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## **A Foucauldian Approach in Stephen King's *The Green Mile***

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### **Abstract**

**This study aims to analyze *The Green Mile* by Stephen King in the light of the foucauldian approach of power in modern institutions. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Foucault, 1995) contributes to better understanding of the unusual role of prison literature in tackling such sharp issues as power structures and dynamics in modern prison systems. The study begins with detailed discussion of some theorists' ideas about institutional power. Then, it ends with analysis of the relations between prison conditions and racism in the novel. As the focus of this study is relationship between the prison system and the institutionalized racism in the United States as reflected in *The Green Mile*, the analysis demonstrates the complex interplay between control and opposition and the strategies of power and resistance that are commonly exercised with prisons by prison writers when defending their ideas, values, principles, and freedom against a dominant oppressing power.**

**Keywords: Foucauldian approach, institutions, prison, power, institutional power, dynamics, control, opposition.**

## Un Enfoque Foucaultiano En *La Milla Verde* De Stephen King

### Resumen

Este estudio tiene como objetivo analizar *The Green Mile* por Stephen King a la luz del enfoque foucaultiano del poder en las instituciones modernas. Disciplina y castigo: El nacimiento de la prisión (Foucault, 1995) contribuye a una mejor comprensión del papel inusual de la literatura penitenciaria al abordar temas tan agudos como las estructuras de poder y la dinámica en los sistemas penitenciarios modernos. El estudio comienza con una discusión detallada de las ideas de algunos teóricos sobre el poder institucional. Luego, termina con el análisis de las relaciones entre las condiciones carcelarias y el racismo en la novela. Como el foco de este estudio es la relación entre el sistema penitenciario y el racismo institucionalizado en los Estados Unidos como se refleja en *The Green Mile*, el análisis demuestra la compleja interacción entre el control y la oposición y las estrategias de poder y resistencia que comúnmente se ejercen con las cárceles. por escritores de prisión cuando defienden sus ideas, valores, principios y libertad contra un poder opresor dominante.

Palabras clave: enfoque foucaultiano, instituciones, prisión, poder, poder institucional, dinámica, control, oposición.

### 1. Introduction

Prison literature is an essential literary genre which sheds light on the theories of crime and punishment. Prisoners are able to write their experience and disseminate their works to convey reality to the world (Freeman, p. 143). Hence, this genre is invaluable for historian as it is regarded as a historical testimony for incident occurring at a certain time. In fact, the experiences of incarceration, confinement, and persecution have profoundly affected both political and religious lives (145). Contemporary American prison literature is a part of the American culture. The influential American prison works have been published since the early 1960s. The Autobiography of Malcolm X is considered a turning point in the contemporary prison writing since it depicts the experience of the Afro-American prisoners inside the jail (Franklin, P. 52). Thus, the main theme in the contemporary American prison literature is America itself as a jail of the black nation as

well as the Afro- American slavery in the United States (P. 60).

In the United States, people of color, as described by Lorna Rhodes (2001), are the most criminalized residents in a new line of transforming from slavery to prison as a form of dominant mode of punishment in the criminal justice system (p.67). According to Foucault, "While the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations that are very complex" (1982, p. 778). In other words, the subject of punishment and prisoners themselves cannot be neglected in the prison study because only the power of institution itself is not enough to get the clearest picture. Foucault adds "We have to know the historical conditions which motivate our conceptualization. We need a historical awareness of our present circumstance" (1982, p. 778). The cultural power relations should be related with the prison and its purpose. The history of any prison must be investigated with the history of its state. Marx emphasizes, "In order to study the connection between intellectual and material production it is above all essential to conceive the latter in its determined historical form" (Marx, 2000, p. 381). Punishment is so related to history not only power. Hence, the analysis of the cultural function of any prison cannot be successful without studying its roots. To get the prison as a concrete and real solution to crime, we have to see it as an intellectual production not mere a material structure.

## 2. Foucauldian Approach

Michel Foucault (1926-84) is one of the greatest philosophers who discuss the notion of power as a positive and productive force, not a negative force in society. He studies power and its relations in modern institutions as schools and prisons (the focus of this study). Foucault's notion was away from the 'sovereign' exercise of power, in feudal states to force their subjects. It is a new kind called 'disciplinary power' that does not need force or violence appears in the administrative systems and social services, such as prisons, schools and mental hospitals. He confirms on the concept of positivity to help people to discipline themselves and behave in expected ways in these institutions:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production' (Foucault, 1991, p. 194).

