The Green Mile Short Guide

The Green Mile by Stephen King

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Characters

Because The Green Mile is an anti-capital punishment exemplum, characters are defined morally in the simplest terms.

King emphasizes the fundamental humanity of the two men who are the first to be executed, Arlen Bitterbuck and Eduard Delacroix. While King tells the reader that the two men are murderers, he shows them speaking and acting with such dignity, love, and simple faith that one perceives their executions as evil, unnatural acts. Sentenced to die for crushing a man's head with a cement block in a drunken argument, Arlen Bitterbuck ("The Chief) fantasizes about a mountain lodge in Montana, where he hopes to return after death. Mass murderer Delacroix lovingly cares for his pet mouse and, before going to the electric chair, recites the "Hail Mary" in French.

The other characters in The Green Mile are polarized between totally evil and unequivocally decent. William "Billy the Kid" Wharton (a death row inmate), Percy Wetmore and Brad Dolan are sadists with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. Like George Stark (The Dark Half), Wharton joys in inflicting pain and humiliation on others. Choking prison guard Dean Stanton with the chain on his handcuff, Wharton cries gleefully: "Whoooee, boys!. . . Ain't this aparty, now?"

(The Mouse on the Mile). In King's fictional universe, child abuse is the blackest crime of all. Therefore, when Wharton, the savage murderer-rapist of the Detterick twins, is shot by Percy, the reader is relieved and delighted.

Because Percy Wetmore (in 1932) and Brad Dolan (in 1996) are both motivated by a single-minded compulsion to bully the institutionalized people in their power, they become confused in the mind of the 104-year-old Paul Edgecombe. In contrast to Paul, who works in death row because the Depression offers him few employment options, Percy had used his relationship with the governor to become a prison guard because he wanted to view an electrocution up close. Brad inflicts pain on elderly residents, secure that the Georgia Pines administration will regard them as delusional if they complain. King, characteristically, uses the books and magazines that characters read to suggest their moral nature: Percy's fascination with executions has been fueled by Argosy and Men's Adventure; Brad reads (and searches for put-downs) Gross Jokes and Sick Jokes. In painting Percy and Brad so blackly, King suggests that prisons, nursing homes, and other institutions are magnets for sadists, who can, with impunity, inflict pain on a helpless or unresisting population.

Unlike Percy, Paul Edgecombe and the guards he supervises are committed to easing the suffering of the condemned criminals during their last days. The guard who is most fully developed as a character, Brutus Howell, is nicknamed "Brutal," a humorous antonym for his extraordinarily kind nature. By the end of the events that culminate in Coffey's execution, all the E Block guards, with the exception of the evil Percy, are determined to find other employment at whatever cost to themselves and their families.

The story's supernatural elements are embodied in John Coffey and the mouse, Mr. Jingles, who comforts Delacroix during his last weeks of life. The mouse and the giant, retarded black man appear on E Block at the same time. Wrongfully convicted of murdering two little girls, Coffey joins the company of King's other holy innocents, retarded men like Tom Cullen in The Stand (1978; 1990) and Sheemie in Wizard and Glass (1997). The imagery surrounding Coffey is, however, the most explicitly Christ-like. Next to nothing is known of Jesus before His thirties, when He began His public ministry. Similarly, Paul can find no clues to Coffey's life before his disastrous attempt to heal the Detterick twins, except what can be deduced from the scars that cover his body. Coffey, like Jesus, heals, exorcises demons, and brings the dead back to life. Coffey heals Paul's urinary infection, draws the demon (which doctors have diagnosed as a brain tumor) out of Melinda, and brings Mr. Jingles back from the dead after Percy has crushed the mouse. Coerced into executing "a gift from God," Paul and "Brutal" fear for their souls.

