AFFECTIVE AMBIVALENCE AND MORAL COMPLEXITY IN STEPHEN KING'S THE GREEN MILE: A COGNITIVE-NARRATOLOGICAL APPROACH

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Abstract: This article examines affective ambivalence and moral complexity in Stephen King's The Green Mile through a cognitive-narratological approach. It explores how narrative perspective, characterization, and emotional contrasts influence readers' interpretations of justice, suffering, and responsibility. Particular attention is devoted to John Coffey's ambiguous social position, Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration, and the tension between institutional authority and individual morality. Drawing on affective narratology, narrative theory, and ethical criticism, the study demonstrates how conflicting emotional responses complicate conventional distinctions between innocence and guilt. It argues that emotional ambivalence encourages readers to reconsider moral judgments and engage critically with the ethical implications of narrative events.

Keywords: affective ambivalence, cognitive narratology, moral complexity, Stephen King, The Green Mile, reader response.

Introduction

Literary narratives do more than communicate events; they organize readers' emotional experiences and influence how fictional characters and situations are interpreted. Fear, sympathy, anger, admiration, and moral uncertainty may emerge simultaneously, producing complex responses that cannot be reduced to a single emotional category. These contradictions are particularly significant in fiction concerned with suffering, punishment, and the boundaries between justice and injustice.

Stephen King's The Green Mile, published as a novel in six parts, offers a compelling example of this phenomenon [1]. Set primarily in a death-row facility during the Great Depression, the novel follows prison guard Paul Edgecombe and his encounters with condemned prisoners, especially John Coffey. Although Coffey has been convicted of a horrific crime, his extraordinary capacity for compassion and healing challenges the assumptions through which other characters and readers initially understand him. The novel's moral complexity arises from the conflict between institutional judgment and individual experience. The prison system establishes categories

of guilt, punishment, and authority, yet the narrative reveals circumstances in which these categories appear inadequate. Consequently, readers must negotiate competing interpretations of characters whose actions, intentions, and social positions resist simple moral classification.

Cognitive narratology provides a useful framework for investigating this process because it examines how narrative structures guide readers' mental representations of characters, events, and fictional worlds. Patrick Colm Hogan's Affective Narratology emphasizes the importance of emotional processes in the organization and interpretation of stories [2]. From this perspective, emotions are not merely reactions to narrative events; they participate in the construction of narrative meaning. This article examines how affective ambivalence contributes to the representation of moral complexity in The Green Mile. It focuses on the relationship between characterization, retrospective narration, empathy, and ethical judgment. The central argument is that King's novel encourages readers to revise their initial assumptions by presenting emotionally contradictory situations in which legal authority and moral legitimacy do not necessarily coincide.

Affective ambivalence and cognitive narratology

Affective ambivalence refers to the experience of conflicting or coexisting emotional responses toward the same character, event, or situation. A reader may sympathize with a character while remaining disturbed by that character's actions, or may admire an individual whose decisions nevertheless produce suffering. Such responses complicate interpretation because they prevent the reader from adopting a completely stable emotional position. Cognitive narratology examines how readers construct mental representations of fictional characters, motivations, and events. David Herman's work on narrative and cognitive approaches demonstrates the importance of understanding stories through the mental activities involved in interpreting narrative worlds [3]. Readers continually make inferences about characters' intentions, relationships, and likely actions, revising these inferences when new information becomes available.

In The Green Mile, these processes are particularly evident in the characterization of John Coffey. His physical appearance, criminal conviction, and imprisonment initially associate him with danger and guilt. However, his behavior gradually introduces information that challenges this interpretation. His sensitivity to suffering and extraordinary healing abilities complicate the relationship between his legal identity and his moral character. The resulting emotional response is ambivalent. Readers may experience apprehension because Coffey occupies the position of a condemned prisoner, yet they may also develop sympathy as his vulnerability and compassion become apparent.

This tension demonstrates how characterization can destabilize established expectations and encourage a reassessment of moral judgment.