In fact, Foucault is interested in studying systems for the administration

to control populations. He says that Physical bodies are made to behave in certain ways, as a microcosm of social control of the wider population, through what he called ‘bio-power’. ‘Bio-power’, also called ‘discursive practice’, defines what normal, acceptable, deviant, etc. is. This discursive practice is in continuous change (Foucault, p. 1991). He believes that revolutions or any state-centric power struggles do not always lead to change in the social order. For some, Foucault’s concept of power is so elusive and removed from agency or structure that there seems to be little scope for practical action. But he has been hugely influential in pointing to the ways that norms can be so embedded as to be beyond our perception – causing us to discipline ourselves without any force from others.

According to Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, there is an intense desire to understand the role of the American prison throughout its history and its relation to the struggle of the oppressed minorities in it. Foucault uses an adaptation of Jeremy Bentham’s ideas of the “panopticon” to demonstrate to what extent the constant surveillance has a considerable impact not only on an individual within disciplinary institutions but also on society as a whole. Bentham (1748–1832) was a legal philosopher and advocate of prison reform. Bentham’s Panopticon is a prison design; i.e., a peripheral building divided into cells arranged around a central tower that is pierced with wide windows which are open onto the inner side of the ring. Thus, inmates are invisible to one another, but are constantly visible and observed by the guard station in the center of the building (Foucault, 200). Anthony Elliott defines Panopticism as “a society in which individuals are increasingly caught up in systems of power in and through which visibility is a key means of social control” (89).

The essence of the Panopticon is that control is achieved through what Foucault calls disciplinary power and self-surveillance (Foucault, p. 201). The general juridical form of the Panopticon guarantees a system of egalitarian rights, providing an apparatus for supervising its own mechanisms. In this central tower, the director may unexpectedly spy on all employees, judge them continuously, alter their behaviors, and impose upon them the methods he thinks best (204). Thus, Panopticism is the general principle of a new political anatomy whose object and end are not the relations of sovereignty, but the relations of discipline (208).

Foucault (1997) explains that prisons create and sustain relationships of power and inequality. This laid the groundwork to engage in critical thought in order to come up with radical alternative ideas to many problems of the prison system, such as mass incarceration, asymmetrical pow-

er relationships that allow the system to self-perpetuate, and racism. It means that the focus will always be on “the social and cultural functions of the prisons, how they shape the quality of individual lives and are shaped by the dynamics of social structures” (Barracough, 2010, p. 42). In providing this specification, the author resists the dominant discourse of crime and punishment, shifting the focus to cultural implications. Additionally, Barracough (2010) makes use of non-hegemonic vocabulary to describe and outline meaning behind the existence of prison and mass incarceration (i.e. “relationships of power”). Making use of non-dominant language in discussion of the prison industrial complex allows for the emergence of alternative critical analyses, as well as comparing prisons to psychiatric hospitals, camps for refugees, and other places where people are confined for periods of time, both definite and indefinite (Sudbury, 2014). In doing this, the interconnectedness of all of the above mentioned institutions rises to the surface of discussion and analysis. In using non-hegemonic vocabulary, it has been noted that definitions must be clearly laid out if the goal is to analytically dismantle the power relations (North, 2006). The term ‘social justice,’ for example, must be clearly outlined in its meaning if it is to be applicable (North, 2006). North adds, “[A] reinvented human consciousness, born from expanding and challenging our dominant notions . . . has the potential to develop political strategies that do not shy away from making generalizing redistributive and recognition claims” (2006, p.527). Thus, clear definitions of terms such as ‘social justice’ and perhaps ‘freedom’ must be used if sound political strategies are in need. If each individual’s definition of these words are different and based on different interpretations of trajectories, a common ground for positive change cannot be met (Lynch, 1995; North, 2006). The difficulty here is to find a common ground for struggle where the goal and the means to the end are all agreed upon.

American prison writings regard as a site of culture. They are considered cultural forms because of the increased number of prisoners, most of whom are elites in the fields of politics, religion, economy... etc. (Freeman, p. 133). Prison writers are civil-right workers, anti-war activists, and revolutionaries imprisoned for political crimes. They have transformed the prison to a revolutionary place full of political rebels. Their writings have documented the contemporary culture (Franklin, p. 55). From this point, power-resistance paradigm has a considerable importance to prison writing. Foucault draws attention to the key role of resistance, portraying how prisoners resist the dominant ideology in order to gain power, and

believing that it is a prerequisite for the existence of power relations. In the absence of resistance, power fails to be visible in the public arena and the state loses its control and authority gradually; so power lies in its relation to the other and in the way it concentrates on the relationship between dominance and resistance. Foucault explains this paradigm in his masterpiece, *Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity*: “If there was no resistance, there would be no power relations... so resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with resistance” (167). Likewise, Ugelivk (2014) illustrates the relationship between forms of power, practices of resistance, and the subjectivity of prisoners, urging to resume the negotiations between the prisoner and the prison which widely embody the opposition between state and subject (296).

