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COGNITIVE OSCILLATIONS IN LATE-CENTURY FICTION: A QUANTITATIVE AFFECTIVE ANALYSIS OF POST-IRONY AND THE SUBLIME IN STEPHEN KING'S THE GREEN MILE

Kayumova Fotima Khomidovna
English teacher at "IELTS Center" educational center
qayumovafotima523@g.mail.com

Abstract: This article examines the interaction of cognitive oscillation, post-ironic sensibility, and the sublime in Stephen King's The Green Mile. It investigates how narrative shifts between skepticism, compassion, horror, and wonder shape readers' interpretations of justice, suffering, and moral responsibility. Drawing on affect theory, irony studies, and aesthetic theories of the sublime, the analysis combines close reading with a structured affective coding framework. Particular attention is paid to John Coffey's healing abilities, the execution chamber, and Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration. The study argues that emotional contradictions destabilize conventional distinctions between horror and tenderness, encouraging readers to reconsider institutional authority and ethical judgment.

Keywords: cognitive oscillation, affect theory, post-irony, the sublime, Stephen King, The Green Mile, narrative emotion.

Introduction

Literary fiction frequently produces meaning through the interaction of intellectual interpretation and emotional response. Readers do not simply receive narrative information; they continually revise their judgments as characters, events, and moral circumstances challenge their initial assumptions. Such interpretive movement is particularly significant in late-twentieth-century fiction, where irony, skepticism, sentiment, and renewed interest in moral experience coexist. Stephen King's The Green Mile, originally published in six installments in 1996, offers a productive case study of this interaction. Set primarily in the death row of Cold Mountain Penitentiary during the 1930s, the novel follows prison guard Paul Edgecombe and his encounters with condemned prisoners, especially John Coffey, a physically imposing man whose extraordinary capacity for healing contradicts the circumstances of his imprisonment. The narrative combines the conventions of prison fiction, supernatural fiction, melodrama, and moral tragedy. Its emotional complexity emerges from the contrast between the apparent authority of the criminal justice system and the morally uncertain reality experienced by its participants.

The central concept of this article is cognitive oscillation, understood as the movement between competing interpretations of the same narrative event. A reader may initially interpret a prisoner through the categories of guilt and punishment but subsequently question those categories when confronted with evidence of compassion, vulnerability, or injustice. This process involves more than a change in opinion: it requires the simultaneous negotiation of conflicting emotional and intellectual responses. The novel is especially suitable for investigating the relationship between irony and the sublime. Irony encourages readers to question appearances, institutional claims, and accepted moral assumptions. The sublime, by contrast, describes experiences that exceed ordinary comprehension and produce mixtures of fear, astonishment, and reverence. In The Green Mile, these modes intersect when apparently miraculous events occur within the ordinary routines of imprisonment and execution.

Literature Review

Affective approaches to literature investigate how textual structures organize emotional experience and how emotions participate in the production of meaning. Rather than treating feelings as secondary reactions to interpretation, affect-oriented criticism considers their role in shaping attention, judgment, and narrative engagement. Stephen Ahern's discussion of affect theory and literary criticism emphasizes the variety of theoretical approaches through which affect can illuminate literary texts, including accounts concerned with bodily responses and the cultural organization of emotion. This perspective is relevant to The Green Mile because its emotional effects depend not on a single dominant feeling but on the interaction of fear, sympathy, disgust, grief, and wonder. The relationship between emotion and narrative can also be approached through cognitive literary studies. Patrick Colm Hogan argues that literary narratives engage patterns of emotion that are shaped by human cognitive and social capacities. From this perspective, readers' responses to fictional characters are connected with expectations about agency, suffering, responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. In King's novel, these expectations become unstable when a condemned prisoner displays greater compassion than the institution responsible for judging him.

Narrative theory provides a further basis for understanding these interpretive changes. Gérard Genette's account of narrative discourse distinguishes between the events being narrated and the ways in which they are presented. Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration is important because the events of the prison are filtered through memory and later reflection. The older narrator's perspective encourages readers to understand the story simultaneously as an account of past events and as an ongoing meditation on guilt, mortality, and the consequences of moral decisions. Irony studies are equally significant. Linda Hutcheon describes irony as a complex interpretive practice in which meaning emerges through the relationship between what is expressed and what is understood. Irony therefore depends on contextual knowledge and the reader's capacity to recognize discrepancies between appearances and implications. In The Green Mile, the language of punishment, discipline, and lawful execution creates an institutional framework that the narrative repeatedly places under ethical pressure. The prison is organized around supposedly legitimate procedures, yet those procedures do not necessarily produce justice.

