

*Note: This essay was given a final grade of 81% (B) because of a type I (subject-verb agreement) error and problems with dashes. For history's sake those errors have not been corrected here.*

## **The Redemption of Lucas Jackson**

*Kristopher T. Marks, April 24, 2002*

On November 1, 1967, Cool Hand Luke was released in North America.

Theatergoers that month experienced a unique and interesting story that is, at its very core, a moral riddle - the story of a man who finds his spiritual redemption through an unusual path. The film, directed by Stuart Rosenberg, was based on a novel of the same name by Donn Pearce who had, just like the title character, spent time in prison and on a chain gang before starting his writing career.

Lucas Jackson was a former war hero with no plans or goals for his life, which is what led to him wandering the street drunk with a pipe cutter, clipping the heads off of parking meters. That activity resulted in him being sent to a prison work camp for two years, a sentence that was extended significantly by his repeated escape attempts. As Luke was being admitted to the prison, the captain asked him if he believed in God, a question Luke answered with a firm "no." That brief scene explains much about the whole concept of this movie. Luke is an aimless man who has no respect for God or earthly authority because of his experiences during the war. (At one point the protagonist apologizes to God for all the people he had to kill during combat.) That spiritual conflict and lack of respect drives most of his actions, including the original crime of vandalism and all three of his escapes.

As Luke resists prison authorities and the hierarchy that exists among the prisoners, his fellow inmates began seeing him as their savior. They start to believe that he will somehow rescue them from the prison even though he is just as much a prisoner as they are. The idea grows stronger inside the prisoners' minds after Luke wins a bet to eat 50 hard boiled eggs in an hour. They see him as being a savior and Luke begins to agree - as evidenced by his crucifix pose at the end of the egg eating

sequence. This did not sit well with the authorities and they increased their abusive behavior, which in turn led to Luke resisting their control more than ever.

After Luke's second escape the guards and prison captain forced him to spend hours digging and refilling a hole, working from early morning until after dark doing and redoing the same repetitive job. One guard eventually pushed him into the grave-shaped hole and verbally abused him until Luke finally breaks down and begs God for help, realizing at long last that his only help would have to come from above. He tells the guards that he finally "got his mind right" and would submit to their authority, eventually becoming one of the most trusted and docile prisoners. That submission to the rules destroys Luke's status as an idol to the other prisoners, all of whom reject him outright because he failed to meet their unreasonable expectations. That proved to Luke that God was his only true friend since both the prisoners and the guards treated him differently depending on how he behaved around them.

However, Luke's submission was short lived. Before much time passed the thrill of freedom overcame his newly found respect and Luke took advantage of his trustee status to escape by stealing a truck. But even as he fled from the legal authorities, Luke retained the seeds of redemption sewn in him on the night he begged God for help. As his pursuers closed in, Luke sought refuge in a church and began praying. He asked for help, for forgiveness, and asked God what plan lay ahead for his life. While the movie never shows Luke receiving a visible answer, he apparently got a resolution to all those questions -- after being fatally shot, Luke looked out the window of the ambulance with a peaceful, happy smile. The answer, while not necessarily one Luke would have chosen, was made quite clear and finally gave the title character peace with God.

This film does have a few flaws and occasionally pushes its symbols a bit too hard, but overall it is an excellent allegory for the process every human being must go through as they seek God and try to determine His will for their lives. Lucas "Cool Hand" Jackson is in the end an exaggerated symbol of the rebellious seeker inside

everyone: disturbed and aimless until experiences both good and bad point the way to salvation.