



Analysis of moral and humanitarian values in The Green Mile: Representations of justice and social awareness

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ABSTRACT

Film can function not only as entertainment but also as a medium for representing moral values, social injustice, and human experiences. *The Green Mile* (1999) presents moral dilemmas, racial prejudice, institutional injustice, and humanitarian concerns through its characters, conflicts, and narrative elements. This study aims to analyze the representation of moral and humanitarian values in the film through Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. A qualitative descriptive design was employed using interpretive film analysis. The primary data consisted of relevant dialogues, scenes, character actions, conflicts, narrative events, and visual or symbolic elements selected according to their relevance to the research focus. The data were analyzed thematically and narratively using Maslow's hierarchy of needs as the primary humanistic framework and Bordwell and Thompson's film theory as a supporting framework for analyzing narrative and cinematic elements. The findings identify four themes: professional duty and human empathy, social justice and racial prejudice, supernatural compassion and human potential, and institutional power. Paul Edgecomb represents the tension between duty and empathy, while John Coffey represents compassion and human potential constrained by imprisonment, prejudice, and injustice. Coffey's supernatural abilities symbolize compassion and moral potential rather than direct evidence of self-actualization. The findings demonstrate that social and institutional conditions can constrain the fulfillment of human needs and human potential. The study contributes to film and humanistic studies by integrating Maslow's humanistic perspective with film analysis to explain the relationship between human potential, moral action, and structural injustice.

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INTRODUCTION

Film is a form of art that not only provides entertainment but also serves as a medium for conveying social, moral, and humanitarian messages. Through characters, storylines, conflicts, and visual representations, films can portray social realities and encourage audiences to reflect on

ethical issues in society. According to Euis et al., (2021), film can function as a medium for representing and communicating social experiences, values, and ideas to audiences. One film that strongly presents moral and humanitarian issues is *The Green Mile* (1999), directed by Frank Darabont and adapted from Stephen King's novel. The film portrays life in an American prison during the 1930s, particularly in the death-row section known as the "Green Mile," and presents conflicts involving justice, humanity, empathy, racial prejudice, and professional responsibility.

The Green Mile centers on John Coffey, a Black man who is convicted of murdering two young girls despite possessing supernatural abilities to heal others. His character represents innocence, compassion, and humanity in contrast to the injustice and prejudice surrounding him. Meanwhile, Paul Edgecomb, a prison guard played by Tom Hanks, experiences an internal conflict between his professional responsibility to enforce the death penalty and his growing empathy toward Coffey. Through these characters, the film illustrates how an unjust judicial system and racial prejudice can affect human dignity and limit an individual's opportunity to experience justice and freedom (Muthukannan, 2021). In this study, moral values refer to principles reflected in empathy, compassion, justice, responsibility, and respect for human dignity, while humanitarian values refer to attitudes and actions that protect the dignity, rights, welfare, and humanity of others, including solidarity and resistance to discrimination. These values are examined through Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs, consisting of physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow's theory is used to examine the fulfillment and deprivation of human needs represented through the characters' experiences, rather than to directly associate Coffey's supernatural abilities with self-actualization. Racial prejudice and structural injustice are considered social conditions that constrain the fulfillment of these needs (Apriliana, 2022).

Several previous studies have examined *The Green Mile* in relation to moral values, empathy, racial prejudice, and criticism of the justice system. Mustofa, (2022) discuss John Coffey as a representation of human purity challenged by racism and injustice, while Ash et al., (2023) examines Paul Edgecomb's internal conflict between professional responsibility and human empathy. Bosavi et al., (2023) discusses the supernatural elements associated with Coffey in relation to human potential and self-actualization. Furthermore, Rahman et al., (2023) highlights the representation of racism and social awareness in the film, while Littu et al., (2023) emphasizes how social isolation and an unjust justice system can restrict the development of human potential. Wijayanti et al., (2023) also emphasizes the potential of film as a medium for moral education and ethical reflection. These studies can be grouped into three themes: Coffey's innocence, compassion, and human potential in the context of racism and injustice (Mustofa, 2022; Bosavi et al., 2023); Paul Edgecomb's moral conflict and empathy toward Coffey (Ash et al., 2023); and the representation of racism, social isolation, and injustice in relation to human dignity and social awareness (Rahman et al., 2023; Littu et al., 2023; Wijayanti et al., 2023). However, these dimensions have largely been examined separately.

