

## The Martyr Archetype And A Brief History Of The Electric Chair In Frank Darabont's 'The Green Mile'

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### ABSTRACT

Stephen King's *The Green Mile*<sup>1</sup>, originally published on August 29, 1996, was chosen by Frank Darabont for film adaptation, which resulted in the film's first premier with the same title, *The Green Mile*, on December 10, 1999<sup>2</sup>. The Film is an American fantasy drama that deals with various aspects of the Great Depression. It deals with religious matters, crime, racism, deathrow, and execution through the electric chair. This article aims to analyze the incidents of wrongful execution by the electric chair during the late 19th and early 20th century and the pain and suffering of the martyr archetype (John Coffey) as described in the film.

**KEYWORDS :** Stephen King, Electric Chair, Archetypal Criticism, Martyr Archetype, *The Green Mile*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In his archetypal theory, Carl Jung suggests that archetypes are universally pervasive images, and one can find such archetypes in various forms of art, fictional and non-fictional, irrespective of time and genre. It is essential to understand the archetype to analyze a character and what patterns they follow<sup>3</sup>. These patterns or attributes may relate to other characters, fictional or non-fictional. This method helps the reader understand the depth of a character and a narrative and the primary motive. The film's narrative is based on 1935, the great depression, when the country was going through the worst of times, which peaked between 1929 and 1939. Quite a noticeable change of year to 35' from 1932 is in the original text's adaptation. In the adaptation, Edgecomb says to Ellie, "Oh, I have lived many years, Ellie, but 1935 that year takes the prize. That year, I had the worst urinary infection of my life, and it was also the year of John Coffey and the two dead girls." (*The Green Mile*, 9.100) However, the text mentions the year 1932, "I felt cold all over, except for my groin, which seemed to burn with the ghost of the urinary infection which had so troubled my life in the fall of 1932 - the fall of John Coffey, Percy Wetmore, and Mr. Jingles, the trained mouse". (King 110)

### 2. METHODOLOGY

This article aims to critically analyze Stephen King's character, John Coffey, as an archetypal martyr and the narrative attribution of the history of abuse and the electric chair in *The Green Mile*. Qualitative research methodology is applied in text-to-film adaptation to understand the source material and its potential for visual storytelling. This approach involves methods such as content analysis, interviews, and focus groups to explore the original text's themes, characters, and narrative structure. By delving into the nuances of the source material, filmmakers can better grasp the emotional and intellectual essence of the story, which can then inform their creative decisions during the adaptation process. Additionally, qualitative research can help filmmakers navigate the potential challenges and opportunities in translating a textual work into a visual medium. Applying qualitative research methodology in text-to-film adaptation enables a richer and more insightful approach to translating literature into cinema.

"*The Green Mile*" by Stephen King is a primary source for qualitative research, providing firsthand material for analysis and interpretation. As a work of fiction, the novel offers unique insights into themes, characters, and storytelling techniques. In contrast, Carl Jung's archetypal theory would be considered a secondary source. This theoretical framework analyzes and interprets the primary source, "*The Green Mile*." Jung's archetypal theory provides a lens through which to examine the characters and themes within the novel, offering a deeper understanding of the universal symbols and motifs present in the story. By combining the primary source of "*The Green Mile*" with the secondary source of Jung's archetypal theory, the researcher provides a comprehensive qualitative analysis that delves into the novel's underlying meanings and psychological dimensions. In qualitative research, primary sources refer to original materials that have not been previously interpreted or analyzed.

Secondary sources use existing materials that analyze, interpret, or discuss primary sources. Selective/qualitative methodology is applied to create a firm ground for the paper's argument. Subject-centric images from appropriate scenes in

the movie are chosen to describe the sentimental and concrete delivery of abuse, brutality of the electric chair, and the archetypal pattern of martyr in John Coffey. to the audience. The secondary source for the argument is structured on the archetypal theory of Carl Jung and Craig Brandon's *The Electric Chair: An Unnatural American History*.