Social Concerns

One of the trademarks of Stephen King's writing is the moral earnestness with which he approaches a wide range of social issues. The Green Mile is, however, the most overtly didactic of his works. Its purpose is to kindle the reader's outrage at the inhumanity and capriciousness of the death penalty. Victims of the death penalty are, King suggests, overwhelmingly, the poor, social or racial minorities, or the mentally impaired. The three men executed during the course of the novel are a Native American, a lowlife French Canadian, and a man who is both black and retarded. In contrast, "the President," a well-connected white man who had killed his father, stays on E Block only briefly before his sentence is commuted to life in prison. The Green Mile's descriptions of "routine" executions are merely heartbreaking; Delacroix's slow death during an execution deliberately sabotaged by a sadistic guard is one of the most harrowing scenes in King's entire corpus.

Among the powerful rhetorical strategies used to arouse the reader's repugnance toward capital punishment is King's choice of narrator. Paul Edgecombe, the self-described "bull-goose screw" of Cold Mountain Prison's E Block (death row), combines a powerful empathy with the condemned men with a tendency to ponder the ethical and spiritual implications of events. He and the essentially decent (with one exception) men he supervises keep the prisoners closely warehoused, prepare them for execution, rehearse the ritual journey to "Old Sparky," then electrocute fellow human beings. Paul experiences a growing revulsion for this work. As he is strapping a condemned man into the electric chair, Paul observes: "I could hear Del breathing in great dry pulls of air, lungs that would be charred bags less than four minutes from now, laboring to keep up with his fear-driven heart. The fact that he had killed half a dozen people seemed at that moment the least important thing about him" (The Bad Death of EduardDelacroix). As an old man looking back at his participation in more than seventy executions, Paul concludes: "Old Sparky seems such a thing of perversity when I look back on those days, such a deadly bit of folly ... . To kill each other with gas and electricity, and in cold blood? The folly. The horror" (Coffey on the Mile). Paul's compelling voice is the novel's moral center.

King juxtaposes Cold Mountain Prison with Georgia Pines, where Paul, at 104 years of age, is writing his story. Like the condemned prisoners, the old people in the nursing home are powerless to leave and are, for better or worse, at the mercy of their caretakers. Two sadists, Percy Wetmore (Cold Mountain) and Brad Dolan (Georgia Pines), are drawn to their respective jobs because they seek power over others. Paul calls both E Block and Georgia Pines "killing bottles": both institutions segregate persons under a sentence of death from the rest of the population.

Techniques

The Green Mile is a serialized novel in six installments: The Two Dead Girls, The Mouse on the Mile, Coffey's Hands, The Bad Death of Eduard Delacroix, Night Journey, and Coffey on the Mile. In his "Foreword" to the first installment, The Two Dead Girls, King explains his decision to serialize The Green Mile. An admirer of Charles Dickens, King planned a series of chapbooks, modeled on the nineteenth-century practice. King believed that his "constant readers" would, thereby, experience the story more intensely. They could neither "gulp" the story at a single sitting nor cheat by peeking at the ending.

The installments of The Green Mile were issued monthly, beginning with The Two Dead Girls (March 1996) and ending with Coffey on the Mile (August 1996). The first installment, King stated, appeared before he knew how the story would end. While the experiment was successful in terms of sales, King admits in his "Afterword" that the book shows signs of haste and that some of the details of the 1930s milieu were anachronistic. Were The Green Mile to be published in a single volume, it would need revision.

In The Green Mile, King uses the literary device of the "frame story." The story of the executions and healings at the Cold Mountain Penitentiary is framed by glimpses of narrator and protagonist Paul Edgecombe at 104 years of age, writing his story in a nursing home. There are intriguing parallels between the two eras.

The older Paul is harassed by the brutal aide Brad Dolan, a double of Percy Wetmore. At Georgia Pines, Brad Dolan displays the same all-consuming, motiveless malice for the aging Paul that Wetmore had displayed for the inmate, Delacroix. The threat of exploiting political connections figures in both the frame and the story proper. Wetmore is protected from the consequences of his outrageous cruelty because he is related to the governor. At Georgia Pines, the shoe is on the other foot. Paul's friend, Elaine Connelly, protects Paul by threatening that she will report Brad's brutal conduct to her grandson, Speaker of the Georgia House of Representatives.

Even within the 1932 period, events come in twos. Coffey performs two healings. There are two sets of twins, both victims of a senseless attack by a being their family had trusted. The little Detterick girls had been murdered by a man who had shared the family's meals for several days while painting their barn.

