby Turpin has come face to face with the “ugliness” of her judgments. When she looks down on the blacks and white trash, she is the warthog, who serves no useful purpose and possesses no special value. Now Ruby Turpin is open to new revelations that this convergence shows her, and she will be part of the journey towards a new and more gracious community.

After their rest, she and Claud realized it was time to do the afternoon chores; he needed to pick up the Negroes and then tend to the pigs. Upon getting up from the bed, Claud drove off to get the Negroes. Ruby did not move until she heard the truck coming back and began performing her usual afternoon ritual of putting ice cubes into a bucket and then filling it with water so that the Negroes had something to drink. When the blacks notice her injury and evince empathy, she tells them what happened:

“We were in town at the doctor’s office for where the cow kicked Mr. Turpin,” Mrs. Turpin said in a flat tone that indicated they could leave off their foolishness. “And there was this girl there. A big fat girl with her face all broke out. I could look at that girl and tell she was peculiar but I couldn’t tell how. And me and her mama was just talking and going along and all of a sudden WHAM! She throws this big book she was reading at me and. . . .” (*Complete Stories* 504)

After hearing about the attack, the Negroes express “concern” over the attack on Mrs. Turpin and speculate that the young lady was sick in committing such an act. Mrs. Turpin’s injury causes her to seek solace and comfort from a community she had looked down on all her life. When she relates to them the real reason for her being upset, her listeners patronize her with bogus sympathy. Mrs. Turpin stated, “She said,” she began again and finished this time with a fierce rush of breath, “that I was an old wart hog from hell” (*Complete Stories* 505). Seeking honest compassion, she receives conventional responses:

“She belong in the ’sylum,” the old woman said emphatically. “You the sweetest lady I know.” “She pretty too,” the other two said. “Stout as she can be and sweet. Jesus’ satisfied with her!” “Deed he is,” the old lady declared. (*Complete Stories* 505)

Mrs. Turpin immediately recognized the sympathy for what it was; she thought to herself, “Idiots! You could never say anything intelligent to a nigger. You could talk at them but not with them” (*Complete Stories* 505). This false flattery only increases her anger at the situation. Suddenly, community appears more important in ways that just a few hours ago she would not have noticed. A woman who felt that “niggers” and “white trash” did not belong to proper society seeks solace from them.

After taking care of the Negroes, and still seething with anger, she “marched into the front of the house and out the side door and started down the road to the pig parlor. She had the look of a woman going single-handed, weaponless, into battle” (*Complete Stories* 505). She marches down to the pig parlor, where Claud is hosing down the pigs. She jerks the hose away from him and commands him to take the Negroes home. When she is sure that Claud was out of earshot, “she turned back and seemed to gather herself up. Her shoulders rose and she drew in her breath” (*Complete Stories* 506). In her fury, she confronts God:

“What do you send me a message like that for?” she said in a low fierce voice, barely above a whisper but with the force of a shout in its concentrated fury. “How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from Hell too? Her free fist was knotted and with the other gripped the hose, blindly pointing the stream of water in and out of the eye of the old sow whose outraged squeal she did not hear.” (*Complete Stories* 506)

Early this morning, Ruby Turpin was the happy immobilist who viewed life as she could wish it to be; now, all of a sudden, the moorings she considered important have been pulled away and nothing appears to give her comfort. And, ironically, there she sits defenseless before God in a pig parlor.

In a setting that evidences the concreteness of reality in which great insights take place, Flannery O'Connor places Ruby Turpin in the pig parlor. In the muck and mire of this place, Ruby Turpin comes to terms with the reality of her spiritual condition. In this setting the image of her diminishment intensifies; it clarifies for her how different her self-assessment in contrast to the reality unfolding before her. Her illusion of superiority in her faith and works has been destroyed by Mary Grace's words.

“Warthog” encapsulates the ugliness of her attitudes toward her community and her acknowledgment of this diminishment opens a space for a confrontation with God, an opportunity to acknowledge an authenticity, heretofore undiscovered. An idea from Chardin gave Flannery comfort, that progressive diminishment can open up the opportunity to discover an authentic self by God's grace, is one of the most powerful lessons that she learned from her struggle with lupus.

In that pig parlor, Ruby Turpin's initial response to these events is what one would expect. She resented the “warthog” description and complained bitterly to God, “It's no trash around here, black or white, that I haven't given to. And break my back to the bone every day working. And do for the church” (*Complete Stories* 507). She angrily, boldly stated:

“If you like trash better, go get yourself some trash then,” she railed. “You could have made me trash. Or a nigger. If trash is what you wanted why didn’t you make me trash?” She shook her fist with the hose in it and a watery snake appeared momentarily in the air. “I could quit working and take it easy and be filthy,” she growled. “Lounge about the sidewalks all day drinking root beer. Dip snuff and spit in every puddle and have it all over my face. I could be nasty. (*Complete Stories* 507)

No matter how hard she attempts to justify herself and her actions, she cannot shake the picture of herself as a warthog. In that pig pen she utters one final diatribe against God, “Go on,” she yelled, “call me a hog! Call me a wart hog from hell. Put the bottom rail on top. There’ll still be a top and bottom!” (*Complete Stories* 507). She believes that nothing will ever change until she receives “some abysmal life-giving knowledge”; as she was looking off into the distance, she noticed a purple streak in the sky leading into the distance like an extension of a highway. As she looked at it, “she saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire” (*Complete Stories* 508). The bridge was swinging upwards toward a point in the sky. And on that bridge were people moving in one big sympathetic movement towards a grand celestial gathering. Instead of the old status quo, new wrinkles in the social and ethnic makeup of the chosen were being developed. As Ruby Turpin continues to watch, she sees:

there were whole companies of white trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (*Complete Stories* 508)

Mrs. Turpin recognizes an old biblical truth presented in a new context; those individuals on the bottom of the scale shall be first and the first shall be last. Proper belief

and proper behavior are not enough in this new milieu. The acknowledgment of the value of all human beings must be accepted and implemented also. Ruby's vision represents the alterations in her societal environment out of her control that are progressing towards inclusivity. Convergence creates a growing equality, unity, and love among people. Just as in "The Lame Shall Enter First," an attraction from above is drawing the character towards a new understanding. The vision in this short story graphically symbolizes Chardin's words of how humanity moves from "a push from behind" towards "an attraction from above."

This convergence is causing a social displacement of a status quo that Mrs. Turpin assumed would never change. In this vision, from the middle of a pigpen, it is the freaks, lunatics, and despised Negroes who are moving in the vanguard. While this vision is painful, Ruby Turpin is convinced by its immediacy.

The pigpen, as metaphor, suggests the primordial ooze out of which humans developed. In contrast to Ruby Turpin who argues with God about community alterations, the mother sow and her piglets are simply interested in getting hosed down and fed for the night. Ruby Turpin is not just content to satisfy her needs, she also wants to reflect on the awful new truths she has discovered about herself. In coming up with the revelation about equality, Ruby reflects the process of evolutionary development. She is part of a converging environment that is changing society and she realizes that these alterations are going to bring uncomfortable change. In that muddy pig sty, Ruby Turpin experiences what the term "warthog" connotes; her physical condition seems representative of her entire life and she has discovered ugly features about herself.

As Leon Driskell and Joan Brittain point out, O'Connor was looking for the spiritual in the physical; they note "that by 1961 Miss O'Connor had a name for that crossroads; she

had begun to read the works of Teilhard de Chardin and must have recognized that his 'point omega' was precisely the goal toward which she, as Christian and writer, was moving" (136).

They observe:

In her art she sought to provide a basis of communion, in time and space which shared the history of the South and of mankind, chiefly as recorded in the Old and New Testament; furthermore, with no lessening of her faith in a personal redemption, she had found in Teilhard a richer version. His work, arising from experimental science, affirmed her belief in an evolving universe—a universe in which the constant (even if slow) movement is upward toward a point of universal convergence. (136)

They both conclude that "for both Teilhard and Miss O'Connor such a convergence coincides with another mystical transformation: the world made one and perfectly expressive of the risen Christ" (137).

This is the effect of melding Ruland's methodology and Chardin's progressive diminishment. Other critics focus on the struggle of Ruby Turpin with the words of Mary Grace, but don't explain why Ruby would even care. She is forced to see herself, a "warthog" who is content with the status quo of her environment, but is forced to recognize a new definition of an evolving community, that promotes political, social and economic equality. In Teilhard's view, this process will continue, even if it is not recognized, and even if it is opposed. Such engagement is not an option but an ultimate goal, and this imperative has captured Flannery O'Connor's imagination in the down-home details of Ruby Turpin's experience.

One of the characteristics of these last three stories is how progressive diminishment operating in convergence more and more prominently animates the literary elements (e.g., narrator, action, and characters) of these short stories. Flannery O'Connor weaves the presence of these physical/psychological abnormalities into the plot of the story as part and

parcel of causing the characters and readers to understand God's presence that has evolved out of her struggle with lupus. Ruby Turpin with her obesity, O.E. Parker ("Parker's Back") with his tattoos, and T.C. Tanner ("Judgement Day") with old age infirmities, acknowledge and wrestle with these abnormalities in their actions and conversations throughout these stories. The influence of these abnormalities appear stronger in these last three stories than in the other stories in the collection. With the impending conclusion of her life, Flannery O'Connor found in Teilhard de Chardin inspiration for her concluding stories.

## CHAPTER VIII

### PARKER'S BACK

According to Irwin Howard Streight and Karl-Heinz Westarp, O'Connor completed this short story on her deathbed in July/August 1964. Westarp notes, "It is important to remember that Flannery's work on "Parker's Back" (PB) took place in two phases with an intermittent period of more than three years. The story is first mentioned in December 1960, when she had been reading *The Divine Milieu*" (Teilhard's Impact 99). She resumed work on it in the last three months of her life, and because of the urgency for feedback from "A" and Caroline Gordon, determined "to get this story right because it contains the epitome of O'Connor's Christian world view, which is essentially Teilhardian" (Westarp 100). In looking at her last stories, O'Connor uses Teilhard's view of progressive diminishment within a convergent environment to illustrate family relations in "Parker's Back" and race relations in "Judgement Day."