The fear of a threatened punishment is the main principle of Deterrence to prevent persons from committing a crime (Duncan, 1988, p. 1240). Retributivist theory of punishment is based on the idea that the criminal must expiate suffering as a tribute which must be paid to vindicate the law (1242). Likewise, rehabilitative theory seeks rehabilitation as a means to a beneficial result. It has a great effect on improving the criminal himself and protecting society as well (1243).

### 3. Stephen King

Stephen King (September 1947) is an American writer of horror who has a considerable contribution to the American popular culture. Modern horror fiction would not be complete without the landmark works and ideas of King. Even those who have not read any of his novels and short stories have more than likely viewed one of the many film adaptations produced of his works, including Kubrick's *The Shining*, *Carrie*, and *Misery*. When someone thinks of Stephen King, the most popular horror fiction author of the last century, it is likely that they would imagine the blood, gore, supernatural elements, and suspense for which he is most known. In almost every case, his characters' careers are essential to the development of the plot of his stories, and are an important aspect of each of their personalities. Though his characters all seem to have different approaches to writing as a career, with some hoping to write popular fiction, others to write more seriously, and some even choosing to write in King's own genre, horror, King's choice to bring many of his characters into the writing profession connects them together in a way that merely being of the same genre does not. There is so much to be explored within the works of Ste-

phen King, but one of the most interesting and unique is that of his writer characters, who are given little attention in criticism and little thought as to the significance of their presence<sup>1</sup>. No matter what the personality of each individual author character, they all share something in common with Stephen King, connecting them to him inescapably.

King deeply refreshes the prison genre in order to reflect the American various prisons. His prison narratives are regarded as a comprehensive portrait of America at the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first as they detail many political and social concerns, provide an insight into the cultural divide within the modern penal system, and condemn various America political institutions whose functions are disempowering individuals (Magistrale, *America's Storyteller VIII*). Among his numerous narratives, the study will focus on *The Green Mile*. *The Green Mile* is a novel that interconnects the controversial themes of racial violence, capital punishment, achieving justice, the reliability of the judicial systems that perform executions, and the means of punishment (Burger, 126).

King is a best-selling popular writer who has published some thirty novels since 1974. He has also written several collections of short stories, novellas, screenplays, and two works of non-fiction. During the past three decades he has gained a vast number of readers around the world and is nowadays guaranteed to hit number one on bestseller lists in several countries, whenever and whatever he publishes. *The Green Mile* was published in 1996. Its publication was a literary event because King attempted at a serial novel more in tune with Dickensian times, each of the six installments published one month apart from the previous one. After the publication of the last installment, the six volumes were all up on the New York Times bestseller list simultaneously. The novel has subsequently been published as single editions with no alterations made to the text in the preceding six installments. The version used in the present study is that of the complete serial novel. The novel is written in first person, the narrator being Paul Edgecombe (subsequently 'Edgecomb' in Darabont's screenplay) in a nursing home, writing down what happened at the Cold Mountain Penitentiary in the 1930s, where most of the novel is then set. In other words, the events at the prison E Block during the Great Depression are framed by the aged Paul's act of narration in the story present. The main storyline of the novel involves the supervisor Paul Edgecombe and his fellow prison guards Brutus 'Brutal' Howell, Dean Stanton, Harry Terwilliger and Percy Wetmore who work at the death row of the penitentiary as guards who also carry out the executions.