### **The Racist Laws in the early 20th century:**

Stephen King's 'The Green Mile' is set in 1932. It is crucial to understand the laws of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which existed for about 100 years, to understand the injustice that the hero, John Coffey, faced. The prevalence of racist laws in the 20th century cast a long shadow over American society, perpetuating inequality and injustice for generations. Throughout much of the 20th century, racial segregation was enforced through a series of laws and practices known as Jim Crow laws<sup>4</sup>. These laws mandated the segregation of public schools and public transportation, restrooms, restaurants, and drinking fountains for whites and blacks. In addition, many states had laws that disenfranchised African Americans and other minority groups, making it nearly impossible for them to exercise their right to vote. The impact of these laws was far-reaching, affecting everything from education and employment opportunities to access to public services and infrastructure.

One of the most notorious examples of racist laws in the 20th century was the policy of Japanese internment during World War II. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States government forcibly relocated and interned over 100,000 Japanese Americans, citing concerns about national security. This blatant disregard for the civil rights and liberties of an entire group of people based on their race remains a dark stain on American history. It reminds of the devastating consequences of racial prejudice and discrimination<sup>5</sup>.

In addition to these explicit laws and policies, there were also more subtle forms of racism embedded in various aspects of society. Housing discrimination, commonly known as redlining, systematically denied African Americans and other minorities access to housing loans and mortgages, effectively segregating neighborhoods and perpetuating economic disparities. Furthermore, discriminatory employment practices and wage disparities limited the economic mobility of minority groups, exacerbating the cycle of poverty and inequality. The peak of racism was decreased by the end of the Civil War, which freed African Americans from slavery, and by 1968, racism and racist laws took a u-turn when African Americans were given the right to vote. Segregation of African Americans became official with a series of southern laws, for example, the 'Black Codes,' which were implemented around 1865 to make black people avail of cheap labour since slavery had been abolished by then. During the Black Code laws, this segregation took a really derogatory move for African Americans when the Jim Crow Laws discriminated against them in schools, public parks, theatres, jails, asylums, separate waiting rooms, and the long list goes on... Oklahoma was the first state to segregate phone booths in 1915 for black people in the country. The derogatory term 'Jim Crow' phrase originated with the song and dance 'Jump Jim Crow' in which white actor Thomas D. Rice performed in blackface in 1828. The people who opposed Jim Crow laws would face arrest, jail sentences, violence, fines, and death.

### **The Electric Chair:**

John Coffey, the main character, represents his race, the trauma of racism and abuse, and the injustice the black community of the time went through. Alfred P. Southwick proposed execution by the electric chair in 1881. The first person on whom this method of execution was used was William Kemmler in Auburn Prison on August 6, 1890<sup>6</sup>. According to the report, physicians Edward Sputzka and Carlos MacDonald were present, and after the execution, when Kemmler was still breathing, he got electrocuted again. It took 8 minutes for a successful execution. The sight was so gruesome that the witnesses claimed that his body caught fire in the process. The news came with the headline: 'Far worse than hanging' in The New York Times. We see a similar type of execution in the Green Mile when Eduard Delacroix is being executed. The sponge, which has to be wet, is kept dry intentionally, and the current cannot run through the body, which causes death. Instead, his body is shown to be burning from the inside. The incident shows the brutality and inhumanity of the electric chair<sup>7</sup>.

In the Green Mile, the age of John Coffey is unknown, but indications suggest that John Coffey may be a minor. Coffey repeatedly asks for the lights to be turned on, and before the execution, his only demand is not to cover his face since he is afraid of the dark, suggesting he is a sensitive child at heart. Through his book, *The Green Mile*, Stephen King showcases brutal real-life injustice and executions. John Coffey's execution reminds George Junius Stinney Jr. of electrocution. George Stinney was an African American boy who was executed by the electric chair method on June 16, 1944, for the murders of two young white girls. He was the youngest African American to be on death row and executed in the 20th century<sup>8</sup>. Seventy years after his execution, the South Carolina court dictated that he did not receive a fair trial and was executed wrongfully. Stephen King and characters like Eduard Delacroix and John Coffey questioned this execution method and injustice towards people in the early 20th century. It is to be noted that the murder of two white young girls caused the execution of John Coffey, and similarly, George Stinney faced the same fate due to the death of two white young girls of the same age<sup>9</sup>.