Therefore, the research gap lies in the limited integration of human needs with the social conditions that influence their fulfillment. While previous studies have examined moral conflict, racism, supernatural elements, and social injustice separately, this study integrates these dimensions by analyzing moral and humanitarian values through Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. The novelty lies in examining John Coffey and Paul Edgecomb's experiences of empathy, justice, professional responsibility, and humanity while considering racial prejudice and an unjust judicial system as social conditions that constrain human needs. Accordingly, this study aims to examine how *The Green Mile* (1999) represents human needs, moral and humanitarian values, social injustice, and human suffering, and how these representations encourage reflection on human dignity and social awareness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Type of the Study

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design using interpretive film analysis with a humanistic psychology approach. A qualitative descriptive design is appropriate because the study seeks to describe and interpret meanings represented through dialogues, characters, scenes, conflicts, symbols, and narrative elements rather than measure them numerically. The approach allows the researcher to examine moral values, humanitarian issues, social injustice, racial prejudice, and human needs within the social and cultural context represented in *The Green Mile* (1999). The study applies Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs as the primary psychological framework and Bordwell and Thompson's film theory as a supporting cinematic framework. The integration of these frameworks enables the researcher to examine how cinematic and narrative elements represent human needs, moral dilemmas, empathy, racial prejudice, and criticism of unjust social structures.

Data and Data Sources

The data in this study consist of primary and secondary data. The primary data are obtained directly from *The Green Mile* (1999), directed by Frank Darabont and adapted from Stephen King's novel. The primary data include relevant dialogues, scenes, character actions, conflicts, narrative events, and visual or symbolic elements that represent human needs, moral values, humanitarian issues, racial prejudice, social injustice, and ethical dilemmas. Particular attention is given to the characters of John Coffey and Paul Edgecomb because their experiences represent the central humanistic and moral conflicts examined in this study.

The secondary data are obtained from relevant academic and theoretical sources, including Abraham Maslow's *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow, (2021) *Film Art*, journal articles, books, and previous studies related to humanistic psychology, film analysis, moral values, racial prejudice, and social justice. Historical and contextual references concerning American society and the justice system during the 1930s are also used to support the interpretation of the film. These sources are selected based on their relevance to the research topic and their ability to support the theoretical and contextual analysis.

Data Collection Technique

Data are collected using a documentation technique through systematic and repeated observation of the film. The data collection procedure is conducted chronologically through the following stages. First, the researcher watches *The Green Mile* (1999) repeatedly to obtain a comprehensive understanding of its storyline, characters, conflicts, and themes. Second, the researcher identifies and records scenes, dialogues, character actions, and visual symbols that are relevant to the research focus. Third, the identified data are documented by recording the relevant scene, dialogue, character, and context of each occurrence. Fourth, the collected data are classified according to the research focus, particularly human needs, moral and humanitarian values, racial prejudice, social injustice, professional responsibility, empathy, and self-actualization. Finally, the classified data are compared with relevant theoretical and contextual sources to support the interpretation.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data are analyzed using qualitative interpretative analysis through thematic and narrative analysis. The analysis is conducted in several chronological stages. First, the documented data are reduced by selecting scenes, dialogues, actions, and symbols that are directly relevant to the research questions. Second, the selected data are categorized into thematic categories based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, including physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization, as well as themes of justice, empathy, racial prejudice, and humanitarian values. In this study, physiological needs refer to basic physical

conditions; safety needs refer to protection from physical or psychological threats; love and belongingness refer to interpersonal attachment, acceptance, and human connection; esteem refers to dignity, recognition, and respect; and self-actualization refers to the realization of personal potential, moral purpose, and the development of one's capacities. Self-actualization is identified only when the film provides evidence of an individual's pursuit or realization of personal potential or higher purpose, rather than being inferred solely from supernatural abilities.

