**The Shawshank Redemption**

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Critical Analysis: The Shawshank Redemption

Film: The Shawshank Redemption

Studio: Castle Rock Entertainment

Release Date: 1994

Cate: Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman, Bob Gunton, William Sadler, Clancy Brown, Gil Bellows

Director: Frank Darabont

Producer: Niki Marvin

Screenplay: Frank Darabont based on "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption" by Stephen King

Cinematographer: Roger Deakins

Runtime: 142 min

Language: English

Genre: Crime, Drama

The Shawshank Redemption is an impressive, engrossing piece of film-making from first-time director/screenwriter Frank Darabont who adapted horror master Stephen King's 1982 novella Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption (first published in Different Seasons). Released in 1994 by Castle Rock Entertainment, the movie is an American combination prison/dramatic film, abetted by the golden cinematography of Roger Deakins and a touching score by Thomas Newman. It features the process how a man who claims his innocence flees the prison and tells us what are friendship, patience, hope, survival and ultimate redemption by the time of the film's finale.

The story begins when Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), a young vice president of a prestigious Portland, Maine bank, is wrongfully convicted of killing his wife and her lover. He is sentenced to Shawshank prison. Andy arrives at the prison and then we meet a mainly character in the film, Ellis Redding (Morgan Freeman), also known as Red. Red and the other inmates are watching the new arrivals at the prison, they take bets on which of the “fresh fish” will crack first. Red puts his pack of cigarettes on Andy.

During the first night, the chief guard, Byron Hadley (Clancy Brown), savagely beats a newly arrived inmate because of his crying and hysterics. The inmate later dies in the infirmary because the prison doctor had left for the night. Meanwhile Andy remained steadfast and composed.

A few weeks go by and Andy approaches Red so he can purchase a rock hammer. Red is a man who has connections and can get things into the prison for the inmates. Andy assures Red that he will not get caught with it. This is how the friendship of Andy and Red is first formed.

Andy’s first year in the prison does not go so well. He works in the prison laundry and attracts attention from "the Sisters", a group of prisoners who sexually assault other prisoners. Though he persistently resists and fights them, Andy is beaten and raped on a regular basis.

While helping to repair the prison roof, Andy overhears Hadley complaining about having to pay taxes for an upcoming inheritance. Using his expertise as a banker, Andy does the guards tax returns. Warden Samuel Norton (Bob Gunton) meets Andy and sends him to work with aging inmate Brooks Hatlen (James Whitmore) in the prison library, where he sets up a make-shift desk to provide services to other guards (and the warden himself) with income tax returns and other financial advice. Meantime, the warden uses Andy to launder illicit money, by doing this Andy and his friends, especially Red get privileges that others do not get. Meantime, Brooks is freed on parole after 50 years in prison, but unable to adjust to the outside world, he hangs himself.

Andy turns a run-down prison library into a library that would rival a high school’s. Here helps a young inmate named Tommy (Gil Bellows) get his G.E.D. After hearing Andy’s story, Tommy tells Andy that he knows the man that actually killed his wife and her lover. Andy talks to Warden Norton about this but Norton sends Andy to solitary for two months. During this time, Tommy is killed while attempting escape.

Andy is released back into the general population of the prison. After talking with him, Red is convinced that Andy is going to kill himself. The next morning, Andy does not come out of his cell, the guards find him disappearing. He has escaped through a hole in the wall that he chiseled with his tiny rock hammer that Red had got for him nineteen years before. Andy has taken out the warden’s laundered money, and exposed the prison for the crime that has gone down there. The warden kills himself when he is about to be arrested. Red is eventually given parole and meets up with Andy in Mexico.

The title, The Shawshank Redemption, initially has a saving appeal to it. Webster's Dictionary defines “redeem” as “…to free from what distresses or harm (Webster 968).” There is the initial sense of salvation for whatever Shawshank might be. How is it that a prison can provide redemption? The title gains its full meaning at the end of the movie. Andy Dufresne is redeemed through his experience at the prison. He learns about life there, while teaching others. He is redeemed through his second chance at life after his escape from the prison. In this sense he takes the Webster's meaning of “redeem,” “to extricate from or help to overcome something detrimental (Webster 968).”