### **The Martyr Archetype and its connection with pain, suffering, and abuse:**

In his theory of the human psyche, the psychologist Carl Jung gave the concept of archetype, which resides within the collective unconscious of a person. 'Archaic remnants,' 'pre-existing forms,' 'primordial images,' and 'representation collectives' are the synonyms used by Jung, which refer to one archetype proposition. The archetypal theory is closely related

to the collective unconscious, a "second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals" (Jung, 43). According to Jung's archetypal theory, no archetype is morally incorrect or correct; they exist and are a means to understand a person's underlying motive. The Martyr Archetype is both positive and negative, representing the Enlightened and Shadow Martyr, respectively. The Martyr Archetype is quite similar to the scapegoat archetype, but there is a vast difference between them; the scapegoat gets harmed and is not well aware of the circumstance; on the other hand, the martyr archetype takes pride and puts themselves in a superior position and knows the repercussions and is well aware of the circumstance and where the plot is leading to. This archetype represents self-sacrifice, endures pain, and surrenders for a greater cause than oneself. It is closely related to sacrifice, unwavering commitment, and suffering, which give them praise and recognition in societal movements and values.

The earliest examples of the martyr archetype can be found in various historical and religious figures who died for a more significant cause, for some great cause, or their belief in God. This archetype leads to a challenging life of struggles and the willingness to self-sacrifice. In Christianity, Jesus Himself and Biblical Stephen are examples of martyr archetypes, and in Sikhism, persecuted Guru Arjan and Guru Teg Bahadur are examples who hold similar traits. In nonfiction, Sir Martin Luther King Jr., whose assassination became an inspiration to fight racism for many, is considered the martyr archetype. Violence to the body and institutional executions with the martyr's commitment to beliefs with a more significant cause is concluded in the martyr archetypal stories. In Western culture, sacrifice is related to powerful allegorical stories due to the high values of individual life. According to Durkheim, the death of a martyr has to achieve public attention; his choice of death must create a firm ground for her/his cause and beliefs. Archetypal martyrdom consists of choosing death instead of quitting a belief; she/he accepts a political, religious, or ideological position and embraces unordinary beliefs and acceptance of the crucial sacrifice of self<sup>10</sup>. The narrative of execution majorly accounts for events leading up to the execution, which may include speech or final words.

A martyr is generally perceived as "a person who sacrifices something of great value and especially life itself for the sake of principle" (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, second definition of Martyr 2012). A martyr goes through persecution for renouncing his/her beliefs. The term 'martyr' comes from the words 'martyrs' or 'Marcus,' literally meaning 'witness' in Ancient Greek. It was quite a dangerous matter to be a witness in the early Christian era since witnesses were associated with execution and persecution. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is an archetypal pattern of a martyr in Christianity. The Christians believe the cause of Jesus's crucifixion is His willingness to die for the sinners. According to the prophet Muhammad, martyrdom is appreciated, while suicide is prohibited. In the case of martyrdom, it is considered a way to prove devotion to God, "I would love to be martyred in Allah's Cause and then get resurrected and then get martyred, and then get resurrected again and then get martyred and then get resurrected again and then get martyred." (Hadith 15) Most of the martyrs come from the scriptures. However, the execution of the Greek philosopher Socrates (399 B.C.) is another example of an archetypal martyr who accepted death (due to corrupting the minds of the young) rather than giving up his enlightened ideology. Another example of such a self-sacrificial woke martyr is Mahatma Gandhi, who fought against the British with his nonviolent ideology of civil disobedience.

### **John Coffey as the Archetypal Martyr:**

In Stephen King's novel "The Green Mile," the character John Coffey, an African American death row inmate with extraordinary healing abilities, serves as a focal point for exploring themes related to racism and injustice. The story is set in a Southern prison during the 1930s, a time and place marked by systemic racism and deeply ingrained prejudice. John Coffey, wrongfully convicted of a brutal crime, symbolizes the suffering and unjust treatment experienced by many African Americans during that era. Throughout the novel, Stephen King skillfully portrays the prevailing racism and discrimination faced by John Coffey and other black characters, illuminating the profound societal impact of these attitudes. Coffey's unjust conviction and the subsequent mistreatment he endures within the criminal justice system underscore the deep-seated racial biases that influenced legal proceedings and societal attitudes.