Investigating the girls' murders, Paul meets the twin son of newspaper reporter Hammersmith; the boy had been mangled by the beloved family dog who had been gentle and loving with the children up to the time of his unprovoked attack.

Themes

Although King depicts the moral issues surrounding the death penalty in black and white, The Green Mile's depiction of God's role in human affairs is extraordinarily ambivalent. Unfailingly ethical in his response to events, Paul Edgecomb, was raised in what he jokingly calls the "Church of Praise Jesus, the Lord is Mighty." While, by 1932, his descriptions of the religious fervor of his childhood have an ironic edge, he has retained the habit of interpreting events in scriptural terms. Witnessing the healing of a dying woman was, Paul says, akin to seeing "the scales fall from Saul's eyes on the Road to Damascus . . ." (Coffey on the Mile). Paul (and, with him, the reader) believe that Coffey's healing both of Paul's urinary infection and of Melinda's brain tumor are miracles.

Yet Paul moves from traditional Christianity to anger at a God whose acts of mercy are arbitrarily parceled out. In 1932, Paul's healing makes him wonder what God wants of him: "to meditate on God's will, and the extraordinary lengths to which God has gone to realize His will" (Coffey's Hands). Yet, toward the end of his life, Paul is furious with God for permitting injustice, hideous suffering, and unavenged evil.

Thus, The Green Mile progresses spiritually in the opposite direction from Desperation, published the same year (see separate entry). Manipulated by God into battling a demon, Desperation's David Carver reiterates that "God is cruel," only to learn, at the end, that God is really love. In The Green Mile, God had, in 1932, sent the mouse, Mr. Jingles, to comfort Del in his last weeks. In the same year, God's "suffering servant," Coffey, had healed the sick and (sometimes) raised the dead. Yet, as an old man, Paul feels betrayed by that same God, who had permitted Paul's beloved wife, Janet, to die in a bus accident. Of human suffering, Paul concludes: "If it happens, God lets it happen, and when we say "I don't understand," God replies, "I don't care" (Coffey on the Mile). Paul's progressively more angry and ambivalent spiritual questioning keeps The Green Mile from simplistic moralism.

Adaptations

Audiobooks were issued simultaneously with each chapbook. The entire unabridged version of The Green Mile takes up twelve sound cassettes and runs for eighteen hours. All are read by Frank Muller, whose folksy delivery provides a splendid recreation of King's hard-working, decent, Southern Protestant narrator, Paul Edgecombe. Muller has narrated other Audiobooks based on King's works: Different Seasons, Skeleton Crew (1985), The Mist (1985), and The Regulators.

The Green Mile has appeared in Hebrew (Tel Aviv: Modan, 1996) and in Spanish (Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 1996).

Key Questions

Each successive chapbook ends with an invitation to "Enter The Green Mile Contest!" Contestants were asked to write a fifty-word response to a question pertaining to that particular volume.

King's questions provide a good starting point for discussion of each volume.

Both the serial format and the discussion questions reflect King's desire to engage in an ongoing dialog with his "constant readers."

The Two Dead Girls: "Why does the mouse, Mr. Jingles, choose Delacroix as its special friend?"

The Mouse on the Mile: "It is said in the book that the guards have no real power over the prisoners on the Green Mile.

What does this mean?"

Coffey' s hands: "King constantly portrays Percy much less sympathetically than Delacroix or Coffey. What is he trying to say?"

The Bad Death of Eduard Delacroix: "Brad Dolan, the orderly at Georgia Pines, reminds the narrator of Percy Wetmore.

What similarities do the two of them share?"

NightJourney: "The narrator, Paul Edgecombe, has a strange dream on the way back from Warden Moore's house. What do you think the dream means?"

Coffey on the Mile: "Would you like to have John Coffey's 'Gift'? Why or why not?"

The Green Mile might fruitfully be discussed in conjunction with books, fiction and non-fiction, that provide in-depth looks at prisoners, especially those facing execution. Percy Wetmore brings John Coffey onto E Block shouting: "Dead man walking! Dead man walking here!"