Andy’s drive to maintain his own sense of self-worth and freedom is hope and the movie just tells us what hope is, why they need it. In Shawshank most of the inmates are afraid to hope. Red says “hope is a dangerous thing”. Andy is the only prisoner who believes that hope is paramount in a place like Shawshank, “you need it so you don’t forget that there are places that aren’t made of stone”. Just because of hope, Andy Dufresne soldiers on with a small rock hammer to carve a passage out of the concrete walls and escapes through a sewage pipe to freedom. Likewise, Andy tries to give hope to others. Red, after 40 years of imprisonment, is redeemed by his friend, Andy, who had given him hope of being let out: "Remember, Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies," says Andy in his letter under the obsidian rock in the wall near Buxton. And Andy offers hope to another inmate, Tommy Williams, who is coached through School Equivalency examinations by Andy and sits the papers, only to screw the sheets up in despair during the test, so frustrated is he by his puny efforts. But Andy unscrews the papers and posts them, and Tommy scores C+. So for three people in the prison, there is a possibility of salvation if they will only stick at it.

Brooks and Red lead the audience to think about how a prison so inures and hardens a person that survivals on the outside becomes impossible. That is institutionalism. Red defines being institutionalised “These walls are funny. First you hate them, and then you get used to them. Enough time passes you get to depend on them. That’s institutionalised”. Many prisoners have been in the prison for so long that they have been institutionalized, which means the only life that they know is the one within the prison walls. For example, Brooks lived most of his life in the prison, so when released he does not know how to live in the outside world. Things have changed so much while he was in prison and he even thinks of crimes he could commit in order to be thrown back into prison. He eventually commits suicide because he cannot handle life in the real world. Red has the situation like Brooks. Only Andy give him hope, and he selects another life.

The film uses a very unique style of cinematography in order to capture the audience, with each film technique having a purpose to fulfill. Roger Deakins, the photography of the movie takes the realism approach to shooting. The scenes that are inside the prison are very dark. They make the viewer feel like they too are apart in the prison with the characters. When the inmates are out in the prison yard the shots are open and bright, though it is still a prison the outside scenes have a different feel to them. This is because that when the characters are outside, it is a small touch of freedom, though there are guards everywhere and barbed wire fences holding them there, this is the closest thing they can get to being free. The lighting and the camera work shows this.

The use of camera angles was a clear way of defining a characters personality. The warden, Norton, is often seen from a low angle which highlights his high status in the prison and his authority. The prisoners however are frequently shown from a high angle which emphasizes their lack of power and authority. The camera angles used by Darabont allow the audience to see the status of the characters. As the audience we get an instant look into who is an in control and who isn't.

Darabont’s naturalism as a storyteller is extended to the way he directs, in particular his use of the camera as another narrator such as the famous helicopter shot of the prison when Andy first arrives. A white bus is seen driving up the street towards a long building. As the bus turns to drive around the building the camera goes straight over the top of the building to reveal the vast expanses of Shawshank Prison. Hundreds of prisoners in the yard are all seen walking in the same direction, seemingly toward the same place. As the camera makes it to the end of the prison yard the bus returns to the frame, meeting a group of guards at the same spot all of the prisoners had been heading towards.

Another good example is the scene when Andy plays the music over the loudspeakers: The camera goes through a montage that captures the prisoners love for a simple thing such as listening to a record. The montage consisted mostly of panning shots with a crane shot mixed into it. The montage was made fluidly with the camera moving at the same speed in all the shots. The director took special notice to the actors’ expressions by using many close-ups in a movie that does not consist of many close-ups. The lighting on this scene was evenly illuminated, there were no shadows evident. The director wanted to get the facial expressions and convey their feeling of yearning for simple freedoms.

The editing style that is used in the movie is continuity. The film does not use the new “MTV Style” of editing which involves rapid cuts. The shoots and scenes dissolve into one another. Often times, when a cell door closes it signifies the ending of a shot or scene. There is one scene where Andy is in solitary and the warden comes to talk to him, after the warden closes the door all the light is gone and that scene has ended. The next scene is Andy sitting in the prison yard talking to Red. We know that time has passed since Andy is disheveled looking and the viewer knows that he must have gotten out from solitary.

Darabont uses skillful editing to maintain momentum and avoid tediousness. The scene switches several times from Andy in the car, to the lovers having a sexual romp on the bed, to the courtroom. Likewise, we turn from the court to Red being interrogated at a parole hearing. Another clever piece of intercutting is near the end when we are allowed to see police cars speeding along the highway, then Norton contemplating suicide, then the police outside arresting Hadley, a door being shaken, then Norton again. The intercutting is employed more frequently near the end in order to build up momentum.