Third, the categorized data are interpreted using Maslow's humanistic theory to identify how the fulfillment or obstruction of human needs is represented through the characters and conflicts. Fourth, Bordwell and Thompson's film theory is applied specifically to examine narrative elements, characterization, conflict, and relevant cinematic elements through which meaning is constructed and communicated. Finally, the findings from the thematic and narrative analyses are interpreted holistically to determine how *The Green Mile* represents humanistic values, moral dilemmas, and criticism of unjust social structures.

The interpretation is evaluated through theoretical consistency and contextual relevance. Theoretical consistency is maintained by relating each interpretation to the concepts of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the selected film-analysis concepts. Contextual relevance is established by considering the social and historical context represented in the film. Rather than referring to the comparison of film data with scholarly literature as data triangulation, relevant literature and previous studies are used to support, contextualize, and critically assess the interpretation. An interpretation is considered appropriate when it is supported by relevant film evidence, corresponds to the theoretical framework, and is consistent with the contextual and scholarly references. Through these procedures, the study ensures that the interpretation is systematic, transparent, and grounded in the research data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Moral Values and Humanity in *The Green Mile*

The analysis of *The Green Mile* (1999) identified several representations of moral values and humanity through dialogues, character actions, conflicts, and significant scenes. Four main themes were identified from the data: (1) conflict between professional duty and human empathy, (2) social justice and racial prejudice, (3) supernatural compassion and human potential, and (4) abuse of institutional power. These themes emerged from the recurring actions, dialogues, conflicts, and narrative events involving John Coffey, Paul Edgecomb, and Percy Wetmore. These themes demonstrate how moral and humanitarian values are constructed through the experiences of John Coffey and Paul Edgecomb within the prison and judicial system.

Conflict between Professional Duty and Human Empathy

The first finding concerns the conflict between professional duty and human empathy, particularly through the character of Paul Edgecomb. As a prison officer responsible for supervising death-row prisoners and carrying out executions, Paul initially performs his duties according to institutional regulations. However, his interaction with John Coffey gradually creates an internal conflict between his professional obligations and his personal conscience.

The primary evidence appears in the scene in which Paul and his colleagues take Coffey outside the prison to heal the warden's wife. The characters temporarily disregard formal prison procedures because they believe that Coffey can save her life. Another significant scene occurs when Paul recognizes the moral implications of Coffey's execution and becomes reluctant to accept the punishment as morally justified. These scenes show a change in Paul's attitude from institutional obedience toward greater consideration of empathy and conscience.

The findings therefore show that professional duty is not presented as an absolute moral standard. Instead, the film depicts situations in which obedience to institutional rules conflicts with

compassion and personal conscience. Paul's character functions as the central representation of this conflict, particularly through his changing attitude toward Coffey and the death penalty.

Social Justice and Racial Prejudice

The second finding concerns the representation of social injustice and racial prejudice through John Coffey's experience. Coffey is a Black man who is imprisoned and sentenced to death for the alleged murder of two young girls. Throughout the film, his physical appearance and social position contribute to the assumptions made about his guilt. His limited ability to communicate and his intimidating physical appearance further reinforce the perception of him as dangerous, despite his gentle and compassionate behavior.

One significant dialogue occurs when Coffey explains, *"I tried to take it back, but it was too late."* The dialogue occurs in the context of Coffey's explanation of the deaths of the two girls. Rather than functioning simply as a confession, it expresses his inability to prevent their deaths and his emotional suffering. The contrast between this statement and Coffey's subsequent actions, particularly his healing of other characters, provides primary evidence of the difference between the identity imposed on him by the justice system and his behavior throughout the narrative.

