

Student Name

Mrs. Weber

English, Period 3

23 May 2011

*The Green Mile* and Death

Death and mystery walk hand in hand in many action-filled books. However, they rarely reach the level of the complex intertwined saga that is Stephen King's book, *The Green Mile*. The novel embodies death in a way unlike any other horror story of its kind. The symbolism of passing on is visible in every page, soaking through the texts to combine a powerful message with an exhilaratingly suspenseful tale. But what really pushes this book beyond the norm is the variety in death's representation in various symbols. This symbolism is most clearly visible in a few powerful elements: Old Sparky (the electric chair), William "The Kid" Wharton, and the Green Mile itself.

Old Sparky is perhaps the most obvious symbol of death in the entire book. It can be argued that Old Sparky isn't REALLY death, but just the passage to death, the means of entering death. However, for the purposes of this essay, it will represent death quite nicely, for what is more tainted by death than the very thing used to extinguish the sparks of life? Ironically, King personifies this macabre chair, giving it a gruesome and lifelike personality, as shown in this quote: "He would sit down with Old Sparky in a little while, and Old Sparky would make an end to him" (16). Old Sparky seems to almost have an insatiable hunger for life. It remains an antagonist over the course of the book. King, although personifying Old Sparky, also points out that it is nothing without its operators. This is expressed in this quote: "We had once again succeeded in destroying what we could not create" (114). This

quote unmasks a deception the reader is fooled into believing. It suggests that the monster serving death isn't Old Sparky at all: it's us. We have vanquished what our seemingly infinite supply of intelligence cannot replace. We have conquered life.

William "The Kid" Wharton is another prime example of death. Wharton was sent to the Cold Mountain State Penitentiary, the main setting of the book, because of his crimes of rape and murder. He was nothing but a straw, a hole through which death sucked life in its desperate thirst for what it can never own. Unfortunately, once he arrived at Cold Mountain, he only became worse. This is realized by the guards in this quote: "Wharton knew what we all knew: they could only fry him once" (159). There is nothing more dangerous than a man with nothing to lose, and Wharton most certainly was nothing if not a man with nothing. One of the main protagonists, a man named John Coffey, is prosecuted for one of Wharton's crimes, a fact that is only understood later in the book. He just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to help two girls murdered by Wharton. "I tried to take it back, but it was too late" (42) is Coffey's outcry of devastation at what he discovers. Coffey just happened to find victims of Wharton's crimes, and became distraught when he could heal them, showing us that the power of death is irreversible, even when wielded by a lowly man like William Wharton.

Lastly, but certainly not leastly, comes the Green Mile. This is the most potent emblem of mortality in the entire work of writing. The Green Mile is the name given to the path to Old Sparky. It is composed of plain green linoleum tiles, which somehow make the death all the more tragic. It is approached by all with unmistakable feelings of dread; the final steps the convicted take on earth. Strangely enough, it is also viewed as a perverse symbol of life. The narrator of the story, Paul Edgecombe, was the boss guard at the

penitentiary. He is very experienced with death. At the end of the book, he is in a retirement home, simply waiting to die. His conclusions on life are, once and for all, defined by this quote: "We each owe a death, there are no exceptions. I know that, but sometimes, oh God, the Green Mile is so long" (536). Edgecombe has lost hope. His life is nothing more than the Green Mile, the final steps before death. In a sense, he's right, and the true horror of *The Green Mile* isn't the death and murder after all, but the internal debate that rampages inside the reader once the book is over.

In conclusion, *The Green Mile* is a perfect insignia of death. It is an exploration of what death is at its essence. It finds the moment of death in the weapon, Old Sparky, an electric chair where many souls have breathed their last. It unveils the servant of death in William Wharton, the deranged murderer who doesn't fear his master. Finally, it exposes the passage to death: life itself. *The Green Mile* has an important lesson for all of us. Whether it's dying despised on a chair for your crimes, or breathing your last in a room surrounded by loved ones, death comes to each of us. There is no escaping the Green Mile.