



Movie Club

The Shawshank Redemption (1994)

1. Some have pointed out that Shawshank is one “of the greatest guy flicks to ever feature so few women”, pointing out that there are only two women with speaking roles: the customer who complains about Brook’s bagging skills at the grocery store and the assistant at the bank Andy visits near the end (Schulz, Bill, “[20 Things You Didn't Know About 'The Shawshank Redemption'](#)”, *The Daily Beast* [New York] 27 Aug 2014.) The film certainly focusses on the bonding of the male characters and the setting doesn’t allow for much gender interaction. How does the limited setting of the prison impact the story? Does the absence of female characters in anyway detract from the impact or universality of the story?
2. Some have pointed out a trend “in films such as *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), and *American History X* (1998)” where “a white male convict benefits from the friendship of a black ‘lifer’ inmate, a ‘natural’ resident of the prison who helps the white inmate survive and sometimes aids in his escape as well.” (Sargent, Andrew, “[Representing Prison Rape: Race, Masculinity, and Incarceration in Donald Goines’s ‘White Man’s Justice, Black Man’s Grief’](#)”, *MELUS*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Crime, Punishment, and Redemption (FALL 2010), pp. 135) Sargent also points out the how this has evolved from the trope of the white guy being raped by black inmates that underpins American middle-class fears of prison into these “buddy” films where prison is transformed “into a site of white male self-assertion... [and] sublimate and reconstitute it into a more palatable form by positioning the black prisoner not as potential rapist but as protector of the white male against a *white* sexual predator—one who is so leeringly, inhumanly white (eg., an albino ‘hillbilly’)” (Sargent, “[Representing Prison Rape](#)”, p.136). Additionally, films like *Shawshank* “personify a plurality of ethnic and cultural diversity in prisons, as they tell stories of mostly white inmate protagonists doing conflict with mostly white correctional antagonists”, becoming “‘white-washed’ versions of life behind bars in the United States.” (Barak, Gregg, “[Class, Race, and Gender in Criminology and Criminal Justice: Ways of Seeing Difference](#)”, *Race, Gender & Class*, Vol. 11, No. 4, Social Change, Criminology, Women of Color in the Academy, Reparations for African Americans, Critical Whiteness Studies, *Workfare* (2004), p.95) Given these separations from reality and the “white-washed” telling of prison life, how impactful is the film? Does it matter that it speaks more towards a white middle-class audience’s expectations of prison? Does it diminish the films impact about things like friendship and hope?

3. Does the film demonise anyone? Andy faces trouble from two groups: first from Boggs and “The Sisters”, and then from Captain Hadley and the Warden. With “The Sisters” the danger ends after Andy has ingratiated himself with the prison authorities, with the guards beating Boggs so that “he lived the rest of his days drinking his food through a straw”. Despite Andy being free of “The Sisters” and Boggs getting his “comeuppance”, the severity of the actions removes any possible satisfaction from this liberation. But when Captain Hadley is arrested and Warden Norton commits suicide the closure is complete. What distinguishes these two dangers for Andy? Do we feel sympathy for Boggs despite his repeated attempts at raping Andy? Do we feel any sympathy for Hadley or Norton? Why are our responses different to these two events?

4. Two of the prominent themes of the film are freedom and hope, and the link between these two. The prison library Andy revitalised stands as one of the greatest demonstrations of these, as it “symbolised hope, freedom, success, dedication, and a place where he could get away from prison brutality”, and became, for all the prisoners who visited, the only place where they “got to make choices”, where “they were free men.” (Little, [“What a Simple Library Can Really Mean”](#), *Journal of Correctional Education* (1974-), Vol. 49, No. 1 (March 1998), p. 4) A similar act is when Andy plays Mozart’s “Sull’aria...che soave zeffiretto” (the Letter Duet) from the *Marriage of Figaro* that “forms an invisible bubble that momentarily suspends the ugly reality of the world... [and] achieves transportation for those who are forever ‘doing time’ out of time.” (Chua, Daniel K L., [“Listening to the Self: The Shawshank Redemption and the Technology of Music”](#), *Nineteenth Century Music* 34.2 (Spring 2011), p. 348) The ineffable nature of the experience is summed up by Red:

I have no idea to this day what those two Italian ladies were singin’ about. Truth is, I don’t want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singin’ about something so beautiful it can’t be expressed in words and makes your heart ache because of it.

For most of the characters, freedom can only take the form of hope. Hope, and in particular the value of hope, is something that seems best suited to artistic expressions. Its prevalence in the arts is contrasted with the fact that the concept “has received little attention in philosophical literature” despite being a “theme so central to how we should live our lives” (Bovens, Luc, [“The Value of Hope”](#), *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (Sep., 1999), p. 667). In particular there are two arguments about hope in Shawshank: Andy, for whom “hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies”, and Red, who warns that “hope is a dangerous thing, hope can drive a man insane, has got no use on the inside, better get used to that idea.” Neither denies the existence of hope, or people’s tendency towards hope (even Red pictures the Mexican coast of Andy’s hope only to stop himself from sharing the “shitty pipe dream”), but they disagree of its value, of its function, particularly when there is no chance of it being fulfilled. But one could ask: is the function of hope to be fulfilled? Does Red have a point in his scepticism of hope? Can it be harmful? Given Andy’s circumstances (his ability to dig out of the prison as well as financing his new life through his activates with the Warden) how much of Andy’s desired escape is hope and how much of it is calculated?

5. [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#) defines Redemption as:

the act of making something better or more acceptable

the act of exchanging something for money, an award, etc.

Christianity : the act of saving people from sin and evil : the fact of being saved from sin or evil

In addition to redemption, another word that keeps coming up, mainly with Red, is rehabilitation. He is asked about his being rehabilitated repeatedly in the film during parole hearings, and although he is eventually released he expresses ambiguity, even hostility, about what it actually means to be 'rehabilitated'. This is best revealed in the final parole interview where Red asserts "I know what you think it means, sonny. To me, it's just a made up word." This is immediately followed by his confession of regret:

There's not a day goes by I don't feel regret. Not because I'm in here, because you think I should. I look back on the way I was then: a young, stupid kid who committed that terrible crime. I want to talk to him. I want to try to talk some sense to him, tell him the way things are. But I can't. That kid's long gone, and this old man is all that's left. I got to live with that. Rehabilitated? It's just a bullshit word. So you go on and stamp your form, sonny, and stop wasting my time. Because to tell you the truth, I don't give a shit.

Are these sentiments expressed the same as being rehabilitated? Red would go on to find Andy, something he did not expect or even hope for. Is this a kind of redemption? Does the redemption in the title refer to Andy? Does Red get redemption, or does it only refer to Andy? Is it the same as rehabilitated?