The film also represents Coffey's deprivation of human needs through his imprisonment, isolation, and constant threat of execution. The data provide clear evidence of restrictions on safety, belongingness, and esteem. However, no sufficient primary data were identified to establish physiological needs as a distinct finding; therefore, physiological needs are not treated as a separate empirical theme in the results. Coffey's experience demonstrates that the social and legal environment surrounding an individual can restrict the fulfillment of human needs and the development of human potential.

Supernatural Elements, Humanity, and Self-Actualization

The third finding concerns supernatural compassion and human potential through John Coffey. This theme is distinguished from self-actualization because Coffey's supernatural abilities are not, by themselves, treated as evidence of self-actualization. Instead, the relevant data concern how he uses these abilities to alleviate the suffering of others. Three significant scenes provide primary evidence. First, Coffey heals Paul's urinary infection. Second, he restores Mr. Jingles after the mouse is injured. Third, Coffey heals the warden's wife by removing her illness and subsequently releasing the black particles representing the disease. In each scene, Coffey uses his ability for the benefit of another person rather than for personal power or material gain.

These supernatural events consistently portray Coffey as a character who possesses extraordinary concern for the well-being of others. His abilities are not used for personal power or material gain but primarily to relieve the suffering of other individuals. The contrast between Coffey's healing ability and his eventual execution creates a recurring pattern in the narrative: a character who repeatedly saves others is ultimately condemned by the same social system that claims to administer justice.

Another significant piece of evidence appears in Coffey's final statement: *"I'm tired, boss. Tired of being on the road, lonely as a sparrow in the rain."* The dialogue occurs shortly before his execution and expresses his emotional exhaustion, loneliness, and suffering. The evidence therefore supports an interpretation of Coffey's higher human needs through his desire for peace, connection, and relief from suffering. However, self-actualization is identified only insofar as Coffey's actions demonstrate the realization of moral potential through compassion and service to others, not merely because he possesses supernatural abilities.

Abuse of Institutional Power

Another finding concerns the representation of institutional power through Percy Wetmore. Percy uses his position within the prison to behave irresponsibly and cruelly toward prisoners. His deliberate interference during Delacroix's execution results in unnecessary suffering

and demonstrates how institutional authority can be misused when it is not accompanied by empathy and moral responsibility.

The execution scene involving Delacroix provides direct evidence of this theme. Although the execution is formally conducted as part of the prison's legal responsibility, Percy's deliberate failure to properly prepare the procedure causes prolonged suffering. The scene therefore demonstrates the difference between the formal exercise of institutional authority and the ethical responsibility that should accompany it. This scene contributes to the broader pattern identified in the film, in which formal authority does not automatically guarantee moral justice.

Overall, the results indicate that *The Green Mile* represents moral values and humanity through interconnected conflicts involving professional responsibility, empathy, racial prejudice, social injustice, supernatural compassion, and institutional power. The findings show that these issues are primarily constructed through the experiences of John Coffey and Paul Edgecomb, while supporting characters such as Percy Wetmore demonstrate the consequences of power without empathy. The narrative consequently presents a recurring contrast between individual humanity and institutional injustice.

Discussion

Compassion and Empathy versus Institutional Duty

Paul Edgecomb represents the central conflict between professional responsibility and human empathy. As a prison guard responsible for supervising death-row prisoners, Paul is required to follow institutional procedures, including carrying out executions. However, his interactions with John Coffey gradually challenge his understanding of duty and justice. One early scene illustrates this relationship when Coffey expresses his fear of the dark and asks whether the lights will remain on during the night. Paul responds by assuring him that the corridor will remain illuminated.



Figure 1. Paul edgecomb responds to john coffey's fear of the dark

The scene demonstrates that Paul's response goes beyond his formal institutional role. By acknowledging Coffey's fear and providing reassurance, Paul recognizes his emotional vulnerability and responds with empathy. From Maslow's perspective, this interaction is related to Coffey's safety needs because his fear reflects a desire for security and protection. The finding supports Widyahening et al. (2023), who identify Paul as a character representing the tension between professional responsibility and human empathy.