At the end of her life, Flannery O'Connor's illness had a spiritual quality to it; in the discomfort and agitation of the disease, she reflected upon its presence in her life. She understood that diminishment was a commonality among humans, and that it represented a form of suffering that individuals sometimes did not deserve. She reflects on diminishment in the life that society would not ordinarily value. O.E. Parker's tattoos represent for O'Connor the struggle with a debilitating disease that she endured up to the end of her life. The conflict between O.E. Parker and his wife, Sarah Ruth, portrays symbolically O'Connor's progress

from perceiving God through doctrinal and abstract thought in her early childhood and young adulthood to discerning God through her physicality and observation in the last five years of her life. Throughout her early life, O'Connor learned about God through the Baltimore Catechism in parochial school, attending church services and participating in religious rituals with her family, at the end of her life, through her reading of Chardin, working on the writing project about Mary Ann Long, and reflecting on her illness.

In "Parker's Back" O.E. Parker was an itinerant farmer who delivered bushels of apples to the isolated countryside. One day when his truck broke down, he saw a woman watching him. To bring her out, he acted as though he had hurt his hand and started cussing; he was surprised by the broom that hit him up the side of his head and the voice that demanded he stop cussing. Sarah Ruth was to be his wife and this introduction did not bode well for their marriage.

The relationship between these two was sorry in multiple ways. For instance, there was no physical attraction between them:

Parker's wife was sitting on the front porch, snapping beans. Parker was sitting on the step, some distance away, watching her sullenly. She was plain, plain. The skin on her face was thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion and her eyes were gray and sharp like the points of two ice picks. Parker understood why he had married her—he couldn't understand why he stayed with her. (*Complete Stories* 510)

Sarah Ruth was plain to look at and never wore any makeup, and she and O.E. espoused different moral values. To O.E. Parker, it seemed that "in addition to her other bad qualities, she was forever sniffing up sin. She did not smoke or dip, drink whiskey, use bad language or paint her face, and God knew some paint could improve it" (*Complete Stories* 510). In contrast, Parker delved into various subjects, for however long they kept his attention. He dropped out of school at sixteen because he could; he worked at a garage for a while, then

went to a tech school for a few months, then joined the Navy after running away from home. The Navy was the only stable thing in his life, until he went AWOL.

Nor was O.E. Parker was a stable figure in his marriage. While he deemed himself an accurate observer of his wife's problems, he could not exactly rate himself a model husband. He barely managed to produce enough income for the two of them to live on, sporadically working on a farm owned by a seventy-year old woman. This work was seasonal and without any type of benefits. Even at that, his employer

looked at him the same way she looked at her old tractor—as if she had to put up with it because it was all she had. The tractor had broken down the second day Parker was on it and she had set him at once to cutting bushes, saying out of the side of her mouth to the nigger, “Everything he touches, he breaks.” (*Complete Stories* 511)

O.E. Parker needed constant badgering from either his employer or wife to keep focused on the task at hand, a hallmark of O.E. Parker's life. Parker could never focus long enough to see a project through; his attention span was worse than that of a child. He would act on a whim if the mood moved him. He often confused whim with sound judgment.

O.E. Parker was unique in a way that confused Sarah Ruth. When she first met him, she noticed some drawings on his arms. When she inquired what they were, he mentioned that they were tattoos. All his life Parker was fascinated by tattoos:

Parker was fourteen when he saw a man in a fair, tattooed from head to foot. Except for the loins which were girded with a panther's hide, the man's skin was patterned in what seemed from Parker's distance—he was near the back of the tent, standing on a bench—a single intricate design of color. The man, who was sturdy, moved about on the platform, flexing his muscles so that the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own. Parker was filled with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes. (*Complete Stories* 513)

Parker felt the tattoos marked him as unique among human beings; they were a feature he thought would endow him with knowledge and substance. In looking at that

tattooist in the circus, "Parker had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself. Until he saw the man at the fair, it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed. Even then it did not enter his head, but a peculiar unease settled in him" (*Complete Stories* 513).

Sarah Ruth and O.E. Parker exemplify a dysfunctional couple. Serendipitous circumstances drove them together and the two of them went along with the results. Nowhere is that dysfunction exhibited more clearly than in their mindsets about Parker's tattoos. Sarah Ruth had been raised in a form of Pentecostalism that viewed the flesh as totally evil. When O.E. showed her his tattoos, she would respond that such manifestations were "vanities of vanities." Westarp notes that in O'Connor's earlier drafts, Sarah's name was "Flowers," but in a late fragment she changed it to the final Cates; Westarp takes "this to be an abbreviation for the Medieval groups of 'Cathari'—the clean ones—who strict dualism forbade them to believe that Christ had really become man" (101). In contrast, O.E. saw his tattoos as an entrance to something beyond himself. Instead of representing idolatry, the tattoos represented a way to discover transcendence, "God," as noted by the fact that the tattoos made him wonder about himself and the world. For Flannery O'Connor, this relationship represents the transformation triggered by the writings of Teilhard de Chardin, a movement from understanding God primarily through doctrinal pronouncements to understanding God through the physical matter of the evolutionary process. George Kilcourse alludes to this shift in her life when he mentions the line enunciated by Sarah Ruth at the end of the story, "He [God] don't look. . . He's a spirit;" Kilcourse focuses on how "O'Connor explains this crucial symbolic action in a letter to 'A' one week before her death: 'Sarah Ruth was the heretic—the notion that you can worship in total spirit'" (291). As her illness tightened its grip on her life and moved her

toward death, she realized that his thoughts in *The Divine Milieu*, particularly on progressive diminishment, depicted a reality that doctrinal pronouncements alone could not supply. She fleshes out this discovery through the actions of O.E. Parker.

O.E. Parker felt instinctively that the tattoos were the right thing for him. According to William Fahey, writing in *Renascence*, Parker's application of the tattoos is his search for some greater value, a process that Fahey describes as Parker being "haunted by the absolute" (164). And in contrast to other characters in this collection, progressive diminishment at length directs Parker towards this sense of otherness. In Parker's life this process has continued for years beginning with his experience in the circus. Parker's fascination with tattoos then is similar to O'Connor's reflection on her illness. The coloring on his body sets him off from his neighbor and makes him exceptional. His tattoo can be a burden out of the ordinary, a curiosity like a disfigurement, like O'Connor's lupus. Without rationalizing his submission to an inscribed body, he has an experience that Teilhard calls hollowing out, making room for God. The tattoos become the physical stirrings in Parker that point him to things greater than himself; Parker is haunted by a restlessness that prompts a search for identity. The tattoos bring Parker gratification at first, but these feelings eventually wear off; and in the long-term they became a diminishment in that he struggled with their effect on his appearance, and they became a touchstone for understanding his life.

For Parker these physical alternations were a source of invisible influences. Kleinman suggests that physical manifestations of sickness or enervation create scenarios of understanding that help the individual cope with that sickness. Sometimes that scenario develops a sense or awareness beyond physicality. Acquiring tattoos gives O.E. Parker access to a transcendence that he "feels" gives stability to his life; in looking at Sarah Ruth,

he feels entrapped in an environment that offers no hope. His tattoos offered him a bond to something beyond himself, not by virtue of an intellectual awakening but a visceral feeling. The lupus and the tattoos serve as markers that point towards the working of God in the biosphere. O'Connor states in her essays the goal of her writing:

The only conscience I have to examine in this matter is my own, and when I look at stories I have written I find that they are, for the most part, about people who are poor, who are afflicted in both mind and body, who have little—or at best a distorted—sense of spiritual purpose, and whose actions do not apparently give the reader a great assurance of the joy of life. I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that. (*Mystery and Manners* 32)

In the last five years of her life she is experiencing a new understanding insight of Christ's redemptive plan; for most of her early life, she depended on her knowledge of doctrinal teaching. Chardin shows a way that complements and buttresses her outlook at this time. Chardin explains this way of understanding Christ's redemption in *The Divine Milieu*:

We shall then see with a wave of joy that the divine omnipresence translates itself within our universe by the network of the organising forces of the total Christ. God exerts pressure, in us and upon us—through the intermediary of all the powers of heaven, earth and hell—only in the act of forming and consummating Christ who saves and suranimates the world. And since, in the course of this operation, Christ himself does not act as a dead or passive point of convergence, but as a centre of radiation for the energies which lead the universe back to God through his humanity, the layers of divine action finally come to us impregnated with his organic energies. (123)

This influence, given O'Connor's philosophical state of mind at this time, is confirmed when in a letter to Father John McCown (March 21, 1964), she emphasizes the importance of Teilhard's ideas: "If they are good, they are dangerous" (*Habit of Being* 571). Sarah Gordon interprets the above statement by O'Connor as "the obedient imagination," "intended to suggest something of an oxymoron—the paradox by which the devout Catholic writer creates and explores fictive worlds and yet works within the limits of faithful

obedience to the hierarchical church" (245). Gordon implies that official Roman Catholic teaching guided O'Connor's theories of writing, and further suggests "a kind of tension that necessarily comes from that paradox; the imagination, by definition free-ranging and risk-taking, is reined in by the teaching and guidance of the Church" (Ibid.). This tension may exist, but it is not the result of her "obedience." Rather, she "takes risks" because Teilhard's evolutionary views have modified the conservative Catholic beliefs of her past. They suggest to O'Connor a new reality: the evolutionary convergence of the world toward a universal unity, Point Omega, a life centered in a cosmic Christ. Gordon is correct that this story "seems to anticipate a new direction and a fuller acceptance of that love which, in poet Richard Wilbur's words, 'call us to the things of this world'" (252). Clearly, that new direction stems from the vigor supplied by Chardin, and through his influence, she renewed her commitment to understanding Christ's redemptive act in the midst of the diminishment effected by her illness.