The distinction between legal guilt and moral understanding is therefore central to the novel. The judicial system assigns Coffey a particular identity, but the narrative encourages readers to consider whether institutional classifications adequately represent the complexity of an individual human being.

John Coffey and the ethics of empathy

John Coffey represents one of the novel's most significant challenges to conventional moral categories. His physical strength contrasts with his emotional sensitivity, while his status as a condemned prisoner contrasts with his capacity to alleviate suffering. These contradictions create a character whose moral significance cannot be understood through appearance or legal classification alone. Coffey's name also produces a linguistic contrast with his characterization. His statement, "I'm tired, boss" [4], expresses exhaustion in simple, direct language. Within the narrative context, this expression acquires significance beyond physical fatigue. It communicates emotional suffering and suggests a profound sensitivity to the pain experienced by others.

The phrase is important because its simplicity contrasts with the extraordinary circumstances surrounding Coffey. Rather than presenting suffering through elaborate philosophical language, the narrative uses ordinary speech to communicate emotional exhaustion. This stylistic choice encourages readers to approach Coffey as a vulnerable individual rather than merely as a supernatural figure or condemned prisoner. Empathy, however, does not eliminate the novel's moral difficulties. The reader's sympathy for Coffey exists alongside awareness of the seriousness of the crime for which he has been condemned. The narrative's emotional force depends on the tension between these positions rather than on an uncomplicated movement from uncertainty to certainty.

This tension can be examined through the concept of ethical criticism. Martha Nussbaum argues that literature can contribute to ethical reflection by presenting complex human experiences and encouraging readers to consider perspectives different from their own [5]. Applied to King's novel, this approach suggests that emotional engagement enables readers to question how judgments are formed and whether social institutions adequately recognize individual circumstances. Coffey's characterization consequently transforms empathy into an interpretive challenge. Readers are encouraged to distinguish between the recognition of suffering and the automatic approval of every action. His moral significance emerges from the way his experiences expose the limitations of simplified judgments.

Paul Edgecombe and retrospective narration

Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration is another important source of affective complexity. Because the story is presented through a narrator reflecting on past experiences, readers encounter the events of the prison through a consciousness shaped by memory, regret, and accumulated understanding. Narrative perspective influences how readers interpret characters and events. Gérard Genette's account of narrative discourse distinguishes between the events represented and the manner in which they are narrated [6]. This distinction is particularly useful for understanding how Edgecombe's recollections shape the emotional meaning of the story.

The narrator does not simply reproduce the past as a neutral sequence of events. Instead, his reflections encourage readers to consider the lasting consequences of decisions made within the prison system. Earlier events acquire additional significance as the narrative develops, and apparently routine actions become connected with broader questions of responsibility and justice. Retrospective narration also introduces a tension between past knowledge and present understanding. The narrator's experiences invite readers to reconsider events that might initially appear straightforward. As the moral implications of the story become clearer, the distinction between professional duty and personal responsibility becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

This structure encourages readers to engage in repeated acts of interpretation. Their understanding of the characters develops alongside the narrator's reflections, while emotional responses are modified by the consequences of earlier decisions.

Institutional authority and moral complexity

The prison environment in The Green Mile is organized around formal procedures, professional responsibilities, and legal authority. These structures create an impression of order and predictability. Nevertheless, the narrative repeatedly raises questions about whether procedural legitimacy guarantees moral justice. The execution chamber is particularly significant because it represents the intersection of institutional power and irreversible human consequences. Prison personnel perform their duties within an established system, but the emotional and ethical implications of those duties cannot be resolved through procedural correctness alone. This contrast produces an important form of moral ambivalence. The guards are not presented simply as representatives of cruelty; they possess personal relationships, emotional vulnerabilities, and individual moral concerns. At the same time, their participation in the prison system raises questions about the relationship between obedience and responsibility.

The narrative therefore resists a straightforward opposition between good

individuals and an entirely abstract system. Instead, it examines how ordinary people operate within institutions whose actions may generate profound suffering. This complexity encourages readers to distinguish between understanding a character and excusing that character's decisions. Sympathy for a prison guard does not automatically eliminate questions about institutional participation, just as criticism of the prison system does not require denying the humanity of those who work within it.

