

Race and Spiritualism: Facing Death Row—A Movie Review of *The Green Mile*

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The Green Mile portrays an unrealistically gleaming vision of death row. The very name of the prison unit is an ode to the meticulously scrubbed and shining green tiles that lined the floor. The guards are forthright and seemingly earnest in maintaining a sense of humanity on the mile. Men were men and deserved the respect that men often reserved only for men. This is evidenced often by a simple handshake or sustaining a level of engagement that granted them relative subjectivity in a space where they seemed to exist without rights. The mile was a home and a place to be proud of. Sergeant Edgecomb (Tom Hanks' character), the general overseer, ardently reinforces this understanding with the other guards who seem pleased to oblige all in the name of preserving this milieu and distinguishing it as a place of dignity.

Much of the film centers on the altruism of John Coffey, the only black prisoner in the compound who was sentenced to death for allegedly raping and brutally murdering two little girls. John Coffey, an oafish lug with a heart of gold, is fortuitously endowed with supernatural powers that compel him to heal the sick and protect the helpless. The film also spotlights Mr. Jangles, the prison mouse, which functions as an innocent household pet/community mascot and thereby keeps morale upbeat on the mile. His presence becomes a source of entertainment for

the prisoners and guards alike with his circus-like tricks and antics. In addition, he provides important companionship for Dell, a prisoner with borderline intellectual functioning, who seems to have found solace, resolve, and a *raison d'être* in training the mouse to do tricks. The prison guards valiantly ensure the safety of the mouse by providing him with a worn cigar box as an abode and protecting him from Percy, a mean-spirited guard who is also the governor's nephew and who tries to smash Mr. Jangles every chance he gets. The guards frequently admonish Percy who seems determined to create chaos on the mile and constantly instigates conflict by physically and emotionally abusing the prisoners. The movie highlights this collective disdain for Percy's behavior with the guards reprimanding him and correcting him when he gets out of line. His very character in the film is set up as an obvious juxtaposition to the notion that this is a model prison with model staff who do not tolerate violence or mean spiritedness. Percy, for example, is the only guard who uses profane and derisive language when speaking to the inmates. He is also unimaginably cruel; he breaks Dell's fingers on one occasion and taunts the inmates as if they were less than animals. Percy's persona is riddled with Axis II pathology. He is both bully and bellicose and insouciant around his truculence, displaying clear evidence of both sadism and antisocial traits.

By the time of Dell's execution, there have been multiple incidents in which Percy's behavior has disturbed the environment on the mile so much that the exasperated guards prompt Sergeant Edgecomb to remove him. The film makes no secret of Percy's

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ultimate desire to “watch one of them cook up close,” and, unfortunately, because of the power of nepotism, he is given a position that enables him to do just that. He is fascinated by death and requests specifically to perform an execution as criterion for his relocation to another facility. Therefore, the oral contract is made, an agreement solidified by a handshake, for him to transfer to Briar Ridge, a mental institution, after he is “put out front” as the chief executioner.

A part of Dell’s last request is to put on a show with Mr. Jangles, showboating the mouse’s many talents but also giving Dell a chance to feel good about himself as his apt and adoring trainer. After the performance, Sergeant Edgecomb and crew congratulate Dell on a job well done. They then respond to his concern about Mr. Jangle’s fate. They promise Dell that Mr. Jangles will receive a ticket to Mouseville, a grand tourist attraction in Tallahassee where people from far and wide will marvel at his mousy talents. This moment in particular reinforces the dialectic of good guard/bad guard played throughout the movie. By actively creating the fantasy of Mouseville, Dell’s spirit and anxiety are assuaged. Because he no longer fixates on the execution looming just an hour away, the guards maintain their benign paternalistic role as consummate do-gooders. They consistently look out for and do what’s in the best interest of the prisoner.

Percy, visible in the background, scoffs and smirks at the notion of Mouseville and physically crushes Mr. Jangles as he scurries out of Dell’s cell. Of course, this action causes Dell to become inconsolably undone. Even Percy (again, bad guard) recognizes the potential harm of this assault to Dell’s very precarious sense of self and well-being but relishes in his ability to abuse his power and overpower the powerless. As he leaves the cellblock, smug and satisfied after finally “killing that critter,” John Coffey, with his special powers, mystically resuscitates Mr. Jangles.