For O.E. Parker, when he feels intensely restless, the tattoos provide relief, but it is only temporary. After a while he becomes extremely dissatisfied with them. Parker senses if he obtains the right tattoo, he will achieve a lasting sense of satisfaction. The impetus for this search comes from the constant nagging of Sarah Ruth, who is digging her claws into him for his shortcomings.

Over the years, Parker has displayed a love/hate relationship with these tattoos; he cannot determine just what they represent. Finally, his dissatisfaction with them grows to the point that they functioned like an illness. "His dissatisfaction, from being chronic and latent, had suddenly become acute and raged in him. It was as if the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a

raging warfare" (*Complete Stories* 514). The tattoos represent internal chaos and war; and so in effect, they mimic the symptoms of O'Connor's disease. Lupus can be dormant for a long time, and then all of a sudden, rage and attack the autoimmune system. A recent news article describes this characteristic:

Lupus is a disease with many faces. In one person, it might bring on a rash. In another, it might cause joint pain...this much is constant: It is an autoimmune disease, meaning that the immune system, which normally protects the body, turns against it, forming antibodies that attack healthy tissues and organs. (Radford, *Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*, 2D)

So tattoos become for O.E. Parker as lupus for her, a considerable source of diminishment. What he thought would promote esteem and pleasure has degenerated into a hapless depression.

Since the tattoos strictly speaking are not physical abnormalities, but alterations which affect O.E.'s psyche, they serve as a magnet, attracting O.E. towards a goal he cannot feel or touch, but as real as breathing. As such, they reflect the relation of matter and spirit. As Teilhard points out, psychic and spirit emerge from the material development of the universe, and, in this view, God is inside the whole evolutionary process—from inorganic, to biological, to noetic—the attractive force directing evolution to its final end through in-folding and convergence. Progressive diminishment within convergence sharpens the focus on the spirit emerging spontaneously from the material and in harmony with it. Westarp suggests that the tattoos symbolically represent the convergence operative in the story. Westarp focuses on the order in which Parker has put the tattoos on him. Westarp observes:

At one point in the story Parker sums up: 'He had stopped having lifeless ones like anchors and crossed rifles. He had a tiger and a panther on each shoulder, a cobra coiled about a torch on his chest, hawks on his thighs, Elizabeth II and Philip over where his stomach and liver were respectively.' Here we have precisely the same [evolutionary] grouping that we find in Teilhard's *The Phenomenon of Man*. (103)

The early tattoos are lifeless and simple objects. Then, the shape of the tattoos start to evolve into animals. Finally, according to Westarp, the crown of the evolutionary is presented—the human. Sarah Gordon observes, “As other commentators have observed, Parker’s tattoos begin with representation of the inanimate, move to the animate and human, and end with the divine—in the figure of Christ imprinted (one wants to say ‘impressed’) upon his back” (248). The operation of convergence is more than symbolic. Convergence occurs in the text because the tattoos, like lupus in O’Connor’s life, cause the affected individual to reflect upon the consequences of such manifestations. The tattoos force Parker to find an answer to the unrest in his life; he cannot be content with the status quo. Physical things carry a psychic thrust tinge because these images lead him to reflect upon the change around him.

O.E. Parker and his wife also illustrate O’Connor’s view of the body-spirit relationship. The story implies what God is not; Sarah Ruth denies that Christ is a human being, “the union of flesh and spirit, the influence of the past on the presence, and the continuing revelation of the divine in the human” (Johansen 92). Dr. Ruth Johansen points to negativity in the behavior of Sarah Ruth, “Our heresy is believing in a partial reality that separates a vaporous and ineffectual spirituality from the living, breathing, material world” (Johansen 92). O.E. Parker experiences “God” primarily inscribed in the physical; he searches for a way to conceptualize this concept and feels that a tattoo with a religious theme will accomplish two things: clarify this feeling and placate his wife.

O.E. Parker on some days felt that he had had enough of this so-called marriage. When he and Sarah settled into a routine, and it became clear that “marriage did not change

Sarah Ruth a jot and it made Parker gloomier than ever" (*Complete Stories* 518), he determined that he would leave and never come back. Over the weeks that followed their marriage, he would argue with himself about leaving, but at the end of each night he would convince himself to stay. In truth, he probably wanted to persuade her to change, but being a mercurial person, he could never really figure out why he stayed.

"He was already losing flesh—Sarah Ruth just threw food in the pot and let it boil. Not knowing for certain why he continued to stay with a woman who was both ugly and pregnant and no cook made him generally nervous and irritable, and he developed a little tic in the side of his face" (*Complete Stories* 519).

Here was O.E. Parker between a rock and a hard place; he could not bear being around her and yet he could not leave her. He set out to find a way to resolve his dilemma. And then he came up with putting a tattoo on his back.

He thought of a way to obtain Sarah Ruth's approval; the harder he thought, the more the idea grew:

Dissatisfaction began to grow so great in Parker that there was no containing it outside a tattoo. It had to be his back. There was not help for it. A dim half-formed inspiration began to work in his mind. He visualized having a tattoo put there that Sarah Ruth would not be able to resist—a religious subject. He thought he thought of an open book with HOLY BIBLE tattooed under it and an actual verse printed on the page. . . . He needed something better even than the Bible! (*Complete Stories* 519)

Putting a tattoo on his back, the last part of his body to remain untouched, would be perfect for Sarah Ruth to admire. He couldn't be sure of what precisely should go there, but he was sure this would be the correct plan of action. He thought that Sarah Ruth would finally love his tattoo and him, if the tattoo was religious. He now was waiting for a sign to motivate him.

One day he was driving the tractor around a field. The sun was blazing glowing down and blinding him. The older lady he was working for had warned him about the tree in the middle of the field; engrossed in thought, O.E. forgot about the warning and all at once he

saw the tree reaching out to grasp him. A ferocious thud propelled him into the air, and he heard himself yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, "GOD ABOVE!" He landed on his back while the tractor crashed upside down into the tree and burst into flames. The first thing Parker saw were his shoes, quickly eaten by the fire; one was caught under the tractor, the other was some distance away, burning by itself. (*Complete Stories* 520)

When O.E. Parker hit the ground and realized he had escaped, he "did not allow himself to think on the way to the city. He only knew that there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and that there was nothing he could do about it" (*Complete Stories* 521). Westarp states that "the ingredients of this episode are clearly reminiscent of the burning bush episode in which Jahweh revealed himself to Moses, who was ordered to take off his shoes for the place on which he stood was holy ground" (105). This event represents the moment when progressive diminishment crystallizes the experience of feeling the presence of God in the inside and outside forces of life. With his annunciation of "GOD ABOVE," O.E. Parker finds the certainty he has desperately searched for; this accident stimulates him to intensify that search. Again, as in other stories, the inciting incident occurs in ordinary circumstances, by fits and starts. O.E. Parker has been progressing toward a point to which this convergence is taking him, an opportunity (good or bad) to encounter God's imminent presence. For O'Connor the sun affects her lupus and her skin breaks out. As Dorothy Tuck McFarland notes of O'Connor's style, "In O'Connor's view, however, the natural world is the medium of divine revelation" (65). This Teilhardian world view, underpins O.E. Parker's search for the appropriate tattoo.

This sign also provided the impetus to please Sarah Ruth. O.E. Parker could leave his wife and never return, but for reasons he cannot articulate, it is important that he preserve the unity of their marriage. The right kind of tattoo would do it.

O.E. Parker arrived in the city and went to the tattoo parlor he had frequented in the past. He demanded that the tattoo artist show him all his pictures of God. The artist asked, "Who are you interested in?" "Saints, angels, Christ's, or what?" "God," Parker said. "Father, Son, or Spirit?" "Just God," Parker said impatiently. "Christ. I don't care. Just so long it's God." (*Complete Stories* 521-22)

Parker went through the book and viewed all of the representations. He viewed many pictures, "Some he recognized—The Good Shepherd, Forbid Them Not, The Smiling Jesus, Jesus The Physician's Friend," but none of these pictures held his attention. Parker continued turning the page until he came up on some pictures that captured his fancy:

One showed a gaunt green dead face streaked with blood. One was yellow with sagging purple eyes. Parker's heart began to beat faster and faster until it appeared to be roaring inside him like a great generator. He flipped the pages quickly, feeling that when he reached the one ordained, a sign would come. He continued to flip through until he had almost reached the front of the book. On one of the pages a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly. Parker sped on, then stopped. His heart too appeared to cut off; there was absolute silence. It said as plainly as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK. (*Complete Stories* 522)

Parker could not get away from the eyes in that face. "Parker returned to the picture—the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all demanding eyes. He sat there trembling; his heart began slowly to beat again as if it were being brought to life by a subtle power" (*Complete Stories* 522). O.E. Parker felt this was the picture which would satisfy Sarah Ruth. When the artist attempted to change his mind, "No, No!" Parker said. "Trace it now or gimme my money back," and his eyes blared as if he was ready for a fight"

(*Complete Stories*\_523). On Parker's body, the tattoo projects a sense of the holy; this representation guides Parker in his search for "meaning." In a letter (June 30, 1963) to Janet McKane, O'Connor mentions a new book on Chardin, and writes that "perhaps joy is the outgrowth of suffering in a special way" (*Habit of Being* 527). This "unique way" may well reflect the working of the tattoo in O.E. Parker's life.