Consequently, the novel offers poignant commentary on the far-reaching effects of racial prejudice and the miscarriage of justice. By interweaving Coffey's extraordinary powers with the harsh realities of racism, Stephen King crafts an engaging narrative that prompts readers to confront the injustices endured by marginalized communities. By conveying John Coffey's story, King effectively illustrates the enduring impact of systemic racism on individuals and communities, encouraging readers to contemplate the lasting legacy of racial discrimination and the significance of empathy and fairness.



**Figure 1. John Coffey howling with pain for the two dead girls, The Green Mile, 00:20:43.**

John Coffey first appears in the prison cell, handcuffed and chained, six feet eight inches tall, big black man. During his first conversation with Edgecomb, he says, "I couldn't help it. I tried to take it back, but it was too late." Later he gets to know that John Coffey had raped and murdered two minor daughters of Klaus Detterick. In the scene, John Coffey is sitting with two little girls and howling out of pain, as if he could feel all the sufferings of the little girls endured. John Coffey has a unique superpower to cure and take the pain and suffering of a person, transmit it from them to him, and he suffers and digests it supernaturally.

This unique gift of ending one's pain by taking it from them is a trait of a martyr archetype. Later, during Edgecomb's rounds around the E block cell, Edgecomb has a nasty urinary infection, and he lies down on the floor. John Coffey tells him that he needs to see him and insists he comes close to him as if Coffey already knows that Edgecomb is suffering from some illness in his groin area. "He hitched under my hand, then made an unpleasant gagging, retching sound. His mouth opened the way horses sometimes open their mouths to allow the bit - reluctantly, with the lips peeling back from the teeth in a kind of desperate sneer. Then his teeth parted, too, and he exhaled a cloud of tiny black insects that looked like gnats or nosebees. They swirled furiously between his knees, turned white, and disappeared". (King 122)

Coffey took away Edgecomb's infection and ingested it into him, which caused him great pain and discomfort. However, with his superpower or gift, he can take out the infection in the form of insects through his mouth. Coffey's discomfort, pain, and exhaustion during the process reflect his martyr archetypal trait of helping and enduring immense pain for others. Coffey revives Del's dying mouse, Mr. Jingles, with his powers; he chokes, coughs, and suffers again, and similar insects vanish through his mouth. While Del is being persecuted in the electric chair, John Coffey holds his mouse in his hands; Coffey tries to take Eduard Delacroix's suffering and feels his pain throughout the process of the electric chair. "I went down to John Coffey. He wiped away his tears with the heels of his hands. His eyes were red and sore-looking, and it came to me that he was exhausted, too. Why he should have been, a man who trudged around the exercise yard maybe two hours a day and either sat or laid down in his cell the rest of the time. I didn't know, but I didn't doubt what I was seeing. It was too clear. 'Poor Del,' he said in a low, hoarse voice. 'Poor old Del.' 'Yes,' I said. 'Poor old Del. John, are you okay?' 'He's out of it,' Coffey said. 'Del's out of it. Isn't he, boss?' 'Yes. Answer my question, John. Are you okay?' 'Del's out of it; he's the lucky one. No matter how it happened, he's the lucky one." (King 201)

As the film progresses, Coffey's meeting with Melinda Moore, who suffers from a brain tumour, is arranged. Coffey sneaks out of the cell and goes to Melinda's house. Where he kisses her and takes away the cancer, which causes him immense pain and suffocation. When Coffey returns to his cell, he holds his arm and transfers the insects/pain to him. He behaves unusually and shoots the cellmate many times. Edgecomb enquires about the incident to John Coffey, for which he insists Edgecomb hold his hand and see what he goes through every day and what it is like to live with all the suffering and pain known to humanity. While holding hands, Edgecomb gets fragments of visions of how William 'Will Bill' Wharton raped Katie and Cora.