Paul's moral conflict becomes more explicit shortly before Coffey's execution. In a private conversation, Paul asks Coffey whether he would leave the prison if given the opportunity. Coffey responds that he would be afraid, while Paul continues to suggest that they could make the escape possible. This conversation demonstrates that Paul has moved beyond simply following institutional regulations and has begun to consider an alternative based on his personal understanding of justice.



Figure 2. Paul edgecomb offers john coffey the possibility of escape

This interaction indicates that Paul's understanding of duty has shifted from institutional obedience toward moral consideration. His willingness to consider Coffey's escape reflects a conflict between legal obligation and personal conscience. In humanistic terms, the conflict can be related to esteem and higher-order needs because Paul seeks to maintain his moral integrity when institutional duty contradicts his perception of justice. Thus, the film does not reject professional responsibility itself but demonstrates that institutional obedience can become morally problematic when it conflicts with empathy and human dignity.

John Coffey as a Representation of Humanistic Values

John Coffey is portrayed as the central representation of humanity, compassion, and selflessness in *The Green Mile*. Despite being accused of a violent crime, Coffey repeatedly demonstrates concern for other people and sensitivity toward suffering. His character therefore creates a contrast between the identity imposed upon him by the justice system and the personality revealed through his interactions with the prison guards.

One significant example occurs when Coffey explains his emotional condition to Paul by stating, "I'm rightly tired of the pain I hear and feel, boss." The statement illustrates that Coffey experiences the suffering of others deeply. His supernatural ability is consequently not represented as a source of personal power but as a burden that exposes him to the pain surrounding him.



Figure 3. John coffey expresses his emotional exhaustion to paul edgecomb

Another scene demonstrates Coffey's vulnerability when he expresses his fear of the dark: "I'm afraid of the dark, boss."



Figure 4. John Coffey expresses his fear of the dark

These dialogues reveal Coffey's emotional sensitivity and vulnerability despite his imposing physical appearance. His supernatural ability is also repeatedly used to alleviate the suffering of others rather than to obtain personal power. Therefore, the findings support the interpretation of Coffey as a representation of compassion and humanitarian values. This finding is consistent with Sihombing et al., (2025), who relate Coffey's character to human potential and self-actualization. However, the present study does not treat supernatural ability itself as evidence of self-actualization. Rather, self-actualization is interpreted through the way Coffey's abilities are directed toward the realization of moral potential and concern for others. At the same time, his imprisonment, isolation, and lack of social recognition restrict the fulfillment of his human potential.

Representation of Justice and Social Injustice

The findings demonstrate that *The Green Mile* represents justice as vulnerable to institutional rigidity, human error, and the misuse of authority rather than as a neutral or infallible process. The death penalty system, particularly the execution of Eduard Delacroix, illustrates how legal procedures can normalize institutional violence when compliance with authority overrides humanitarian considerations. Percy Wetmore's misconduct intensifies the suffering of the condemned prisoner. From Maslow's perspective, these conditions restrict safety, dignity, belongingness, and esteem. The wrongful conviction of Coffey further demonstrates the separation between legal judgment and moral justice. This finding supports Fitri et al., (2023) and Prasetyo, (2025), who identify Coffey as a representation of innocence and the film as a critique of injustice. The present study extends these interpretations by connecting wrongful conviction with the obstruction of human needs, showing that institutional injustice affects not only legal status but also an individual's opportunity to develop human potential.

Racial prejudice further reveals the structural dimension of injustice in *The Green Mile*. Coffey's position as a Black man within the social and institutional context of the 1930s demonstrates how racial inequality can influence access to justice, dignity, and social recognition. The unequal distribution of authority between Coffey and prison officials also illustrates the vulnerability of marginalized individuals within institutional structures. This finding complements Sonia et al., (2024), Hidayat, (2024) and Surya et al., (2024), who highlight the film's representation of racism and social injustice. The present study extends these interpretations by relating racial prejudice to the obstruction of human needs, particularly safety, belongingness, and esteem. Thus, racism in the film is not treated only as interpersonal prejudice but also as a social condition that can constrain the fulfillment of human potential.