The concept of post-irony requires particular care. It is used here as an analytical description rather than as a claim that the novel belongs to a formally established post-ironic literary movement. Post-ironic reading describes a position in which skepticism toward conventional emotional or moral narratives coexists with a renewed willingness to take suffering, kindness, and ethical responsibility seriously. The term helps explain how readers can remain aware of melodramatic conventions without dismissing the emotions those conventions generate. The sublime offers another interpretive framework. In A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, Edmund Burke associates the sublime with experiences of terror, astonishment, and the limits of ordinary reasoning. The sublime is therefore not simply a synonym for beauty or greatness. It involves an encounter with something emotionally overwhelming, potentially threatening, or difficult to assimilate into familiar categories.

Immanuel Kant develops a different account of the sublime in his Critique of the Power of Judgment, associating it with the limits of imagination and the mind's effort to comprehend what exceeds its immediate representational capacities. Although Burke and Kant differ in their explanations, both offer useful frameworks for interpreting scenes in which ordinary perception and judgment become inadequate. John Coffey's healing abilities, the suffering of prisoners, and the execution of an apparently innocent man create precisely this kind of interpretive difficulty.

Studies of Stephen King's narrative technique also support an affective approach. Hye-Knudsen examines King's use of language, immersion, and emotion, connecting stylistic choices with readers' engagement in narrative situations. Such work suggests that emotional effects can be investigated through the relationship between linguistic form and the reader's developing model of the fictional world.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed interpretive framework combining close textual reading, narrative analysis, and structured affective coding. The primary source is Stephen King's The Green Mile: A Novel in Six Parts, published by Pocket Books in 1996. Selected episodes concerning the prison's institutional routines, John Coffey's healing abilities, the execution of prisoners, and Paul Edgecombe's retrospective reflections are examined for narrative perspective, emotional vocabulary, contrasts between appearance and reality, and moments in which events resist ordinary moral or causal explanation. Each selected episode is interpreted through a coding scheme containing the categories of fear, compassion, irony, grief, wonder, and ethical disorientation. Coding is based on the dominant and secondary affective functions of an episode rather than on isolated words alone. The quantitative dimension is operationalized through systematic classification and comparison of these categories, while close reading establishes how their meanings depend on context. Because the present analysis is interpretive rather than a fully automated corpus study, the findings are reported as qualitative patterns rather than as statistically validated measurements of the novel's entire text. This approach makes it possible to investigate recurring affective transitions without presenting unverified frequencies or percentages as empirical facts.

Results

The analysis identifies three major patterns in the novel's affective organization: the coexistence of tenderness and institutional violence, the transformation of skepticism into wonder, and the movement from moral certainty toward ethical uncertainty. The first pattern emerges through the contrast between the prison's ordinary routines and the extraordinary suffering that occurs within them. The death row environment is governed by schedules, professional responsibilities, surveillance, and established procedures. Such routines create an impression of order. However, the execution chamber reveals that administrative regularity does not necessarily correspond to moral legitimacy. The recurring image of the Green Mile itself contributes to this contradiction. The corridor is a physical route toward execution, but it also functions symbolically as a space in which characters confront the limits of their understanding of justice. Its apparent simplicity contrasts with the complexity of the moral decisions associated with it. The movement toward the electric chair is institutionally organized, yet its consequences cannot be reduced to procedural correctness.

The second pattern concerns John Coffey's healing abilities. His extraordinary actions initially challenge the assumptions through which the prison environment is understood. The institution classifies him as a condemned criminal, while his behavior reveals sensitivity to suffering and a capacity to alleviate it. The discrepancy between these representations produces cognitive oscillation: readers must reconsider whether the categories of guilt, innocence, power, and vulnerability adequately explain the character.

The third pattern develops through Paul Edgecombe's retrospective perspective. His narration places the immediate events of the prison within a longer temporal framework. Past decisions acquire additional significance because their consequences remain emotionally present. The narrative consequently moves beyond the question of what happened to consider how people continue to live with the memory of their actions.

The principal affective patterns are summarized in Table 1.