Lighting is part of the mise-en-scene, and is a very important aspect for shaping meaning in films. There is extensive use of shadows, fadeouts, and partial sunlight to represent the cloudy mental and moral state of many of the characters in the movie. The Violent scenes all take place in the shadows as well, with low key light. Shadows cover the majority of characters throughout the film. This is created by the fact that when the sun shines, it does so only on one side of a character, usually their back. This alludes to the thought that these people have the truth about them, yet are unable to truly see it. A good portion of the movie occurs in the dark. Lights out at the prison is an extremely dark time when the characters are left with only their own thoughts. The nighttime death of Tommy Williams alludes to the desire to stay away from the truth. Hadley walks into the light after he commits the murder to show that he partially realizes the wrongdoing he has just committed. However, at the end of the movie there are no shadows. As Red walks along the beach to Andy everything is seen as it really is. This is so figuratively and literally.

The use of particular colors within a scene, give that scene a deeper meaning. The same is the movie. While Andy is inside Shawshank we do not see many variations of color, mainly just shades of grey. These dull, lifeless colors highlight the prisoners lack of power and for most of the prisoners, their lack of hope. Being contained in those dull prison walls and obeying Norton completely shows that the prisoners do not maintain any form of control in the situation they are in. The grey boring tones of the prison represent how the prisoners are expected to act, dull, lifeless and without and opinion. The colors Darabont has used show how insitutionalised the prisoners become. When Brooke's is released these dull colors are also shown, emphasizing how he has become insitutionalised. This contrasts against the colors shown.

The color red plays an integral part to the movie. In the beginning scene, as the story of Andy's trial is being told, Andy's wife is seen in a red dress while embraced by her lover. The red dress symbolizes the vitality of her life and the passion of her sins. The first real sense of bright color within the prison occurs when the prisoners do labor outside of the prison. They wear pants that are blue with a red stripe running down the leg. This shows the conflict between gluttonous desire for freedom and the reality that their lives are confined to behind the prison walls. The cigarette package that the Warden has before Tommy's death is red and white. The red and the white together represent Tommy's desire to tell the truth and the anger of Norton for trying to hide it. Warden Norton is wearing a red tie when he kills himself. This time the color red signifies Norton's pride. He refuses to allow anyone else to control his fate. The stamp that approves Red's parole is used with red ink. The red reinforces the idea of Red's new lease on life. Red hitches a ride to Buxton in an old red pickup truck. The truck brings him one step closer to fulfilling Andy's dream of a new life for him and Red. The trail ways bus that Red takes to Texas has red detail on the side. This reinforces the truck's meaning. Andy's boat is red and blue. This symbolizes the pride that Andy has for taking fate into his own hands and being redeemed for his false punishment.

Minor items within a movie can have extra symbolic meanings. The Holy Bible is an important item and we see it through the whole movie. To the warden, the Bible is sacred and to be followed at all times, so it is a rule book. To Andy, he hides his rock hammer in the Bible going against the rules completely and they represent freedom and salvation.

Darabont uses the harmonica as a symbol of hope. Andy gives the harmonica to Red, representing the hope and inner strength he is helping Red to find. It helps s to understand that our friends can aid us in holding on to our self-belief, even in times of struggle, like Red’s long prison sentence. When Red blows it we know Andy is helping him hold on to whatever hope he has left. As Andy’s gift to Red, the harmonica is a clear development of the symbolism established in the aria scene.

Andy's posters symbolize the hiding of the truth. On the surface the posters appear to be just pretty girls that no one would question. However, they cover a tunnel that Andy digs that allows him to escape. Another symbol that could go by easily unnoticed is the picture of the R.M.S. Queen Mary on the lid of the tin box. The RMS Queen Mary was launched on September 26, 1934 to symbolize the end of the worldwide depression. The ship has lasted through a world war and set the standard for liners. This ship in many ways is like Andy. His escape from Shawshank symbolizes the end to the long and unjust battle that he was forced to fight. He is also the beacon that Red looks to for an example of how to truly live.