#### 4. The Green Mile

Stephen King's *The Green Mile* (1996) was originally published in six monthly installments, which all made it to the *New York Times* bestseller list. Subsequently, the story has been published in a complete serial novel form. *The Green Mile* tells an unusual story of five death row prison guards meeting a huge black prisoner named John Coffey in the American South during the Great Depression. The story is told in the first person, by the main character, Paul Edgecombes. It takes place in 1932 in Georgia on the "E" Block in Cold Mountain Prison. Paul is the captain of the prison guards. "The Green Mile" is the corridor between the cells of the cell block and the execution room covered in green linoleum. King ironically wants to tell his readers that prisoners take green mile to their death. The story follows John Coffey, a large, black inmate convicted of raping and murdering two young white girls, and the other two inmates on death row, along with the guards who watch over them. Coffey is special, as Paul discovers, and he has magical healing abilities. The second of three inmates, Eduard Delacroix is the friend of a small white mouse, whose name is Mr. Jingles. Coffey heals the mouse when the young and reckless guard Percy Wetmore tried to kill it. Coffey also heals Paul's urinary tract infection, and later, Paul temporarily breaks him out of the prison to heal the warden's wife's brain tumor. Coffey transfers this brain disease to Wetmore, the cruel guard who the inmates and staff dislike. Wetmore never recovers and spends the rest of his life in a mental institution. Eventually, Paul discovers that Coffey is extraordinary in many areas. It turns out he did not murder the two girls, another inmate (William Wharton) or as the inmates call him Wild Bill had murdered the girls. Coffey doesn't want to be pardoned, and dies in the electric chair because he can no longer cope with the vicious cycle of real life. After his death, Paul discovers that each of the people Coffey has healed live unusually long lives. Paul is 108 at the end of the book, and Mr. Jingles is 64. They have no idea how long they will live, and then the novel ends.

#### 5. Power and Punishment

Foucault recognizes that the modern prison system imposes severe punishment and undermines the rules of justice and rehabilitation, King expresses how prison guards enjoy exercising sadistic torment on the death row inmates. Throughout King's prison narratives, some prisoners are willingly subjugated to the others' power (Magistrale, 2010, p.59). Others reject the status quo, deciding to resist the oppressive system as means of survival (p. 65). In *The Green Mile* many of the relationships present imbalances of

power. The primary conflict of power appears when the state is exercising its power to end the residents' lives. John Coffey has to be executed though he has been imbued with a divine gift and power to give life. His power does not save him. Paul is tortured by the fact that the state will end the life of an innocent man.

King gives an example of a hurtful white man, Percy. Percy, who is 21-year-old, is rude and lazy but always seeing himself the best with disrespect for authority. Furthermore, he does not use his muscle as opposite of John Coffey. He always uses his mind to get what he wants out of people. All these adjectives in one character are enough to get him fired from any job. But in the case of Percy whose uncle is the governor he can choose any job he wants. It is his choice to work on E Block at Cold Mountain Penitentiary because he enjoys seeing men finishing. On the other hand, Paul and other guards who do not excuse anyone of guilt, as guilt seems to be more effective than death in getting a man to see what he has done wrong. They are helping prisoners come to peace with the violent acts they have done and how they are being punished for them. They understand that punishment for crimes committed has already been handled by the judges and juries.

Struggle between Paul Edgecombe and Percy Wetmore is the most visible example. Paul, the head officer on the Green Mile, apparently has the most power out of all the prisoners and the guards. He establishes the general manner for the cell block. The guards' conduct, the prisoners' behavior, and much information are set according to his superiors. According to Paul's authority, there is a certain protocol guards have to follow. Those who follow the system are given more liberty to make their own decisions and more charges. Guards who fight against it are fired or transferred to a different part of the prison and written up for disobedient behavior. Prisoners are treated respectfully and given little things to increase their comfort, like a mug of soda when they accept and obey the rules. The restraint room is the only end for those who rebel against the system wearing a straight-jacket.

On the other hand, Percy Wetmore who has to have the least amount of power in E Block because he is the most recent hired and the youngest. The governor is his uncle as discussed in the previous section therefore; he uses the most power and gets the first place. Furthermore, he can end the employment of anyone for no reason at all. His political connections give him this advantage. He does not follow the system. He also threatens the other guards with unemployment and in 1932 it was hard to get a job

because of worldwide economic struggle after the Great Depression. Even Paul is mostly powerless over Percy. It is an extremely effective strategy employed by the author to show different relations of power in the prison. Power dynamics also appear in the relationship between Paul and Brad Dolan. Paul is again the one without any power. This time it is because of his age. Dolan is one of the few people who know how old Paul is. It is not exactly a secret, but it is also something Paul does not talk about unless he directly is asked. His age is also an issue when Dolan does things that would get him trouble with his bosses, like causing physical harm to the facility's residents "I'll tell them you're having delusions," Dolan threatens after leaving a ring of bruises around Paul's wrist. "Onset of senile dementia, likely. And you know they'll believe me." Paul does know. People are more likely to believe a young, supposedly capable orderly than a very elderly nursing home resident. Paul has no power over Dolan until Elaine Connelly threatens to have him fired. This time political connections work in Paul's favor. Paul says:

I believe there is good in the world, all of it flowing in one way or another from a loving God. But I believe there's another force as well, one every bit as real as the God I have prayed to my whole life, and that it works consciously to bring all our decent impulses to ruin. Not Satan, I don't mean Satan (although I believe he is real, too), but a kind of demon of discord, a prankish and stupid thing that laughs with glee when an old man sets himself on fire trying to light his pipe or when a much-loved baby puts its first Christmas toy in its mouth and chokes to death on it. I've had a lot of years to think on this, all the way from Cold Mountain to Georgia Pines, and I believe that force was actively at work among us on that morning, swirling everywhere like a fog, trying to keep John Coffey away from Melinda Moores. (Part 5, chapter 7, *The Green Mile*)

Paul's words show different kinds of power that affected man's life. King admits both purposefully and subconsciously to inserting part of his own character into his creations.