As if killing the mouse in the hour of Dell’s imminent demise weren’t enough, Percy continues to antagonize Dell as he waits plaintively in the electric chair, “They just told you that to keep you quiet, faggot,” debunking the sublime vision of Mouseville in a pathetically cruel attempt to deny Dell the chance to die in peace. Percy also deliberately “forgets” to wet the head sponge, reducing the expedient conductivity of electricity, and thereby makes the

execution a grizzly and drawn-out torture. The event turns into more of a sadistic exhibition as the panicked on-looking witnesses disintegrate into a frightened and frenzied melee, mobbing the exit to escape the smell and horror of tortured death.

Mysticism plays an important role throughout the film no matter how contrived or forced it may be. John Coffey is a big black man with mythical powers that possess him with an unnerving need to heal. First, he heals Sergeant Edgecomb, who has been ailing for several months with an excruciating urinary/prostatic problem so refractory to the treatment available, it inhibits his sexual ability and desire. Coffey, who also is conveniently clairvoyant, knows that Edgecomb is suffering. The viewer frequently observes him attempting to urinate, cringing from the piercing pain that causes him to sweat puddles and topple to the ground in one of the film’s most highly dramatized scenes. Without explicitly offering his services, Coffey simply pleads with Edgecomb obsequiously, “Boss I gots to tawk to ya.” Still unaware of Coffey’s magical gift, Edgecomb tells him, “Now is not a good time, John,” as he writhes on the floor in profound discomfort. Finally, when Edgecomb is able to rise to his feet, he staggers over to see exactly what it is that Coffey wants. “Just to help, boss,” Coffey utters meekly as he quickly grabs Edgecomb’s perineum and the fantastic display of magical power gets underway. Then a mighty surge of energy punctuated by thunderous music and bright lights sets the stage so that divine intervention may begin. The viewers appreciate Edgecomb’s recovery as he re-enters the bathroom, urine now flowing with a great stream, a far cry from its previous meager trickle. The recovery is illustrated further when Edgecomb arrives at home. For the first time in months, he is so overwhelmed by nuptial desire that he seduces his dutiful wife as she tends to the dishes. They end up making love more times than they “did in high school,” much to Mrs. Edgecomb’s bemused wonderment.

Coffey’s unimaginably awesome anatomic habitus represents the very problematic ideological trap of the ultravirile black man. Coffey’s beast-like presence and ability to heal Edgecomb so that he is now able to “please his missus” two or three times over is a direct reflection of the historical mythology that shrouds black men as sexually virile/preoccupied/endowed “creatures” in legendary proportions. In this moment, the Southern white man’s fear of black male sexual prowess is turned upside down because Coffey

gives the gift of renewed potency to the good-hearted and well-meaning white guard.

Coffey's initials J.C. are by no means an accident. They inevitably invoke comparison to Jesus Christ, because his mission is always to heal, help, and soothe others and to expect nothing in return. After witnessing the resurrection of Mr. Jangles and hearing about the recovery of Sergeant Edgecomb's self-described "waterworks," the guards are convinced of Coffey's abilities to make miracles happen. The Edgecombs and the other guards discuss this over an afternoon dinner in the garden, with the specific aim of curing Melinda, the warden's wife who is on the brink of death from a brain tumor. Exploring various strategies, they ultimately decide they will sneak Coffey out of the prison in the middle of the night and take him to the home of the doubtful and unsuspecting warden. While processing the logistics of pulling this off, they of course refer to Coffey's gigantic and harrowing appearance, insisting on being fully armed with both shotguns and firearms in case anything goes awry. After all, he is a convicted murderer.

On the night of the event, Edgecomb and posse pull up at the warden's home with Coffey in the back of a truck. The warden, undoubtedly alarmed by all the ruckus, emerges from his home clad in a bathrobe, shotgun in hand with finger on the trigger. He is frightened by Coffey's presence and points the shotgun at him as if he will shoot, despite Coffey's calm demeanor and lack of aggressive posturing. After much ado, the warden backs down letting Coffey upstairs to Melinda's room. There she lay in her bed looking haggard and deathly pale in a cold sweat, shiners encircling her sunken eyes. Rather than being alarmed at Coffey's presence, she warmly greets him, asking his name and where he is from. She asks him why he has so many scars, obviously to show her reciprocal concern for his well-being. In a bold and wildly erotic gesture resembling a kiss, Coffey places his mouth on top of Melinda's and begins to inhale the evil tumor out of her body. However, this "kiss" is deftly and artistically staged as a eunuchoid priestly kiss of unction and salvation and within moments of this gesture, miraculously, Melinda appears rejuvenated. At once, she is restored to her premorbid condition: alabaster cheeks aglow with life and a whimsical and ethereal beauty.