Considering Coffey's execution, Edgecomb opens the cells to converse with him. In their discussion, John Coffey explains how much pain he endures daily and how hard it is for him to live with all the injustice in the world. Edgecomb tells John Coffey that he can manage an escape plan for him and see how far he can go, but John remains reluctant and still chooses the electric chair over living in a world of evil and miseries. "You and Mr. Howell and the other bosses been good to me," John Coffey said. 'I know you been worryin, but you ought to quit on it now. Because I want to go, boss.' 'I tried to speak and couldn't. He could, though. What he said next was the longest I ever heard him speak. 'I'm rightly tired of the pain I hear and feel, boss. I'm tired of bein on the road, lonely as a robin in the rain. Not never havin no buddy to go on with or tell me where we's comin from or goin to or why. I'm tired of people being ugly to each other. It feels like pieces of glass in my head. I'm



tired of all the times I've wanted to help and couldn't. I'm tired of being in the dark. Mostly, it's the pain. There's too much. If I could end it, I would. But I can't, can't." (King 313)

To analyze an archetypal character, observation of multiple recurrent arrangements is crucial. These arrangements are called suits (suitable events/cases), which a specific archetype follows throughout the plot and in different stories that can belong to an entirely different culture or era. For example, the martyr archetype has characteristics like compassion, inspiration, selflessness, courage, and sacrifice. In the case of John Coffey, he is compassionate towards the good people around him, Mr. Jingles (the pet mouse), and the natural elements like stars and grass, which he appreciates. Coffey sets an inspiration through his sacrifice and selflessness to be good and do good. He tends to face immense pain and does not hesitate to take others' sufferings away. In conversation with Melinda, John is asked about the scars and how such gruesome scars were inflicted on him, to which Coffey responds that he hardly remembers the scars he gave him. This shows his selfless spirit, on the other hand, he feels precisely how victims in the film feel and what happens to them. "Who are you?" she asked in a clear, reasonable voice. 'And why have you so many scars on your hands and arms? Who hurt you so badly?' 'I don't hardly remember where they all come from, ma'am,' John Coffey said in a humble voice and sat down beside her on her bed. Melinda smiled as well as she could - the sneering right side of her mouth trembled, but wouldn't quite come up. She touched a white scar, curved like a scimitar, on the back of his left hand. 'What a blessing that is! Do you understand why?' 'Reckon if you don't know who hurt you or dog you down, it don't keep you up nights,' John Coffey said in his almost-Southern voice. She laughed at that; the sound as pure as silver in the bad-smelling sickroom. Hal was beside me now, breathing rapidly but not trying to interfere. When Melly laughed, his rapid breathing paused for a moment, indrawn, and one of his big hands gripped my shoulder. He gripped it hard enough to leave a bruise - I saw it the next day - but right then I hardly felt it." (King 260)

His qualities fit perfectly into the martyr archetype. According to Carl Jung, this kind of archetype follows a journey with four stages,

Awareness: The martyr seeks out the cause or a person worth sacrificing.

Sacrifice: They suffer due to a more significant cause.

Inspiration: Their actions teach others to be compassionate and courageous.

Legacy: Their sacrifice affects others significantly and leaves an impact on them.

Coffey's journey is quite similar to the journey of a martyr archetype. He chooses to save the little girls in bright daylight even though he looks like the culprit. His more significant reason for sacrificing and staying there is to help the two young girls who were raped, but he fails to save them. Coffey's sacrifice is to take others' pain and endure it to himself so the other person does not suffer. The legacy Coffey left behind was on Mr. Jingles the Mouse and Edgecomb. He 'infected' them with life, and due to his impact and energy transfer to Edgecomb and Mr. Jingles, they live a long life.

"King has written a Depression-era prison novel that's as hauntingly touching as it is just plain haunted... One of his freshest and most frightening works to date." (Tom De Haven, Entertainment Weekly) In Frank Darabont's film "The Green Mile," the thematic elements of abuse, suffering, and racism are intricately interwoven. The storyline portrays the egregious abuse of authority by prison guards and the profound suffering experienced by the death row inmates. A minor change in the narrative can be seen when Coffey cures Edgecomb's infection; in the book, Edgecomb enters Coffey's cell, but in the adaptation, Edgecomb stays close to the bars of Coffey's cell as he cures him.