## 6. The Technique of Prison

The innovative style of the prison writings of King expresses his isolation and confinement. Many prisoners seek writing as an appropriate way of catharsis to convey their political, social, and ethical concerns which are essential for their time, place, and generations. Prison narrative, in general, is concerned with the extent of the readers' perception of the narrative voice because the prison structure, stories, and experiences are entirely unknown to readers; consequently, they cannot judge the authenticity of the

prison life portrayals if they do not have reliability on the prison narrator himself. Moreover, the environment in which the narrator writes his prison narratives is totally different from outside environment in which readers live (Keyes-Lebergott, p. 71)

Archer's prison narrative tackles various topics and consequently differs from any other traditional ones. He employs the prison narrative technique that makes use of highly visual imagery and metaphors to express real experiences. He also explores the themes of self, authority, power, and resistance, and conveys his particular version of reality to the reader (Keyes-Lebergot, p. 72). King uses the first-person narrative technique to draw the readers' attention to the narrator's world, and lively depict interrogations and trials (Freeman, p. 134). Moreover, dialogic forms are frequently selected by a prison writer (Paul) to reflect the traumatic experiences in jail. He writes personal accounts in the form of novel and diaries to record the suffering in the jail and "preserve memorial images of themselves and others as historic testimony" (Zim, p. 2).

Setting occupies a great significance in prison literature. The prison narrative by King mainly focuses on the "place" more than any other literary genre. In *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault talks about the notion of "space", arguing that control over space is highly related to control over prisoners. It can be argued that the prison is the spatial restraint the prisoners seek to subvert; so they try to interact with its space in order to possess it. Since the prison the significant part of the prison narrative, the space should be greatly considered (Keyes-Lebergott, p. 18-19).

The racist attitudes displayed by many of the characters in *The Green Mile* represent the desire of white people in the Depression era to maintain power over African-Americans. This is best illustrated by Burt Hammersmith, the reporter who covered the Detterick twins' murders and John Coffey's trial. Despite his claims of enlightenment, Hammersmith thinks black people are not better than dogs. "[Y]our negro will bite if he gets the chance," Hammersmith says. Speaking of other humans in such a degrading way allows Hammersmith and other characters in *The Green Mile* to feel better about themselves. It helps them to justify to themselves the actions they take to maintain an illusion of white supremacy.

## 7. Conclusion

*The Green Mile* is sharply depicted the injustice nature of American prisons, it is a great "good vs. evil" story. We discover that some characters of this novel are wrongly convicted of crime, because they happened to be at

the wrong place in the wrong time, and have the wrong appearance. It is also confronted to strong human cruelty. Through this novel and its characters' uncanny similarities to their creator, King plays with the blurred line between fact and fiction and creates the personalities from his own experience. King intentionally places himself within his works for the amusement of himself and others. King paints a complex picture of the practices the United States directs toward prisoners who are members of populations that are considered criminalized. The topic of criminalized populations in the United States cannot be fully understood without taking note of the nation's use of torture on its prisoners.

It is obvious that Edgar Allan Poe has a great influence on King. Although they share certain themes within their works, King is not directly borrowing from him. It is interesting to note the similarities between the two authors. A common element of Poe's stories is live burial, the fear of which is presented in many of Poe's short stories. Though being buried alive does not appear much in Stephen King's works, the fear of entrapment, very closely related, is a factor in many of King's novels. The conventions of horror utilized and introduced by Poe in his short stories are still important elements in any book in the horror genre, even in the very modern horror fiction of Stephen King.

The primary conflict is related with the power to give and end life. The residents of *The Green Mile* have exercised the power to end life, and the state is exercising its power to end their lives. John Coffey has the power to give life, and yet he is to be executed. At the end Paul, as the book's hero, his wife and colleagues to a lesser extent and even readers, are tortured by the fact that the state will end the life of an innocent man — not only an innocent man, but one who has somehow been imbued with a divine gift. The novel is a charmed story of Paul and his friends encountering something miraculous in the form of John Coffey, a Christ-like figure with supernatural powers.

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