(The Two Dead Girls). The allusion is to the book by Helen Prejean, Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States (1993), or to the film based upon it. Other works with a prison milieu are Brendan Beham's play, The Quart Fellow, Norman Mailer's The Executioner's Song (1979; see separate entry); Truman Capote's In Cold Blood (1965; see separate entry); Jack Henry Abbott's In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison (1981); and Eldridge Cleaver's Soul on Ice (1967).

1. Discuss what Paul has to say about his own writing process and the effect that reliving events in 1932 have on him in the present. Why is he compelled to relive events that are so painful for him?

2. What parallels do you find between the E-Block and the Georgia Pines Nursing Home? Discuss other ways in which E-Block, with its condemned prisoners waiting to be executed, is used metaphorically to describe other human conditions.

3. Discuss The Green Mile as a critique of the death penalty. What do you make of the fact that, during the time span covered, the men executed are, respectively, a Native American, a French Canadian, and a man who is both Black and mentally retarded?

4. Discuss God's role in The Green Mile.

Brought up in "the church of Praise Jesus, The Lord Is Mighty," Paul sees the hand of God in Coffey's healings and in Mr. Jingles' appearance to comfort condemned murder, Eduard Delacroix. Yet, at the end of the story, Paul is overwhelmed by God's cruelty in permitting the senseless deaths of his wife, the Detterick twins, and John Coffey. What do you make of this contradiction? Do you think that the spiritual views of the younger or the older Paul best explain the book's events?

5. The Green Mile ends on a somber note. The sadistic orderly, Brad Dolan, is (uncharacteristically for Stephen King) never punished. All Paul's friends have died, and Paul himself is waiting for a death that seems slow in coming. Do you find King's downbeat ending appropriate, or would you like to rewrite it?

6. King's books are regularly made into films and King finds much of his literary inspiration in films. Would The Green Mile be suitable for a motion picture adaptation? If so, who would you choose to direct it? What actor would you cast as Paul Edgecombe? As William Wharton?

As John Coffey?

7. Do you find it convincing that Paul Edgecombe works so hard to track down evidence that demonstrates conclusively that John Coffey could not have murdered Cora and Kathe Detterick, then make no effort to get the innocent man a new trial? Do you believe that Paul, as he is characterized, would execute someone he knows—and can prove—is innocent?

8. King often provides clues to his characters' moral natures through what they read. Percy is an avid fan of pornographic comic books, Argosy, Stag, and Men's Adventure. Brad Dolan carries around Gross Jokes and Sick jokes. What types of books do you enjoy, and what does your choice of reading say about you? If you are a Stephen King fan, why do his books strike a responsive chord in you?

9. What is the difference between reading a book in its entirety and reading it in installments? Do you agree with King that the effect of a story is experienced more intensely when the reader cannot read (or skim) the book at a sitting? What are the advantages and disadvantages of the serial format?

10. The Green Mile is set mainly in the male world of a death row prison block.

There are, however, some female charac ters: e.g., Paul's wife, Janet, and his eighty-year-old special friend, Elaine Connelly; the warden's ailing wife, Melinda; and Mrs. Detterick, who attends Coffey's execution and yells that she wants him to suffer. Do you find King's women convincing as people? Why or why not?

11. The review of The Green Mile in New York Times Book Review calls the novel unconvincing in "its Depression ambiance," saying that it "radiates 1996, not 1931, or feels cadged from a James Cagney movie". Do you agree or disagree with this assessment? If you agree, what aspects of the Depression milieu or of the characters' attitudes and speech seem anachronistic to you? Does lack of historical authenticity pose a problem for you in enjoying the book?

Literary Precedents

Stephen King is one of the most allusive of all contemporary fiction writers.

Because he is a voracious, eclectic reader and motion picture viewer, references to an amazingly wide range of sources crop up in his works. Part of the fun of reading The Green Mile is being one of the insiders who recognizes echoes, not only of Poe, Lovecraft, and other horror writers, but of Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men (1937; see separate entry); the noir films White Heat (1949) and Kiss of Death (1947); and the Bible.