Robert Brinkmeyer suggests a possible influence on O'Connor was the extreme Yahwehism practiced by some ancient Hebrew prophets. These individuals separated themselves from society and wore unique garments. In this way they reminded themselves to remain focused on God. For Parker, the Byzantine Christ becomes a remedy for the convulsive restlessness in his life; the Pantocrator, particularly the eyes, fascinate Parker. As he is lying on his cot at the Haven of Lights Christian Mission, he thinks about Sarah Ruth and the Pantocrator and the difference in their eyes, "Her eyes [Sarah] appeared soft and dilatory compared with the eyes in the book, for even though he could not summon up the exact look of those eyes, he could still feel their penetration. He felt as though, under their gaze, he was as transparent as the wing of a fly" (*Complete Stories* 524). At this point in his life, that face and those eyes would be the guiding force in his life.

O.E.'s fascination with the tattoo had intrigued the artist. He could not understand why anyone would want such a picture on his back. After Parker arrived the next morning, "The artist began where he left off. 'One thing I want to know,' he said presently as he worked on Parker's back, 'Why do you want this on you? Have you gone and got religion? Are you saved?' he asked in a mocking voice" (*Complete Stories* 524). O.E. Parker insisted that salvation was not the reason, but when the artist continued with "Then why," Parker finally owned up:

“I married this woman that’s saved,” Parker said. “I never should have done it. I ought to leave her. She’s done gone and got pregnant.” “That’s too bad,” the artist said. “Then it’s her making you have this tattoo.” “Naw,” Parker said, “she don’t know nothing about it. It’s a surprise to her.” “You think she’ll like it and lay off you a while?” “She can’t hep herself,” Parker said. “She can’t say she don’t like the looks of God.” He decided he had told the artist enough of his business. Artists were all right in their place but he didn’t like them poking their noses into the affairs of regular people. (*Complete Stories* 525)

O.E. Parker is not sure how Sarah Ruth would respond to the new tattoo. He imagined numerous reactions to the Pancrator, to the burning tree and his “empty shoes burning beneath it.” When he contemplated the finished product, his reaction was constant, the eyes fixate him—“still, straight, all-demanding, enclosed in silence” (*Complete Stories* 525-26). Parker began the long trek home.

Before O.E. Parker left town to head back home towards Sarah Ruth, he stopped at one of his former local haunts for a beer. As soon as he walked in, one of his old comrades came up and slapped him on the back, causing O.E. to wince in pain. When O.E. complained, the guy yelled, “What you got this time?”. . .and then yelled to a few at the slot machines in back, “O.E.’s got him another tattoo” (*Complete Stories* 526). O.E. Parker refused to let them look at it, so they wrestled the shirt off his back; when the face of the Byzantine Christ appeared, they were thunderstruck:

Finally someone said, “Christ!” Then they all broke into noise at once. Parker turned around, an uncertain grin on his face. “Leave it to O.E.!” the man in the checkered shirt said. “That boy’s a real card!” “Maybe he’s gone and got religion,” someone yelled. “Not on your life,” Parker said. “O.E.’s got religion and is witnessing for Jesus, ain’t you O.E.?” a little man with a piece of cigar in his mouth said wryly. “An original way to do it if ever I saw one.” (*Complete Stories* 526)

Parker does not appreciate the insinuation behind “gone and got religion” crack; the type of religion practiced by Sarah Ruth and his mother never sat well with Parker. He followed his feelings in decision-making. He rejects the religion of Sarah Ruth and his mother, but

adheres to his experience with the Christ of the tattoo, as evidenced after the fight at the bar. After an exchange of insults between Parker and some of the patrons, and a fight broke out, Parker was unceremoniously dumped outside. He wandered around to the back alley and did something totally out of character for him; he “sat there for a long time on the ground in the alley examining his soul. He saw it as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed” (*Complete Stories* 527). The apparition of the eyes was like all the other events that had dominated his life—the sight of the tattooed man at the fair, joining the navy, and marrying Sarah Ruth—“throughout his life, grumbling and sometimes cursing, often afraid, once in rapture, Parker had obeyed whatever instinct of this kind had come to him” (*Complete Stories* 527). He must follow the path in front of him. And for O.E. Parker, that path led to only one ending—returning to Sarah Ruth.

He wanted to return because he thought this tattoo would please Sarah Ruth. He had received a “sign” from God about how he could please her, and he was not about to pass up such a chance. To O.E. Parker, he felt that this religious tattoo on his back would bridge the differences between him and Sarah Ruth. This image of God would convince her of his heartfelt attempt at belief, perhaps not in the way she envisioned, but in a sincere, honest, fashion. Perhaps O.E. Parker does not have all the pieces in place, but something pulls him in that direction.

The thought of her led him back to his truck, “She would clear up the rest of it, and she would at least be pleased. It seemed to him that, all along, that was what he wanted, to please her” (*Complete Stories* 527). He hopped into the truck and began driving home; “that his head was almost clear of liquor and he observed that his dissatisfaction was gone, but he

felt not quite like himself. It was as if he were himself but a stranger to himself, driving into a new country though everything he saw was familiar to him, even at night" (*Complete Stories* 527).

The prospect for Sarah's accepting the Pancrator are obviously dim—she lacks any imagination—religion or otherwise. O.E., on the other hand, only deals in images. On imagination and interpretation, Flannery remarks that Teilhard de Chardin is a fellow laborer with poets because his worldview "is a scientific expression of what the poet attempts to do: penetrate matter until spirit is revealed in it" (*The American Scholar* 618). George Kilcourse points out that "the image of Christ the Pantocrator, traditionally seated above the rainbow (symbolic of God's love for the whole of creation), penetrates Parker's life with Teilhard's vision of all things converging in Christ" (291). Eventually, at the end of the story, as Parker weeps over Sarah Ruth's rejection of his efforts, Teilhard's vision of converging in Christ does penetrate him, even though he may never understand or articulate it. In the way that these last three stories are constructed, O'Connor offers the reader an understanding of how this evolutionary process points towards God. As much as one relies upon doctrinal statements to define God, it is in the midst of progressive diminishment and in understanding it that the reader can also discover this presence and acknowledges it.

O.E. Parker continued his drive home and when he arrived home, he slammed the car door to let Sarah Ruth know he was there. He walked up to the door and attempted to enter, but Sarah Ruth had placed the back of a chair against the unlocked door to keep him out, "Quit fooling," Parker pleaded. "You ain't got any business doing me this way. It's me, old O.E., I'm back. You ain't afraid of me." (*Complete Stories* 528) Sarah continued to hesitate, but eventually let him in. When O.E. finally got in, she informed him about the conversation

with the older woman about the tractor. Such events were no longer important to Obadiah. He only wanted to show her his new tattoo. When he started to turn on the kerosene lantern, she protested vehemently. He responded:

“Shut your mouth,” he said quietly. “Look at this and then I don’t want to hear no more out of you.” He removed the shirt and turned his back to her. “Another picture,” Sarah Ruth growled. “I might have known you was off after putting some more trash on yourself.” Sarah Ruth adamantly denied any acquaintance with the image there and, when Parker insisted that it was God, she declared that God does not look like that. He moaned in despair and tries again; she doesn’t know how he looks, she hasn’t seen him. “What do you know how he looks?” Parker moaned. “You ain’t seen him.” “He don’t *look*,” Sarah Ruth said. “He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face.” “Aw listen,” Parker groaned, “this is just a picture of him.” “Idolatry!” Sarah Ruth screamed. “Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don’t want no idolater in this house!” and she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it. (*Complete Stories* 529)

O.E. Parker could not believe his wife’s response; he had put a “God” on his back and so God was with him now. Parker has been “hollowed out. This painful reception that provokes two beatings for very different reasons confirms the intuition about the reality of God in him. Sarah Ruth, on the other hand, excludes God from any incarnation in the cosmos. God “is a spirit” and cannot be seen or touched; human beings in no way can find God through their senses, and that representation of such an experience is idolatrous. Flannery O’Connor’s struggle with lupus resonates in the development of O.E.’s persona

Finally, O.E. Parker was forced out of the house by the beating he has taken from Sarah Ruth. He was convinced that putting the tattoo of the Byzantine Christ on his back would seal his bond with Sarah Ruth; instead of drawing her closer, the tattoo ruptured it decisively. As Sarah Ruth noted, she can stand lies and vanity, but idolatry is an unforgivable act. There simply can be no bond between two people who view “God” in such opposite ways. O.E. Parker has demonstrated his sincerity in trying to please his wife, but his efforts

to please her failed miserably. Stricken, he leaves the house and leans up against the tree just outside. He begins weeping. Christ wept over Jerusalem because of its refusal to recognize his concern for his people. O'Connor's comment to Father McCown four months before her death is indicative of the way Chardin's vision affected her. Leon Driskell sees O.E. Parker at this point as "being incorporated in Christ—or in God" (123), "and in the final beating, Christ suffers in him and he in Christ as the welts form on the tattooed face" (Ibid.). As Flannery wrestled with lupus to the end, in her stories she recognized a new dimension of her suffering and a new way of coping with it. God, as presented in Teilhard's work and reflected in O'Connor's last stories, is a dynamic, realistic, human presence within the evolutionary universe.

CHAPTER IX  
JUDGEMENT DAY

Jill Baumgaertner describes Flannery O'Connor's "Judgement Day," as postmodern. She relates that "O'Connor's editor, Robert Giroux, received "Judgement Day" in early July, 1964, a month before her death. In May she had written to him that she had been working on the story intermittently for several years" (157). In Baumgaertner's opinion, "Essentially a revision of "Geranium," O'Connor's first published story, "Judgement Day may not conclude O'Connor's writing career as neatly as some critics have suggested" (157).