Social Awareness and Moral Reflection

The findings indicate that *The Green Mile* functions as a medium of moral reflection by positioning the conflict between legal authority and moral responsibility at the center of its narrative. Paul's recognition of Coffey's innocence challenges the assumption that institutional obedience necessarily constitutes justice, while the execution scenes expose the human

consequences of a system that prioritizes procedural authority over dignity. Through character development, dialogue, narrative structure, and emotionally charged scenes, the film constructs moral tension that encourages audiences to question the legitimacy of punishment and the ethical responsibility of individuals within unjust institutions. This interpretation is consistent with Bordwell and Thompson (2019), who emphasize the role of narrative and cinematic elements in constructing meaning and shaping audience interpretation. Thus, the film's social criticism emerges not merely from its depiction of injustice but from its construction of a moral contradiction between legal legitimacy and humanitarian justice.

The supernatural abilities of John Coffey strengthen this criticism by establishing a symbolic contrast between individual compassion and institutional violence. Coffey's capacity to heal others represents humanistic potential that remains unrecognized by the legal system, reinforcing the contradiction between his moral character and his execution. This finding supports Tombu, (2024), Adalta, (2024) and Jismulatif, (2025), who relates Coffey's supernatural abilities to self-actualization, and Fikri et al., (2024), who identifies film as a potential medium for moral education. The present study extends these perspectives by integrating supernatural symbolism, Maslow's humanistic psychology, and social criticism to demonstrate how the film connects individual suffering with broader structural injustice. Consequently, *The Green Mile* encourages reflection on justice, racism, empathy, human dignity, and institutional responsibility. However, because this study does not empirically examine audience responses, the identified social awareness represents the potential meaning constructed by the film rather than a measurable change in viewers' attitudes.

Limitations and Threats to Validity

This study is limited by its focus on a single film, qualitative interpretation, and the use of specific theoretical perspectives, while audience responses were not empirically measured. To strengthen validity, the analysis was grounded in relevant scenes, theoretical frameworks, and supporting literature. Future research may compare similar films, apply alternative theories, and conduct audience-response studies to provide broader insights into representations of justice, racism, and humanity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, this study concludes that *The Green Mile* (1999) represents moral and humanitarian values through four interconnected themes: conflict between professional duty and human empathy, social justice and racial prejudice, supernatural compassion and human potential, and abuse of institutional power. Through Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the findings demonstrate that human needs are influenced not only by individual conditions but also by the social and institutional environment. Coffey's imprisonment, isolation, racial prejudice, and lack of social recognition illustrate how institutional injustice can constrain safety, belongingness, esteem, and the development of human potential, while Paul's moral conflict demonstrates the tension between institutional duty and personal conscience. The study contributes to film and humanistic studies by integrating Maslow's hierarchy of needs with film analysis to explain the relationship between individual human potential, moral action, and structural injustice. Unlike previous studies that tend to examine Coffey's humanity, Paul's moral conflict, racism, or institutional injustice separately, this study connects these dimensions within an integrated humanistic framework. The findings therefore indicate that *The Green Mile* constructs a moral contradiction between institutional authority and human dignity, while its cinematic and narrative construction provides a means of representing this contradiction. The study implies that *The Green Mile* has potential as a medium for moral and social reflection, particularly concerning empathy, justice, human dignity, racial prejudice, and institutional responsibility. However, this implication refers to the meanings and potential for reflection constructed by the film and does not demonstrate an actual change in

audience attitudes because audience responses were not empirically examined. The study is limited to one film and qualitative interpretation. Future research may compare similar films, apply alternative theoretical perspectives, or examine audience responses to provide broader evidence concerning representations of justice, humanity, and social awareness.

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