Readers may wish to explore The Green Mile's many biblical references. In John Coffey, King alludes both to the Isaiah's servant and to Jesus. Coffey is burdened with such an empathy for suffering humanity that he weeps continually, recalling Isaiah's description of the suffering servant: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: . . . and with his stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53: 4-5). In Paul's dream about the crucifixion, Coffey stands in for Christ. Paul and the guards, "Brutal," Harry, and Dean, are Centurions crucifying John Coffey, flanked by Percy Wetmore (the bad thief) and Eduard Delacroix (the good thief). Like Isaiah's servant and Christ, Coffey suffers violence and scorn from those he came to help.

Related Titles

In The Green Mile's frame story, Paul Edgecomb enjoys a "special friendship" with Elaine Connelly. Their twilight years romance is reminiscent of the courtship of self-described "Old Crock," Ralph Roberts, and Lois Chasse in King's Insomnia (1994). At sixty-eight, Lois is hounded by grown children trying to put her in a nursing home. In both books, King shows his profound sympathy with senior citizens in danger of losing their personal autonomy. Even the best nursing homes are, King suggests, another kind of death row.

Old age is one of many kinds of imprisonment, literal and figurative, found in King's fiction. The younger Paul Edgecombe has been forced to participate in the deaths of more than seventy human beings because he is a prisoner of Depression economics. The warden's wife, Melinda Moore, is imprisoned by a terminal illness. Melinda, Paul, and, of course, the prisoners on E Block join the many other prisoners in King's novels: e.g., Jessie Burlingame handcuffed to her bed in Gerald's Game (1992; see separate entry); Paul Sheldon in a deserted Colorado farmhouse, a captive of his "number one fan" (Misery, 1987; see separate entry); Stu Redman locked in the secret government medical facility in The Stand (1978).

"Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption" (Different Seasons, 1982) and The Green Mile are the King works set in a penitentiary. Both question society's arbitrariness of labeling some persons worthy of incarceration and even execution, while others, sometimes more evil than they, exercise power over them.

Andy Dufresne, an innocent man, has been sentenced to life in Shawshank Prison for the murder of his wife and her lover. Like John Coffey, Andy has been wrongfully convicted of murder by a mountain of circumstantial evidence. In both works, the condemned man exercises a redemptive influence over his grim and restrictive environment. While he is not, like Coffey, a Christ figure, Andy Dufresne (as the tide suggests) helps inmates to redeem themselves by building the prison library and managing their investments.

Like the other two books King published in 1996, The Regulators (see separate entry) and Desperation (see separate entry), The Green Mile deals with demon possession, although in a more ambiguous, understated fashion. When Coffey cures Paul's urinary infection, Coffey exhales what look like small black insects, which turn white, then disappear. Doctors believe that Melinda Moore's brain tumor has induced Tourette Syndrome. Filth spews from the mouth of the hitherto ladylike Melly. Paul suggests that a demon is responsible: "It had only been a matter of days since she had been recognizable—sick but still herself. Since then, the thing in her head must have moved with horrifying speed to consolidate its position. . . . Her expression when Coffey entered was one of fear and horror—as if something inside her had recognized a doctor that might be able to get at it and pry it loose . . . I'm not saying that Melly Moore was possessed, and I'm aware that, wrought up as I was, all my perceptions of that night must be suspect. But I have never completely discounted the possibility of demonic

possession, either" (Night Journey). This equation of illness with demon possession harks back to the New Testament. Like Jesus, Coffey is at one and the same time a healer and exorcist.

The demon Tak, who possesses various characters in both The Regulators and Desperation, is an ancient earth spirit, released when an old mine, where Chinese miners had been buried alive, is uncovered. In The Regulators, Tak possesses Seth, an autistic child: the worst of his autistic behaviors are attributed to the demon's influence. Like the brain tumor demon in The Green Mile, the Tak of Desperation damages its hosts both spiritually and physically. Tak causes any existing illness (cancer, a leaking heart valve, a yeast infection) to intensify until its host's body is destroyed.

Desperation's vevout child, David Carver, and The Green Mile's John Coffey are, respectively, God's instruments in battling demonic evil. The subject matter of the three books suggests that King is moving away from secularly conceived monsters toward overtly spiritual themes.

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