Critics have offered differing opinions and interpretations on the importance and aim of this final work. In his judgment, Frederick Asals offers this assessment of the short story:

In her last published work, "Judgement Day," O'Connor presents a protagonist unique in her stories, one in whom control and surrender, will and imagination, are reconciled and made one. . . . In Tanner, O'Connor at the end of her own life reconciled those very impulses that form the basis of conflict throughout her earlier work. Not surprisingly, he is the most sympathetically handled adult protagonist in all her stories. (141)

Marshall Bruce Gentry however disagrees with Asals and Ralph Wood's assessment about the story; he notes, "Despite Ralph Wood's argument that 'Judgement Day' opened 'new possibilities for O'Connor that she did not live to explore, 'Judgement Day' seems to me the to mark the less-than-successful end of O'Connor's struggle to rework the material with which she began her career" (87). Diane Tolomeo views it as a part of the trilogy in which O'Connor changed her timing of conflict in order to increase reader reflection. Leon Driskell

and Joan Brittain view its significance in terms of the physical diminishment facing characters at the end of their lives:

The doctrinal progression in the nine stories of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* is perhaps more pronounced than in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, for the white woman who dies in the title story experiences a regression at the time of her death, while at the end old Tanner has a vision of his resurrection. In both instances the end result for the chief characters is death, or, as Teilhard might say, diminishment. (104)

Though this is an apt description of the doctrinal progression, it does not supply enough detail about Teilhard's view of this process, particularly how he deals with death. Driskell and Brittain believe that "Judgement Day,' which squares off the frame for the collection, is the appropriate final word from an artist whose recurrent theme is her belief that salvation is for sinners and that (contrary to Haze Motes's assertion, [cf. *Wise Blood*]) the fall requires redemption and the two make inevitable a final judgment'" (136). The outcome for the characters in this short story is a natural progression that describes how the converging environment has changed things. The individuals in this short story are judged, and when "Judgement Day" is compared with "The Geranium," Teilhardian influence in the former is clearly present. The story offers characters active from/motivated by the effects of progressive diminishment in a convergent environment. Whereas the emphasis in "Parker's Back" is on a more personal level, this short story offers a more focused assessment and judgment on societal issues plaguing the South in the early 1960s. The emphasis of this short story also answers the question about, or at least points in the direction of, Flannery O'Connor's view on racial issues and how Chardin's ideas offered her a resolution for a troubling situation in Southern culture. T.C. Tanner is facing the diminishment of old age in "Judgement Day." His character is a reworking of a character, Old Dudley, in the earlier story "Geranium." T.C. Tanner and Old Dudley are two elderly Southerners who have moved

north to live with their daughters; the move has not gone too well. T.C. Tanner had lived in Corinth, Georgia all his life. He lived with an old Negro named Coleman Parrum, who existed in a symbiotic relationship with him for over thirty years. He and Parrum had built a shabby cabin on a plot of land, which they did not own. The owner of the land showed up one day and declared the property his and ordered Tanner to vacate. At the same time his daughter showed up and talked Tanner into moving with her to New York City.

His daughter had shown up to get him because of his old age; when she visited him and discovered his living arrangement with Parrum, she declared, "If you don't have any pride I have and I know my duty and I was raised to do it. My mother raised me to do it if you didn't" ("Judgement Day," *Complete Stories* 534). His daughter was concerned about doing her duty to her father and she would not be deterred from doing it.

His diminishment—old age—is mentioned prominently at the beginning of the story: Tanner was conserving all his strength for the trip home. He meant to walk as far as he could get and trust to the Almighty to get him the rest of the way. That morning and the morning before, he had allowed his daughter to dress him and had conserved that much more energy. Now he sat in the chair by the window—his blue shirt buttoned at the collar, his coat on the back of the chair, and his hat on his head—waiting for her to leave. ("Judgement Day," *Complete Stories* 531)

T.C. Tanner is attempting to figure a way to get back to Coleman, Georgia. After a few months of living in New York City, the impact of this environment is affecting him considerably. Old age has robbed him of his independence and mobility. So, T.C. Tanner engages in activities that he believes might soothe his agitated state:

With the energy he had conserved yesterday letting her dress him, he had written a note and pinned it in his pocket. IF FOUND DEAD SHIP EXPRESS COLLECT TO COLEMAN PARRUM, CORINTH, GEORGIA. Under this he had continued: COLEMAN SELL MY BELONGINGS AND PAY THE FREIGHT ON ME AND THE UNDERTAKER. ANYTHING LEFT OVER YOU CAN KEEP. YOURS TRULY T. C. TANNER. It had taken him the better part of thirty minutes to write the paper; the script

was wavery but decipherable with patience. He controlled one hand by holding the other on top of it. ("Judgement Day," *Complete Stories* 531)

Tanner and Old Dudley exhibited traditional Southern attitudes towards African Americans. Baumgaertner notes that "Tanner is confident of his ability to 'understand' Negroes, and in his home setting he has devised a set of ritualistic questions, phrases, and actions which establish his relationship with the black race—a relationship which is threatening but clear" (161). She continues by noting the quality of that relationship, "Tanner whittles with a knife and says, 'Nigger, this knife is in my hand now but if you don't quit wasting my time and money, it'll be in your gut shortly'" (161). African Americans were viewed as needing guidance by Caucasians in everyday life; Negroes were good at dancing, being slothful, but little else. This attitude in the whites is a recurring theme in Flannery O'Connor; from Mrs. Chestny to Ruby Turpin to T.C. Tanner, these individuals cannot accept the status change of African Americans. When scholars such as Melvin Williams or Claire Kahane view O'Connor as part of the racist South, or Ralph Wood sees her hesitation in condemning racism in the South, it is helpful to remember how whites are portrayed in the last short stories that she writes. Doreen Fowler observes that "in my reading, 'Judgement Day,' the final reworked version of the story, represents a significant advance over 'The Geranium' because her revisions, particularly the new names she gives the principal characters and two new scenes she adds, call attention to the role of repression in the articulation of racial difference" (Fowler 32). These condescending whites squawk and whine about how "niggers" really want the status quo enforced, but every time social changes show them that it cannot be maintained. Chardin's idea on convergence appealed to O'Connor because it promoted equality in social relations.

In “Geranium” Old Dudley had moved into his daughter’s apartment. One of the things that he noticed was the presence of African Americans in the same building as his daughter. According to the traditional view on the matter, he assumed that some whites had themselves a fancy “nigger” servant. Old Dudley noticed the Negro when he heard the door next to them slam.

“That would be the nigger,” Old Dudley muttered. “The nigger with the shiny shoes.” He had been there a week when the nigger moved in. That Thursday he was looking out the door at the dog-run halls when this nigger went into the next apartment. He had on a gray, pinstripe suit and a tan tie. His collar was stiff and white and made a clear-cut line next to his neck. His shoes were shiny tan—they matched his tie and his skin. Old Dudley scratched his head. He hadn’t known the kind of people that would live thick in a building could afford servants. (“Geranium,” *Complete Stories* 8)

Old Dudley never once imagined that a Negro would actually be a next door neighbor to his daughter and her family. Like many Southerners of that time, he figured that Negroes could function competently only in a few limited roles. When he realizes that the Negro is not a servant but a neighbor, his reaction is predictable. When his daughter informed him that the Negro was about to rent the apartment, he laughed at the suggestion:

Old Dudley laughed. She could be right funny when she wanted to. “Well,” he said, “I think I’ll go over and see what day he gets off. Maybe I can convince him he likes to fish,” and he’d slapped his pocket to make the two quarters jingle. Before he got out in the hall good, she came tearing behind him and pulled him in. “Can’t you hear!” she’d yelled. “I meant what I said. He’s renting that himself if he went in there. Don’t you go asking him any questions or saying anything to him. I don’t want any trouble with niggers.” “You mean,” Old Dudley murmured, “he’s gonna live next door to you?” (“Geranium,” *Complete Stories* 9)

To Old Dudley, just like T.C. Tanner in “Judgement Day,” such a situation just couldn’t happen. If Negroes attempted to act like white people, the world would soon erupt into chaos. In this first version of the story, Old Dudley simply reiterates what has been the traditional view of most Southerners on Black/White relations.

In O'Connor's later draft the Dudley character renamed T.C. Tanner deals with three Negroes: Coleman Parrum, Dr. Foley, and the Northern Negro. In each of these relationships, the balance has shifted. Whereas once T.C. Tanner was the undisputed master of Negroes around him, now he is either a peer or a nuisance. In this version, the African American characters are strongly developed in contrast to Tanner's character; these strong characters represent O'Connor's understanding of convergence in *The Phenomenon of Man* and her familiarity with the notes later published as *The Future of Man*. If we examine each of these relationships against the converging social milieu, the changes are notable. The title of this short story "Judgement Day" takes on a universality with regard to the characters and the audience; each of the characters and the audience face a judgment, but with differing consequences. In Tanner's struggle with old age in a changing environment, she uses this convergence leitmotif to emphasize the commonality that people share. Tanner and Coleman Parrum have lived with each other for thirty years; in fact, the narrator mentions how they have achieved a form of symbiosis, "When Coleman was young, he had looked like a bear; now that he was old he looked like a monkey. With Tanner it was the opposite; when he was young he had looked like a monkey but when he got old he looked like a bear" (*Complete Stories* 534). All suffer from diminishment, in this condition they are equal. Suzanne Paulson states that "O'Connor's last story about race, "Judgement Day," most explicitly condemns the dominant white's relationship to the black as one-sided and narcissistic" (72). At the end of her life, Flannery imbues this last short story with Teilhardian substance. Each of the relationships with these three African Americans function as the moral transformation wrought by this convergence.

At this time O'Connor realized that Chardin's convergence forced a sure, but steady movement towards equality, unity, and order. He remarked that "although our individualistic instincts may rebel against this drive towards the collective, they do so in vain and wrongly" (*Future of Man* 124). He notes that the status quo will undergo change through evolution and then sympathy with the new changes. He states:

The very fact of our becoming aware of this profound ordering of things will enable human collectivisation to pass beyond the *enforced* stage, where it is now, into the *free* phase: that in which (men having at last understood that they are inseparably joined elements of a converging Whole, and having learnt in consequence to *love* the preordained forces that unite them) a natural union of affinity and sympathy will supersede the forces of compulsion. (*Future of Man* 125)

The social configurations will change in a steady flow and cannot be stopped. In Tanner's interaction with these African Americans, O'Connor illustrates this process.

