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NYT Style Review of *The Shawshank Redemption*

In 1982, prolific horror writer Stephen King released a novella titled *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* in a collection of other short works. This piece was a nearly unprecedented departure from King’s more popular work, without wendigos nor gun slingers, opting instead to focus on the corrupt prison system in 20th century Maine.

Just 5 years after the short story was minted, seasoned horror screenwriter Frank Darabont bought the rights to the story and set to work re-writing it for the silver screen. While Darabont’s main wheelhouse was also similar to King’s at the time, with the 1988 remake of *The Blob* and the third entry into the *A Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise acting as his major successes, he would quickly establish his skill at writing and directing some more grounded stories.

*The Shawshank Redemption* focuses on telling the story of inmates in the eponymous Shawshank prison, a showcase for Murphy’s law in the US prison system. The protagonist, expertly portrayed by Tim Robbins, is former banker Andy Dufresne. Dufresne’s inciting incident into Campbell’s monomyth happens in the first few moments of the movie, where he is sentenced to life in prison for murdering his wife and her lover. Andy protests that he is innocent but ends up in the yard of Shawshank all the same.

The film’s deuteragonist, another prisoner nicknamed Red, and played by Morgan Freeman, takes on the role of narrator throughout the film. Red starts off being able to get things for the other prisoners, ranging from cigarettes to the iconic pinup posters Andy hangs on his walls.

While *Shawshank* may have some aspects of a feel-good story about a found family surviving in hellish conditions, the film does not shy away from the negative aspects of life incarcerated. The dictatorial power wielded by the warden, portrayed by Bob Gunton, and the other guards is often shown as abuse on the prisoners. Additionally, the film features offscreen depictions of repeated sexual assault on Dufresne, and violence as a whole is a common affair.

Despite the horrific conditions, Andy and Red become fast friends through a series of adventures spanning the years they spend together, and the excellent acting of Freeman and Dufrene makes the friendship seem genuine and real. A varied supporting cast consisting of William Sadler, Clancy Brown, Gil Bellows, and James Whitmore as various prisoners and guards keep the plot interesting with a steady stream of snapshots into the world outside the prison. Overall, between the supporting and main cast it is nearly impossible to find a single poorly delivered line of dialogue or a facetious reaction through the whole film.

The score of the film, composed by Thomas Newman, greatly increases the narrative experience. The music swells to accent the highs of the movie, as well as taking on a more sporadic and somber tone to highlight anxious moments.

The cinematography, provided by Roger Deakins, is yet another factor that enhances the movie, and much like the music changes to suit the needs of a scene. Moments of calm are given large sweeping vistas, and tenser moments take on cramped, lower camera angles.

Overall, through a combination of excellent all-around acting, an attention-grabbing story, a remarkable score, and great cinematography and directing, *The Shawshank Redemption* is one of the few pieces of media that can only be described as a masterpiece. Without exaggeration, this film may be the best movie to not even come close to passing the Bechdel test.