The novel's ethical significance lies in its ability to sustain these competing interpretations. Readers must evaluate the relationship between personal intention, institutional responsibility, and the consequences of action.

Comparative analysis of narrative and emotional mechanisms

The principal mechanisms through which King develops affective ambivalence are summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Affective ambivalence and moral complexity in The Green Mile

Narrative element	Emotional response	Cognitive process	Ethical significance
John Coffey's characterization	Sympathy and apprehension	Revision of initial assumptions	Challenges the equation of appearance with moral identity
Coffey's healing abilities	Wonder and uncertainty	Reinterpretation of established beliefs	Complicates judgments about guilt and innocence
Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration	Regret and reflection	Reassessment of past events	Highlights the persistence of moral responsibility
Prison routines	Security and unease	Recognition of institutional contradictions	Questions the relationship between legality and justice
Execution scenes	Horror and compassion	Evaluation of consequences	Exposes the human implications of institutional authority
Relationships among prison personnel	Empathy and moral discomfort	Negotiation of conflicting perspectives	Distinguishes personal decency from institutional

			responsibility

The table illustrates how emotional responses interact with interpretive processes. Sympathy may encourage readers to reconsider a character's identity, while unease may prompt further examination of the circumstances surrounding that character's actions. Emotional ambivalence consequently becomes a means of developing ethical understanding. Importantly, the categories in the table represent interpretive observations rather than experimentally measured reader responses. They identify narrative features that invite particular emotional and cognitive reactions without assuming that all readers respond identically.

The reader's role in constructing moral meaning

The novel's emotional complexity depends partly on the reader's active participation in interpretation. Readers must connect narrative events, assess the reliability and limitations of their initial impressions, and reconsider moral assumptions as the story progresses. Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response emphasizes the role of readers in negotiating textual indeterminacy [7]. Literary works do not always provide complete explanations or eliminate every interpretive uncertainty. Instead, readers participate in the construction of meaning by connecting details and considering competing possibilities.

In The Green Mile, this process becomes especially important when readers compare the official representation of Coffey with the person revealed through his actions. The difference between these perspectives creates a gap that readers must interpret. The same process applies to the prison guards. Their professional roles provide one framework for understanding their behavior, while their personal experiences and ethical decisions provide another. Readers must evaluate both perspectives without assuming that either completely resolves the moral problems presented by the narrative.

This approach demonstrates why affective ambivalence is important to cognitive narratology. Emotional contradictions encourage readers to reconsider their interpretations, while narrative perspective determines how information becomes available and meaningful. The relationship between feeling and cognition therefore forms a central part of the novel's ethical structure.

Conclusion

This article has examined affective ambivalence and moral complexity in Stephen King's The Green Mile through a cognitive-narratological approach. The analysis demonstrates that the novel's ethical significance emerges from the interaction of characterization, emotional response, retrospective narration, and institutional criticism. John Coffey's characterization challenges conventional distinctions between legal guilt and moral identity. His

compassion and extraordinary abilities encourage sympathy while preserving the uncertainty associated with his circumstances. Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration further complicates interpretation by presenting past events through the perspective of memory and moral reflection.

The novel also questions whether institutional authority necessarily corresponds to ethical legitimacy. Through its representation of prison routines and executions, it encourages readers to examine the relationship between professional duty, personal responsibility, and human suffering. Affective ambivalence is therefore more than an emotional effect. It functions as a narrative mechanism that encourages readers to revise their assumptions, consider competing perspectives, and engage critically with moral uncertainty. The cognitive-narratological approach demonstrates that emotional responses and intellectual interpretation are closely connected in the construction of literary meaning.

Ultimately, The Green Mile illustrates how fiction can encourage ethical reflection without offering simplistic moral solutions. Its lasting significance lies in its capacity to sustain empathy while inviting critical examination of the institutions and judgments through which human lives are evaluated.

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