Tanner's relationship with Coleman Parrum is based in the old status quo. As mentioned above, according to Tanner, Coleman Parrum was always on his back and in his charge. Living with each other for these many years, had made Coleman Parrum an extension of T.C. Tanner; in the description of their change, Parrum became a mirror, a reverse image of T.C. Tanner. The two of them had come to feel that such a relationship as natural. Each of these individuals was now a mirror image of the other, hindered by the diminishment of old age. Each of them was in a dilapidated state of retirement, and each was lonely, with no close family around. Both of them had lived together so long that in some ways they were the same, except for skin color. For them, this living arrangement seemed normal.

Upon viewing this unique relationship, his daughter retorted:

"My mother raised me to do it if you didn't. She was from plain people but not the kind that likes to settle in with niggers. . . ." Her father responded, "Who do you think cooks?"

Who you think cuts my firewood and empties my slop? He's paroled to me. That no-good scoundrel has been on my hands for thirty years. He ain't a bad nigger" ("Judgement Day," *Complete Stories* 534-35).

Parrum paroled to Tanner testifies to Tanner's view of Negroes—they could not function without white oversight.

Their relationship had sprung from an incident about thirty years before. Tanner was running a work crew of six Negroes at a construction site. One day this Negro had appeared at the construction site, and was laying around watching Tanner supervise a bunch of Negroes at a sawmill. At about 11:30 AM, thirty minutes before lunch, the six Negroes decided it was time to stop working and start relaxing. Sensing that Coleman's presence and demeanor encouraged the other Negroes to break for lunch early, Tanner realized he needed to confront Coleman and force him to leave. Armed with his penknife, which he used often to threaten troublemakers, he started towards the Negro and met him; at the moment of confrontation, he realized that Coleman had vision problems, so he used his pen knife to cut a couple of holes in some bark, attached wire rims to it, and gave them to Coleman. From that day forward, the two of them became inseparable. To Tanner, after that encounter, "He had not got rid of Coleman since. You make a monkey out of one of them and he jumps on your back and stays there for life, but let one make a monkey out of you and all you can do is kill him or disappear" ("Judgement Day," *Complete Stories* 539). Paulson observes that "Tanner's treatment of his black servant is reductive and involves a show of masculine power. Tanner drains Coleman's power" (73). Georgia traditions offered extensive resistance to any change in the social environment. Unfortunately, for him, events in Tanner's locale would change the culture drastically.

When his daughter inquired about the shack that he and Coleman Parrum had built, he responded that it was built “on property owned by someone up North.” He and Coleman had built it on the property, thinking that no one would ever come around to check on it. Dr. Foley, however, came by:

When he saw the brown porpoise-shaped figure striding across the field that afternoon, he had known at once what had happened; no one had to tell him. If that nigger had owned the whole world except for one runty rutted peafield and he acquired it, he would walk across it that way, beating the weeds aside, his thick neck swelled, his stomach a throne for his gold watch and chain. Dr. Foley, he was only part black. The rest was Indian and white. (“Judgement Day,” *Complete Stories* 535)

Dr. Foley had come to check on the land he had bought and to let T.C. Tanner know who was now in charge. Even in the South, social interaction had developed to the point where a Negro could own property and dictate conditions to a white man. The situation with Dr. Foley indicates how the culture is changing drastically.

Chardin has noted how since the beginning of the Second World War a worldwide process has slowly, but surely, changed humankind. He remarks how the war was fought in a part of the world “hitherto on the fringe of civilization,” and now the Pacific Island territories “have for practical purposes entered irrevocably into the orbit of industrialised nations” (*Future of Man* 126). This process has been occurring externally as the bonds of community are being fashioned through the numerous organizations created for the advance of international unity.

Convergence is causing the displacement of social practices that inhibit human development. This convergence is magnified by the awareness of this new order. Once T.C. Tanner was the king of the hill in Black/White relations; he exercised power and influence at

the top of this social hierarchy. Now he is now, socially and physically, at the bottom of the heap! His predicament represents a distinct change from the picture in "Geranium."

In the earlier version, the relationship between Old Dudley and the African Americans is presented as a matter-of-fact situation. Dudley and Rabie would go fishing and possum hunting, "He and Rabie had fished it in a flat-bottom boat every Wednesday. Rabie knew the river up and down for twenty miles. There wasn't another nigger in Coa County that knew it like he did. He loved the river, but it hadn't meant anything to Old Dudley. The fish were what he was after" ("Geranium," *Complete Stories* 4). To Old Dudley, the presence of Rabie and his perception of Rabie was a given, and would never change. He appreciated Rabie for his hunting skills and for his companionship, but at the same time he knew that in some respects Rabie would never change:

Sometimes at night they would go 'possum hunting. They never got a 'possum but Old Dudley liked to get away from the ladies once in a while and hunting was a good excuse. Rabie didn't like 'possum hunting. They never got a 'possum; they never even treed one; and besides, he was mostly a water nigger. "We ain't gonna go huntin' no 'possum tonight, is we boss? I got a lil' business I want tuh tend tuh," he'd say when Old Dudley would start talking about hounds and guns. "Whose chickens you gonna steal tonight?" Dudley would grin. "I reckon I be huntin' 'possum tonight," Rabie'd sigh. ("Geranium," *Complete Stories* 5)

In this description the relationship between blacks and whites is merely stated and acknowledged. Old Dudley eventually meets the Negro who lives next door to him and by that fact realizes how things have changed.

In Tanner's the standard code of conduct in the South is changing. When Foley comes to inspect the property, the ironic tone is deafening:

Tanner took hold of the knobs on the chair bottom and held them hard. "This shack ain't in your property. Only on it, by my mistake," he said. The doctor removed his cigar momentarily from his mouth. "It ain't my mistake," he said and smiled. He had only sat there, looking ahead. "It don't pay to make this kind of mistake," the doctor said. "I

never found nothing that paid yet," he muttered. ("Judgement Day," *Complete Stories* 535)

This is not a conversation between an embittered white man and an uppity Negro. Chardin's ideas lent a parodic tone to O'Connor's character development; people must interact more. A character such as T.C. Tanner is hopelessly stuck in the mire of irrelevancy. Dr. Foley represents "the relative right of the individual to be placed in circumstances as favourable as possible to his personal development" (*Future of Man* 195), and because of social change, he emerges as the top dog in this reconstituted relationship. Foley now can enforce his legal claim against Tanner. This new context sketches out changes in the milieu comfortable to views on societal change.

In Tanner's conversation with Foley, the new parameters of the relationship are established very clearly.

"You don't belong here," he began. "I could have you prosecuted." Tanner remained there, dumb, staring across the field. Where's your still?" the doctor asked. "If it's a still around here, it don't belong to me," he said and shut his mouth tight. The Negro laughed softly. "Down on your luck, ain't you?" he murmured. Didn't you used to own a little piece of land over acrost the river and lost it. . . . "If you want to run the still for me, that's one thing," the doctor said. "If you don't, you might as well had be packing." ("Judgement Day," *Complete Stories* 539-40)

T.C. Tanner was in a position where he was giving orders and ultimatums. Now, instead of him ordering a Negro to move and get busy, he was the one who was told to work at a certain task, or face certain retribution. The ultimate insult to a racist, and to all racists who cling tenaciously to the status quo, such as T.C. Tanner, was being told to do certain work for a Negro, and realizing that he possessed few options in the matter. That fate is sealed when, before he leaves, Foley states, "I be back here next week," he said, "and if you still here, I know you going to work for me" ("Judgement Day," *Complete Stories* 540).

For Flannery O'Connor, this scene represents why she was drawn to the ideas of Chardin over the last four years of her life. Chardin grounded cosmic issues in the day-to-day existence of human beings. He observes that "society, embracing the individuals which comprise it, must in its own interest be so constituted that it *tends* to create the most favourable environment for the full development (physical and spiritual) of what is special to each of them" (*Future of Man* 195). Human beings could never be satisfied with just the material possessions, but also needed motivation to progress.

Adding to the irony of the possessor dispossessed, T.C. Tanner has become one of the minority members in society. He now lives in a part of the country where interaction among different cultures has enforced a sense of community drastically different from that in Coleman, Georgia. In the twenty-six square miles of Manhattan, four million people live next to each other. They do not possess acres of woods to separate them and they do live in separate detached houses; rather they live on top of each other in close quarters. The urban setting in which Tanner finds himself magnifies this interaction. So Tanner finds himself marginalized in this environment; instead of a place where he is dominant, he lives in a polyglot company of different races. He is astonished when he views a Negro moving into the apartment next to his daughter's; in the South, the races have always been separated by custom and the strictures of law. In the North the races segregated themselves through custom, but the overt strictures of law had disappeared. T.C. Tanner could not pretend that such forces were non-existent; he could only try to hang on when he encounters a Negro actor and his girlfriend moving into the next apartment.

After he witnessed the Negro moving in, he came back into the apartment and commented to his daughter about her new neighbor:

“Who you think’s rented that apartment over there?” he asked, his face alight. She looked at him suspiciously. “Who?” she muttered. “A nigger!” he said in a gleeful voice. “A South Alabama nigger if ever I saw one. And got him this high-yeller, high-stepping woman with red hair and they two are going to live next door to you!” It was the first time since coming up here that he had had occasion to laugh. (“Judgement Day,” *Complete Stories* 543)

His daughter warns him that his attitude towards Negroes will only invite trouble for him up North. “All right now you listen to me. “Don’t you go over there trying to be friendly with him. They ain’t the same around here and I don’t want any trouble with niggers, you hear me?” (“Judgement Day,” *Complete Stories* 543). Tanner responds, “I was getting along with niggers before you were born” (“Judgement Day,” *Complete Stories* 543). Tanner insists he knows Negroes and how to treat them. When Tanner acts upon his presumptions, the results are disastrous.