This visit by a black man to a white woman's bedroom lacks historical credibility and it is the hefty dose of mysticism that enables these historically im-

plausible vignettes to occur. Black men at that time in Southern environs were condemned and lynched for any suspicion of "reckless eyeballing," not to mention being alone in a house with a white woman. Some of these sentiments persist today. The symbolic image of Coffey's harrowing appearance lurking over Melinda as she lay in wait is stark and surreal. The film's fluidity between the threats of violence with eroticization typifies the timeworn dyad of black male behavior as aggressive and sexually preoccupied.

However, perhaps the film is most objectionable in these trappings of racial stereotypes and profiling. The constant comparisons ranging from animal to monster remain problematic. First, there is the district attorney who initially prosecuted Coffey. When giving Edgecomb the low-down on Coffey's criminal history, he tips him to the unpredictability of violence by anecdotally likening Coffey to the mongrel dog that maimed his boy. Coffey's undying benevolence and persistent representation as the idiot savant is almost always superseded by a running commentary on his habitus and girth, much as if he was back on the antebellum auction block. Even after performing multiple miracles on the mile, his potential for being dangerous is assessed continually by the well-meaning guards, who promise to shoot him on the spot if anything goes awry during the visit to the Edgecombs'.

If the movie truly attempts to transcend racist ideologies and recreate the notion of death row as both humane and just, it is not without limitations. John Coffey, through his magical powers, visually imprints the accurate image of the crime for which he is wrongly convicted. Even when Edgecomb knows with certainty that Coffey is innocent, he remains next on the list for execution. Of course, keeping with the theme of "well-meaning" guard, the audience catches many glimpses of Edgecomb brooding in existential angst over not doing something to interrupt Coffey's imminent death sentence. Again, we are reminded of Jesus Christ who died innocently for the sins of others without complaint. Coffey is the quintessential martyr looking forward to death as an escape from the brutality of his life. As Coffey is situated in the electric chair, the dewy-eyed guards maintain their compulsory role and carry out the execution without event. Surely, given the circumstances, coupled with over-the-top dramatic bells and whistles sequencing the film, the viewer waits desperately for an act of clemency so that Coffey's life

may somehow be spared. Vindication and retribution seem obligatory here, not only because of all he has done and for whom he has done it, but above all, he is innocent. Yet ironically, rallying for the innocence of a big black man convicted of murdering two little white girls requires even more magical power than that involved in healing the sick or resurrecting dead animals.

Another important issue bearing mention is the polemics surrounding competency, mental retardation, and the ability to stand trial and to be sentenced to die. The movie contained at least two inmates with borderline intellectual functioning if not frank mental retardation. Coffey, who could only spell his name, was frequently and affectionately referred to as an imbecile or simpleton. He is grossly inarticulate and barely able to string a sentence together. Even more disturbing, he acknowledges his cognitive limitations in a self-effacing manner: "I don't know much of nuthin' boss." Dell also shows signs of child-like cognition, as starkly exhibited by his naïve belief in Mouseville, not unlike a child's belief in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus. At some points, Dell has limited understanding that he is actually going to die. Yet, despite the film's self-congratulatory tone of progressivism and its efforts to show humane treatment of inmates, it does not address this issue of competency as an injustice. Could one opine that the well-mean-

ing guards also would crusade for the rights of the prisoners in this regard? There is frequent acknowledgment of Coffey's intellectual inadequacy as well as his innocence. Surely, his inability to express his needs clearly, let alone assert them, would prompt the guards also to pursue justice valiantly on his behalf.

To its credit, *The Green Mile* is a film that touches on myriad issues. It bravely attempts to reconstruct death row prison life by providing a refreshingly idealistic and humane portrait. In many ways, the film makes the cellblock a welcome place, where guards ensure the safety and well-being of inmates and do so even if it ruffles the feathers of the governor's nephew. This is admirable because it challenges the blue shield code of silence that frequently enables the abuse of power that characterizes the relations between guards and inmates. The film even allows mysticism to flourish in an environment where probably any mention of the supernatural would imply psychosis mandating a one-way ticket to the state hospital. Best of all, despite its lack of plausibility, consistency, and fully developed issues of sociology and criminology, this film fills the spirit of the viewer with a powerful sense of hope and redemption. It is a remarkable enterprise worth contemplating and examining. It is even more worthwhile to view it again.