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Table 1. Affective patterns and cognitive oscillations in the Green Mile

Narrative episode or feature	Dominant affective response	Secondary response	Cognitive oscillation	Interpretive significance
The routines of death row	Anxiety	Detachment	Order ↔ violence	Institutional procedure conceals the human consequences of punishment.
John Coffey's healing abilities	Wonder	Compassion	Skepticism ↔ belief	Extraordinary actions challenge conventional judgments about the prisoner.
The treatment of condemned inmates	Fear	Sympathy	Criminality ↔ vulnerability	The distinction between legal status and moral identity becomes unstable.
The execution chamber	Horror	Grief	Justice ↔ cruelty	Lawful procedure is separated from ethical legitimacy.
Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration	Regret	Reflection	Past certainty ↔ present doubt	Memory transforms earlier events into continuing moral questions.
The novel's supernatural dimension	Astonishment	Unease	Rational explanation ↔ the inexplicable	The narrative tests the limits of ordinary interpretation.

The table demonstrates that the novel's emotional structure is not adequately described by a single category. Fear frequently coexists with sympathy, while wonder emerges alongside unease. These combinations are important because they prevent the reader from settling into a stable interpretive position. One illustrative textual detail is the novel's repeated designation of the execution apparatus as "Old Sparky". The nickname transforms a lethal instrument into an object of informal familiarity. Its colloquial tone contrasts sharply with the violence associated with electrocution. This contrast is ironic because familiar language makes a disturbing practice appear ordinary, while the narrative context exposes the inadequacy of such normalization.

The phrase also demonstrates how emotional responses can be organized through a discrepancy between linguistic tone and represented reality. A reader may recognize the nickname's humor or informality while simultaneously experiencing discomfort at the practice it describes. The result is not the disappearance of horror but its intensification through contrast. John Coffey's characterization produces a different but related effect. His extraordinary capacity to heal introduces a form of wonder that challenges the apparently

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settled categories of prison life. The narrative does not merely ask whether a supernatural event is possible. It also asks what such an event reveals about the people who witness it and the institutions that determine a person's fate.

Discussion

The results can be interpreted through the interaction of affect theory, irony, and the sublime. Together, these perspectives explain why The Green Mile generates emotional engagement without removing the reader's awareness of contradiction.

Cognitive oscillation and affective meaning

Cognitive oscillation describes the process through which a reader moves between interpretations without necessarily resolving their differences. In the novel, the prison is both a functioning institution and a site of profound injustice. The guards perform recognizable professional duties, yet their participation in executions raises questions about the relationship between obedience and moral responsibility. This contradiction complicates the reader's response to Paul Edgecombe. He is not represented simply as an embodiment of institutional cruelty or as a morally flawless observer. Instead, his position as a participant in the prison system creates tension between personal decency and institutional involvement.

Affective theory helps explain why this tension matters. Emotional engagement is not merely an ornamental feature of the narrative; it shapes how readers evaluate events. Sympathy for an individual prisoner can change the perceived significance of an institutional procedure. Conversely, awareness of the procedure's consequences can transform the reader's understanding of the guards' responsibilities. Ahern's account of affect-oriented literary criticism supports the view that emotional processes are relevant to the interpretation of narrative texts. In King's novel, the reader's emotional position changes as the story reveals discrepancies between official classifications and individual experience. The process is cognitive because interpretations are revised, but it is also affective because these revisions are driven by encounters with suffering, tenderness, and fear.

Post-irony and the limits of institutional authority

Irony operates through discrepancies between an apparent meaning and the interpretation made possible by context. Hutcheon emphasizes that irony is not a simple linguistic decoration; it is a social and interpretive practice that depends on the relationship between expression and understanding. The nickname "Old Sparky" illustrates this mechanism. Informal language appears to reduce the psychological distance between prison personnel and the machinery of execution. Yet the surrounding narrative makes that familiarity troubling. The language of routine does not eliminate violence; instead, it reveals how violence can become normalized through institutional habits. This is an example of irony that does not require the reader to reject every emotional response as naïve. The reader can recognize the disturbing implications of the nickname while remaining deeply concerned about the people affected by the execution process.

The concept of post-irony is useful here because the novel's emotional force depends on the coexistence of critical distance and sincere concern. A purely ironic reading might emphasize the hypocrisy of institutional authority and the instability of moral language. An exclusively sentimental reading might focus on individual suffering without examining the structures that make it possible. The novel encourages a position between these alternatives. Its emotional effects are therefore not reducible to either cynicism or uncomplicated compassion. The narrative challenges the reader to recognize institutional contradictions while continuing to treat individual suffering as morally significant.

The sublime and the experience of john coffey

The sublime provides a framework for understanding the novel's supernatural elements. Burke associates sublime experience with terror and the powerful emotional effects of what threatens or exceeds ordinary security. Kant, by contrast, emphasizes the limits of imagination and the mind's attempt to comprehend what surpasses its immediate capacities. John Coffey's healing abilities can be interpreted through both approaches. They produce wonder because they exceed the explanatory framework of the prison environment. At the same time, they create unease because the same narrative world remains governed by confinement, punishment, and death. Coffey's extraordinary abilities do not abolish suffering. Instead, they make suffering more difficult to interpret within conventional moral categories. The character possesses a capacity for extraordinary compassion, yet he remains subject to an institutional system that defines him through criminal accusation and punishment.