"Was it from when you were a guard at the prison?" she asked. "The time that you've been writing about in the solarium?" I nodded. 'I worked on our version of Death Row - 'I know - 'Only we called it the Green Mile. Because of the linoleum on the floor. In the fall of '32, we got this fellow - we got this wild man - named William Wharton." King 110] Another change in the film can be seen when Coffey cures Edgecomb's infection; in the original text, Edgecomb enters Coffey's cell, but in the adaptation, Edgecomb stays close to the bars of Coffey's cell as he cures him.

Additionally, the narrative confronts the prevalent issue of racism, particularly in the unjust treatment of John Coffey, an African American man endowed with extraordinary abilities, while incarcerated. The film adeptly illuminates societal injustices, offering poignant insights into the challenges faced by marginalized individuals. The Green Mile is the story of John Coffey, a humungous yet gentle prisoner on death row for the rape and murder of Caucasian twin young girls. Paul Edgecomb narrates the story at the age of 108; his narrative is of when he was a prison guard at the Cold Mountain Penitentiary's death-row facility in the 1930s (1935 in film adaptation and 1932 in original text). It was the time when the electric chair was used as a humane method for punishment of the inmate on the death penalty. The electric chair, called 'Old Sparky,' has a strong influence on the entire narrative and showcases one of the most inhumane ways to die. Death by hanging was also another choice for punishment; not only in America but also in the Philippines adopted the execution by the electric chair. The novel was published monthly in 6 volumes, hitting the list of bestsellers in the New York Times. Frank Darabont adapted the story into a film three years later, which starred Tom Hanks as Paul Edgecomb and Michael Clarke Duncan as John Coffey.



**Figure 2. John Coffey getting electrocuted by the electric chair, *The Green Mile*, 02:51:20.**

The character analysis of John Coffey concludes that his character touches the audience's heart with various real-life, inhumane incidents of the Great Depression era, like racism and physical abuse of African American people even after the abolishment of slavery. It reminds the spectators/readers about the similar wrongful execution of the fourteen-year-old African American boy George Stinney<sup>11</sup>. Through Carl Jung's psychoanalytical archetypal theory, Stephen King's characterization and the pattern followed by John Coffey fall under the Martyr Archetype. William Francis Kemmler was the first person who was executed by the electric chair took place in August 1890. His execution is depicted through the character of Eduard Delacroix. Kemmler was electrocuted twice because, after the first electrocution of 17 seconds, he was witnessed to be still breathing. The attending physicians commanded to "have the current turned on again, quick-no delay." Similar was the presentation and synopsis of Stephen King's Delacroix, who was still breathing after the first attempt of electrocution, which failed because the wet sponge that transmitted successfully through the boy was kept dry (intentionally by Percy Wetmore) and failed to kill him entirely. Brutus Howell called out to generate the current again for a successful execution. The wordplay of Stephen King is quite noticeable in his characters since John Coffey, the archetypal martyr, has the same acronym of Jesus Christ 'J.C.,' Eduard Delacroix, whose last name literally means 'from the Cross' and the pun in Percy Wetmore's name since he was the person who keeps the sponge dry, instead of keeping it wet, has his surname as 'Wetmore.'



**Figure 3. Eduard Delacroix's body catches fire during the execution, *The Green Mile*, 01:23:12.**

The film adaptation by Frank Darabont successfully presented the sentiments and gruesomeness of racism, crime, and execution through the electric chair in the early 20th century. John Coffey, as a character, stands out for portraying racism, execution, physical and mental abuse, and the psychosis of the martyr archetype. Darabont's fitting scenes of the gruesome scenes of the execution, murdered and raped young girls lying in Coffey's lap, Coffey's howling for their immense suffering, and his pain for using his powers for others' good; can seize the emotion and justify it from the text to visual adaptation.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "The Green Mile" adeptly delves into the martyr archetype, portraying the character of John Coffey as a poignant example of self-sacrifice and moral integrity. Moreover, the film provides a compelling exploration of the historical context and societal implications of the electric chair, shedding light on its significance as a method of execution. The juxtaposition of these themes within the narrative serves as a profound commentary on the complexities of justice, empathy, and the human experience. Through Frank Darabont's meticulous direction and storytelling, the film not only captivates audiences but also prompts deep reflection on profound philosophical and ethical questions.

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