One day Tanner sees the Negro leave his apartment and decides to demonstrate his ability to get along with Negroes:

The Negro came out about eight o’clock. This time Tanner advanced squarely in his path. “Good morning, Preacher,” he said. It had been his experience that if a Negro tended to be sullen, this title usually cleared up his expression. The Negro stopped abruptly. “I see you move in,” Tanner said. “I ain’t been up here long myself. It ain’t much of a place if you ask me. I reckon you wish you were back in South Alabama.” A seething noise came out of the Negro before he spoke. “I’m not from South Alabama,” he said in a breathless wheezing voice. “I’m from New York City. And I’m no preacher. I’m an actor.” (“Judgement Day,” *Complete Stories* 544-45)

Tanner attempted to communicate with the Northern Negro once more, with even more disastrous consequences. Later on in the day, the Negro actor returned and Tanner said, “Good evening, Preacher.” Tanner was not ready for the reaction from the Negro actor; he Negro actor became visibly angered and moved closer to Tanner. [When he] “was close enough he lunged and grasped Tanner by both shoulders:” “I don’t take no crap off no wool-

hat red-necked son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard like you" *Complete Stories* 545). The

Negro actor

caught his breath. And then his voice came out in the sound of an exasperation so profound that it rocked on the verge of a laugh. It was high and piercing and weak, "And I'm not no preacher! I'm not even no Christian. I don't believe that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God". . . . The Negro slammed him against the wall. He yanked the black hat down over his eyes. Then he grabbed his shirt front and shoved him backwards to his open door and knocked him through it. (*Complete Stories* 545)

Whereas, once T.C. Tanner was master of Negroes and could control over six of them with a small penknife, now he is an old man who exists in a social environment with different rules and expectations. Also, old age has radically altered his status in society. Whereas once he could confidently approach a Negro and initiate a conversation, now he is an old man who opens his mouth and causes trouble. Once he knew the codes of conduct for both parties, but now he has no clue. Jill Baumgaertner notes that "when he moves to the city and encounters a Negro in the same building, it is clear that Tanner does not understand the signifying rules, which are different in the city. He speaks one language, but the Negro actor hears another" (162). Tanner attempts to reassert the code by which he has lived all his life, and this response "to blasphemy is to reassert the social rules that have sustained him and given him a sense of place and power in the past. But they are not effective in this new setting" (163).

T.C. Tanner is faced with changes he has trouble assimilating. Dr. Foley and the Northern Negro are not the passive, unintelligent "niggers" that he imagined all black people to be; they work in white collar type careers and are educated beyond Tanner's expectations. But that is not the only theme O'Connor develops here. In "The Geranium" and "Judgement

Day” O’Connor illustrates the effects of diminishment at work. The personae in these stories experience progressively more physical limitations as their circumstances change.

The physical diminishment—old age—that affects Tanner and Old Dudley causes them to be dependent on others around them. When each of them attempts to board the subways in New York City, old age inhibits the quick reaction to get on the trains. Whereas the physical layout of small towns in Georgia might absorb the sense of diminishment, the physical demands in New York City quickly expose such problems. In getting on and off of the subways, both men realize just how dependent they are. When Old Dudley meets the African American in the hall and cannot navigate to his daughter’s room, the African American helps him up and counsels him about being lost. In the similar situation at the end of “Judgement Day,” when T.C. Tanner is attempting to get back to Georgia, he meets the Northern Negro actor and asks for help; their meeting ends in a harsh judgment upon Tanner.

One of the effects of diminishment is to open a human being to convergence. This process engenders an awareness of human commonality. Tanner is presented with a series of opportunities to accept help, but tradition and old age inhibit his understanding. Hopefully, people experiencing limitations acknowledge the importance of interacting positively with their neighbors.

In the case of Old Dudley, his diminishment is evident. He had lived comfortably in his hometown, until one day his daughter had showed up and asked him to come live with her. When she asked him if he wanted to go for a walk, and he responded

“No.” He wondered how long she was going to stand there. She made his eyes feel like his throat. They’d get watery and she’d see. She had seen before and had looked sorry for him. She’d looked sorry for her too; but she could’er saved herself, Old Dudley thought, if she’d just have let him alone—let him stay where he was back home and not be so taken up with her damn duty. (“Geranium,” *Complete Stories* 4)

Old Dudley had been living on his pension and occasional odd jobs. When his daughter came and told him that she wanted to take him to New York, something inside him desired to see the city. But in the city he discovered the extent of his disability:

Once she took him shopping with her but he was too slow. They went in a “subway”—a railroad underneath the ground like a big cave. People boiled out of trains and up the steps and over into the streets. They rolled off the street and down steps and into trains—Everything was boiling. The trains swished in from tunnels, up canals, and all of a sudden stopped. The people coming out pushed through the people coming in and a noise rang and the train swooped off again. Old Dudley and the daughter had to go in three different ones before they got where they were going. (“The Geranium,” *Complete Stories* 7)

The same kind of situation faced Tanner, but more noticeably in his social relationships. Unlike Old Dudley, he did not desire to move to a big city; he felt very comfortable where he was living. However, his eviction by Dr. Foley does not allow him the option of staying.

In New York City, the full impact of his physical limitations hit him. He could not move as fast as he once did; a great deal of the time he was limited to sitting in the parlor watching people go by. It was not something that he was used to. The specter of final diminishment pervaded his thoughts. Old age made him keenly aware of places and relationships that he sorely missed. If he could recover those familiar sights and sounds, then he could achieve some semblance of peace. So, he fixates on attempting to get back home to Corinth, Georgia.

Tanner is ultimately unhappy because it appears that he will not return to his home and its community, dead or alive. He overhears his daughter and her husband talking about his fate:

“He has a stroke when he sees a nigger in the building,” the son-in-law said, “and she tells me, “Shut up talking so loud.” “That’s not why he had the stroke.” There was a silence. “Where you going to bury him?” the son-in-law asked, taking a different tack. “Bury who?” “Him in there.” “Right here in New York,” she said. “Where do you think? We got a lot. I’m not making that trip down there again with nobody.” “Yah. Well I just wanted to make sure,” he said. (*Complete Stories* 533)

Tanner now realizes that he will never get back to Corinth, Georgia. After confronting his daughter with what he heard in the conversation, he decides on action:

Today he was ready. All he had to do was push one foot in front of the other until he got to the door and down the stairs. Once down the steps, he would get out of the neighborhood. Once out of it, he would hail a taxicab and go to the freight yards. Some bum would help him onto a car. Once he got in the freight car, he would lie down and rest. 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. (“Judgement Day,” *Complete Stories* 532)

His obsession on returning to Corinth, Georgia, includes dwelling on the people that he left behind, specifically Coleman Parrum. As he sat in the parlor of the apartment, he imagined a conversation with Coleman about his plight in the city:

He had to turn his head every few seconds to make sure Coleman was behind him. Keep to the inside or these people’ll knock you down, keep right behind me or you’ll get left, keep you hat on, you damn idiot, he had said, and Coleman had come on with his bent running shamble, panting and muttering, What are we doing here? Where you get this fool idea coming here? (“Judgement Day,” *Complete Stories* 541)

To T.C. Tanner, Coleman represents home and family; dealing with Coleman was easy and never surprising. Coleman represents what an immobilist cherishes—the past and the status quo. In a status quo environment, an individual can enjoy the constants and never worry about challenges to beliefs or practices.

Tanner continues down the stairs until his legs begin to tire and start wobbling; he loses his grasp on the handrail, tumbles down the stairs and lands head downward. He hears people coming up the stairs and calls for help. When the Negro actor and his girlfriend

discover him, Tanner, dreaming he is trapped in a coffin with Coleman and Hooten trying to get him out, shouts out “Judgement Day! Judgement Day! You idiot’s didn’t know it was Judgement Day, did you” (*Complete Stories* 549)? He calls the Negro actor “Coleman,” and the Negro actor responds:

“Ain’t any coal man, here;” Tanner recognizes him and mistakenly calls out to the Negro actor, “Hep me up, Preacher. I’m on my way home”. . . . The Negro actor “leaned closer and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. “Judgement Day,” he said in a mocking voice. “Ain’t no judgement day, old man. Cept this. Maybe this here judgement day for you” (*Complete Stories* 549).

Later on that day, when his daughter comes home, she finds Tanner’s body poked through the spokes of the staircase like the stocks of Puritan times. The police are called and his body removed.

For T.C. Tanner, the final judgment has come; he could not adjust to the changing social conditions around him and his time had run out. In his diminishment, he could not accept the changed circumstances of his new life. His pillorying in the stairwell is a final judgment on people who cannot accept the change. The Negro actor acts as judge, jury and executioner of Tanner. Richard Giannone notes that “In ‘Judgment Day,’ the black actor is the agent of retribution in pummeling Tanner with the forces of his own past wrathful and racist demons [and] rather than stopping the old wayfarer, the actor accelerates Tanner’s final passage” (269). In contrast to African American characters that scholars have assumed were merely helpers to whites attempting spiritual insight in Flannery O’Connor’s stories, this African American is the master of this environment. The actor recognizes his superiority rights in the changing, convergent social environment and exercises it.

Tanner has suffered a final humiliation in his demise, but in a way he has achieved a return to community. O’Connor presents Tanner’s inability to realize potential community.

The need for a community drives Tanner to leave the apartment, and when he stumbles on the stairs, he cries out for help from “the preacher.” Tanner’s daughter also accepts a judgment.

Initially, she buries him in New York because it seems the practical thing to do; she believed that one place was as good as another. However, she could not avoid her father’s request that she bury him back in Georgia. Her father’s words did not allow her to sleep peacefully. She tossed and turned and began to lose her good looks. Finally, she decided that she should keep her promise and arranged for the body to be shipped back home. Afterward, she felt at peace again, and “mostly, her good looks returned.”