Another important symbol to the movie is the Mexican town of Zihautenejo. Zihautenejo is an old fisherman town on the coast of the Pacific Ocean. It is known for its beautiful beaches and peace. The town symbolizes the life that Andy not only dreams of having but deserves. There he will be able to live a quiet life full of simple pleasures that were kept from him. There he can be completely free.

Sound is an important part of this film. The director chose to have narration throughout this film. The sound of Red’s narration tells Andy’s story, without it there would be no story. He has been in prison for a lot longer than Andy; therefore he presumes that he knows what will happen because he has seen it all before. His predictions conflict with what happens. This prevents the audience from guessing or solving what will happen. This is what makes this film so dramatic and incredibly different from others. It isn’t easily predicted. An example of this is when the guards discover that Andy is missing. Red is taken in with them in case he knows what has happened. This adds much tension because the audience is watching from Reds perspective and he does not know anything.

The film touches on the power of music. When Andy smuggles a record of Mozart, Le Nozze di Figaro onto the prison's public address system and plays it over the whole compound, Red says it was, “something so beautiful it can't be expressed in words and it makes your heart ache because of it.” All are transfixed, men in the workshop, men picking stones, even Wiley the guard reading his comic in the toilet. The influence of music as a powerful, uplifting force is emphasized. Andy questions Red, “That's the beauty of music. They can't take that away from you. Haven't you ever felt that way about music?” Andy gives Red a present of another harmonica as a symbol of its uplifting power. And the music score of the film itself epitomizes the invigorating influence on the emotions of strident chords, particularly when Andy escapes through the sewage pipe and at the end on the beach as the two re-unite.

Darabont cast Morgan Freeman first, not at all an apparent choice given Red’s description in the novella, but absolutely a right one. Freeman’s performance is nuanced, balancing the surface level twinkle in his eye befitting a man “who has been known to procure certain items from time to time” with the turmoil going on beneath, the intense regret over the mistake he made as a youngster that has condemned him to his life inside. He tries to keep it hidden away, out of sight of his fellow inmates, but every so often it breaks through, notably in the scene in the dining hall when he tells Andy that hope is a dangerous thing before running away, a moment Freeman plays perfectly. His final speech to the parole board, when he tells the suits in front of him that “not a day goes by when I don’t regret it” and that he wishes he could go back in time and change things, is beautifully done – compare this emotional vulnerability with his first parole hearing, twenty years beforehand in the story, in which his insouciance and insincerity still shine through. His journey from one point to the other, made through Andy, is Freeman’s triumph in the film.

His chemistry with Tim Robbins is also just perfect. Robbins is one of the finest actors working in Hollywood today, and here he gives one of his best performances, one that is, if possible, even more subtle than Freeman’s. Although Andy is a very private man (Red explains that he kept himself to himself the first few months he was there), through his actions he wears his heart on his sleeve. Robbins has that tricky job of expressing both joy and horror through very small signs, such as the simple smile he gives when the first lots of books are delivered, but not once does his performance stumble. Not a man to express himself though physical emotion (he tells Red that his wife found him “a hard man to know”) he does so instead through words, like the moment when he tells the Warden he is being “obtuse.” As the film wears on Robbins allows Andy small moments of expression, but there is no outright burst of emotion – Andy never laughs or cries once while inside – until that joyous moment when he emerges from the pipe and raises his hands to heaven. It is almost worth getting through the entire film just for the final moments when we see Andy, for the first time, really smiling. It was a deceptively difficult role for an actor, a taciturn role that nevertheless exudes both real sympathy and warmth, but Robbins handles it magnificently.

The Shawshank Redemption has many points in its favor. It must be destined for a place in the canon of quality prison movies. The profundity of its issues, the quality of its script, the skillful use of time and camera manipulation and its overriding positivism lift it far above the usual quality of such films. Made in 1994, one can see it being re-screened on television for decades to come.

Many films reviews give the movie so many good comments. As reviewed by Ed Gonzalez, “I should have known that Shawshank Redemption would become as beloved as it is now, ranking alongside other overrated "classics" like Casablanca, Schindler's List, and the genuinely terrible Star Wars as one of the greatest movies of all time” (Gonzalez 1). James Berardinelli praises it “ranks among the best filmed versions of any King stories to date” (Berardinelli 1). Why the movie attracts so many people to watch? I think the reason is just the story shares the human emotion from hopelessness and despair to hope and salvation.

Work Cited

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