This contrast creates a form of ethical sublimity. The reader encounters an apparent contradiction between extraordinary moral sensitivity and the violence of the social world. The resulting astonishment does not necessarily produce a definitive explanation. Rather, it reveals the limitations of ordinary assumptions about power, guilt, and justice. The sublime also emerges from the execution scenes. Their emotional force derives not simply from the physical reality of death but from the confrontation between procedural certainty and moral uncertainty. The institution can determine what will happen, yet its authority does not automatically settle whether what happens is just.

Retrospective narration and ethical memory

Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration adds a temporal dimension to these affective movements. The reader encounters events that belong to the narrator's past but continue to influence his understanding of himself and the world. Memory therefore becomes an instrument of ethical evaluation. Genette's distinction between narrative events and their presentation is relevant to this structure. The story is not delivered as a neutral sequence of occurrences. It is filtered through the consciousness of a narrator who has lived with the consequences of those events.

This perspective transforms the meaning of earlier experiences. Actions that might initially appear to be ordinary professional decisions acquire greater significance when viewed through later reflection. The narrative encourages readers to consider how moral responsibility persists beyond the immediate moment of action. Retrospection also complicates the relationship between knowledge and judgment. Readers may understand the consequences of an event before fully appreciating its emotional meaning. As additional details emerge, earlier judgments are revised. Cognitive oscillation thus becomes a narrative mechanism through which ethical understanding develops.

Implications for quantitative affective analysis

The analysis demonstrates the value of structured affective coding for literary interpretation. Categories such as fear, compassion, irony, grief, and wonder provide a consistent vocabulary for comparing narrative episodes. They make it possible to identify recurring combinations of emotional responses and to relate those combinations to specific narrative functions. However, the categories should not be treated as objectively measurable psychological states of actual readers. The table records interpretive classifications of textual episodes, not experimentally observed responses. A full computational study would require a defined electronic edition, a documented annotation protocol, independent coding or validation procedures, and an explicit account of how ambiguous cases were handled.

This distinction is important because literary emotion cannot always be reduced to isolated words or stable sentiment labels. A sentence associated with humor may produce discomfort in context, while a scene of apparent horror may also generate compassion. The

meaning of an affective marker depends on narrative perspective, characterization, and the reader's developing understanding of the fictional world. Consequently, the most productive quantitative approach is one that supports interpretation rather than replacing it. Structured coding can reveal patterns, but close reading is needed to explain why those patterns matter.

Conclusion

This article has examined cognitive oscillation, post-ironic sensibility, and the sublime in Stephen King's The Green Mile. The analysis demonstrates that the novel's emotional complexity emerges from the interaction of institutional routine, supernatural possibility, individual suffering, and retrospective moral reflection. Cognitive oscillation is central to this structure because readers are repeatedly encouraged to revise their assumptions about guilt, authority, compassion, and justice. The prison appears orderly, yet its procedures generate profound ethical questions. John Coffey's extraordinary healing abilities inspire wonder while exposing the limitations of ordinary moral classifications. Paul Edgecombe's retrospective narration further transforms these contradictions into questions about responsibility and memory. The concept of post-irony helps explain how the novel combines skepticism with sincere emotional engagement. Its critique of institutional authority does not require readers to abandon compassion, and its emotional intensity does not prevent critical reflection. Instead, the narrative sustains a productive tension between the two.

The sublime illuminates the novel's representation of experiences that exceed familiar categories. Extraordinary healing, irreversible suffering, and the confrontation with death produce moments in which rational explanation appears insufficient to resolve the reader's ethical uncertainty. Finally, structured affective coding offers a useful method for identifying recurring emotional patterns in literary fiction. Nevertheless, such coding must remain transparent about its evidentiary limits. The present findings are interpretive and should not be mistaken for experimentally verified measurements of reader psychology. Future research could develop this framework through a reproducible digital-text corpus and independently validated annotation. Ultimately, The Green Mile demonstrates that the emotional power of late-twentieth-century fiction can arise from the refusal to separate critical intelligence from moral feeling. Its narrative invites readers to question familiar explanations of justice while remaining attentive to the suffering of individuals. In this sense, cognitive oscillation becomes not merely a stylistic effect but a central mechanism of ethical reflection.

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