Judgment Day arrives for each individual in this story in different ways. Tanner never changes his outlook on life, the Negro actor and the Negro doctor are the new realities that confront Tanner, and his daughter experiences harmony through the simple act of returning his body to Corinth, Georgia. Judgment day in this short story is less the apocalyptic vision of Jesus appearing in the clouds and separating the sheep and the goats, and more the picture of spreading roots that take shape as a plant grows. Human beings naturally grow and develop in a physical environment and must adapt or change when that environment changes. Some individuals appear quite able to do so and some individuals never get the hang of it. Judgment Day is the inevitable conclusion of the process that is to unify humankind in the distant future.

## CHAPTER X

### CONCLUSION

Flannery O'Connor faced a crisis in her life in the latter part of the 1950s, the growing presence of lupus inhibiting her physical activities more and more. Through her letters and conversations with people, she battled with developing a relevant attitude towards the disease. All of her writing (fiction and non-fiction) served as the expression of the various internal struggles she wrestled with all of her adult life; from cajoling people about moral relativism to encouraging people to sustain and nurture their religious life to finally reflecting on the finality of death. This last situation vexed her greatly, until a remark about a new author from her editor in May of 1959. From that remark began an intensive investigation of the priest/paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin. The proof of her interest is that Flannery O'Connor read as much of Chardin's literary output, wrote reviews, letters, and comments about him, and spoke to people about him as much as any scholar she encountered in these last five years of her life. In Chardin she found answers to her evolving outlook on illness, community, and social issues.

These issues constantly reintroduce themselves throughout Flannery O'Connor's literary output; characters possess physical limitations that marginalize them in society, they exist in odd communal relationships, and society dictates their value. In the last five years of her life, the growing presence of lupus, in conjunction with her deteriorating physical condition, focused her attention on specific works of Chardin as a new source by which to

examine and interpret these issues. First, from reading and reviewing *The Phenomenon of Man*, that described the evolutionary process shaping creation (convergence), then later reading and reviewing *The Divine Milieu*, which focused on how spirituality fit into this process, she developed a framework in which to vitalize her position in these last five years. She made this plan plain in her letter to Alfred Corn on questions he had about God. As was her modus operandi, and as George Kilcourse points out, she used these ideas to help come to terms with her physical condition and then incorporated them into her later fiction. Eventually, this pattern of ideas evolved into the new context of progressive diminishment in convergence.

The framework “progressive diminishment in convergence” offers an opportunity to understand the attracting influence of Chardin on O’Connor; this attractive influence helps flesh out human relationships on different levels in a milieu that O’Connor thought important to humanity. O’Connor fervently believed that to understand humanity, a writer must ground human action in a concrete situation. In letters and essays, she clearly states the importance of realizing that human beings cannot be understood apart from the material world in which they existed. Orthodox propositions were not enough to interpret human behavior; a clearly defined concrete environment must exist in order to flesh out the benefits and problems such propositions might manifest.

Flannery O’Connor also believed that beneficial change must occur in an orderly manner, if it is to be effective. She detested the antics of Maryat Lee and James Baldwin, who denounced segregation in the South. She felt uncomfortable with their actions, because such actions made the activist feel good without really helping the African Americans stuck in the situation. At the same time, in letters to Maryat Lee, she denounced the stupidity of

segregationists, who wanted to maintain the status quo between the races, even if it caused a blight on the South. Progressive diminishment in convergence offered her an opportunity to plead for cultural change in the South, but in an orderly manner.

This framework exposes the developing new bond defining human relationships, as O'Connor saw the situation. The upward thrust of convergence clearly demonstrates that developments focused on equality and opportunity are the new watchwords in the human experience. People cannot rely on the old ideas concerning human worth; they must acknowledge how the in-folding of convergence has changed the status quo. In each of these stories, relationships based on custom and tradition are destroyed if the element of equality is not present. Mrs. Chestny, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," must face the realization that African Americans are going to be given the equal right to ride on the public transit system, despite her protestations. Mrs. Turpin, in "Revelation," is rudely awakened to the fact that the vision that shows the masses marching towards heaven places the dregs of society at the front and "good people" such as herself at the back. Finally, T.C. Tanner, in "Judgement Day," witnesses how he goes from dominance to domination at the hands of African Americans, due to the fact that the social code has changed. In these stories convergence captures the changing role of relationships moving humanity towards the concept of equality and opportunity, whether it desires such changes or not. When one views the action in these stories against this framework, one sees that Flannery O'Connor agitated for social and racial equality in her last stories. The old way of segregation cannot stand and cannot flourish; convergence is forcing it towards extinction. Flannery O'Connor actively changes African Americans from appearing to idly standing by in the stories to actively demanding to be considered equal beings. Part of convergence, as described by Chardin, is

the active social change and development that influences relationships between different types of people. Convergence relentlessly marches towards Point Omega, changing and removing the customs of tradition that intentionally inhibit people from achieving economic and social equality in a society.

This framework incorporates the presence of an expanded definition of diminishment into this convergent atmosphere. Marion Montgomery, Ralph Woods, and other scholars have focused on the self-righteous arrogance of intellectuals, who dismiss the presence, yea, the relevance of God in the twentieth century. They focus on the attitudes of people like Julian Chestny, Sheppard, and others who contemptuously dismiss religion. At the end of her life, Flannery O'Connor faces an expanded definition of what ill fortune consists of.

Teilhard de Chardin defined ill fortune as those external and internal passivities that limit human potential, be they societal or natural. These passivities rob human beings of the opportunity for a full life and its attendant qualities. This definition hits Flannery O'Connor dramatically in the last five years of her life. First, the deteriorating condition of lupus strengthens its grip on her and severely limits her physical mobility and intellectual activity. Chardin's definition of evil squarely hits her when she encounters the story of Mary Long in 1961. Mary Long was a young cancer patient, who died at the age of ten from her illness. No adequate answer appears to resolve such a problem. The resonance of Chardin's ideas with O'Connor is reflected in the letter she writes to Alfred Corn towards the end of her life. She talks about how she has come to accept that life is a wonderful and mysterious process that sometimes possesses open-ended questions. She attributes her peace with this situation to Chardin, whose ideas showed her that having questions about the process of life was not a sign of doubt or weakness. At the end of her life, Flannery O'Connor does not list

propositions to explain her use of this framework. She fleshes it out in the lives and themes of these six short stories, because to her, fleshing out human action in concrete existence is the best proposition she can illustrate to her audience. Julian Chestny glibly sails along in life, indulging in self-martyrdom at the expense of his mother, until the day when she dies of her racial insensitivity. Norton, the ten-year-old son of Sheppard the psychiatrist, longs for a reunion with his mother, who died prematurely. O.E. Parker suffers from the tattoos on his body, which remind him of dissatisfaction. In each of these cases, these diminishments are forms of evil that hinder and hurt these individuals in different ways. Diminishments hinder and limit people, but they also prod, arouse, and heighten the deeper issues that face these people.

Diminishments are subtractions that limit human endeavor, but at the same time, act as an addition in terms of orienting people towards the magnetic pull of Point Omega. Chardin states that one of the characteristics of the ever increasing psychic complexity developed by convergence, is that human beings are prodded towards recognizing the communal fibers necessary to move humans toward long-term goals. Now, human beings are forced to commune with each other because of the limited area on earth and the in-folding of human activity. Ultimately, instead of existing in enforced communities, human beings will gather in voluntary, or as Chardin calls it, “sympathetic,” communities. Chardin notes that human beings cannot exist on just physical sustenance, but they also need an imperative for surviving as a species. They need things such as hope, love, and goals in order to continue, just as much as physical needs are necessary. It isn’t just the physical necessities that help people continue its survival, but also the intangibles that sustain this effort. Progressive diminishment in convergence encompasses the process that helps sustain

and foster human endurance. Something in human beings demands more than adequate shelter, food, and clothing; human beings must achieve a spiritual sense of peace in their existence, often found in new communal relationships. Julian, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," faces the subtraction of his mother when she dies from her confrontation with the Negro lady. This diminishment removes something he considers valuable, but offers the chance to achieve a new sense of community. Norton, in "The Lambe Shall Enter First," suffers both the loss of his mother and the coldness of his father. He tragically initiates action that attempts to resolve this subtraction, because he cannot live without her. In contrast to Sheppard and Johnson, he attempts to use the telescope to find her, and when he does, he hangs himself. Even though he fails, his actions point to Chardin's observation that human beings are attracted towards trying to find that psychical/spiritual connection important to the species. In each of these cases, a character seeks something that transcends the physical and sustains the psychic, even though they might not recognize it. Sometimes that search is satisfying, sometimes that search is illuminating, and sometimes that search is tragic, but it never ceases in its impetus to drive human beings to resolve such deficiencies.

In spite of questionable theological leanings, Flannery O'Connor was attracted to the ideas of Teilhard de Chardin the last five years of her life. He offered her insight and comfort in the midst of her bout with lupus. First, she understood all too well the fact that his ideas on humanity developing from the material. She lived this battle intensely the last five years of her life. When she awoke every morning, she battled aching joints, skin rashes, limited energy, and constant stays in the hospital; she understood clearly how her physical situation dictated anything she did as a human being. Secondly, his ideas helped bring together the synthesis of the material and the spiritual. His ideas allowed for two great

springs of information about humanity to function together in a combined way to interpret life. Science and religion could both bring their wisdom to the table and be appreciated for what each respective field of study could offer. Thirdly, it helped resolve a love/hate relationship she had with science and modernism. While she often railed against the relativism of modernism and the eschewing of religion's importance by science, one undeniable fact faced her. For the last ten years of her life, the products of scientific discovery were keeping her alive. The drugs developed by science, even as crude as they were in the 1950s, were the last wall of defense that allowed her to live beyond her mid-twenties. Teilhard helped her resolve many issues at the end of her life, and, thus, weaved his way into her last short stories.

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