

Rebecca Daly
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Shawshank Redemption: A Reflection of its Time



Shawshank Redemption is a 1994 prison drama directed by Frank Darabont. The film was adapted from a novella written by Stephen King called *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*. The story was published in his 1982 book King's collection *Different Seasons*, subtitled *Hope Springs Eternal*. *Shawshank* stars Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman, Bob Gunton, and many other talented actors. This film is a reflection of its period in two ways; it perfectly exemplifies what effect the rise of cable TV and videos had on the film industry, and is a mirror to social issues at the time revolving around religion and prison systems.

Shawshank takes place in 1947 Maine and follows the story of a banker named Andy Dufresne who is wrongfully accused of murdering his wife and her lover. He is given two life sentences and sent off to Shawshank Prison. Although he has trouble when he first arrives because of his cold and standoffish demeanor, he begins to make friends with an inmate named Red who runs a “business” in Shawshank where he smuggles certain items from the outside—cigarettes, alcohol, magazines, etc. Andy asks Red to get him a rock hammer so he can practice his hobby of rock sculpting. Over the first few years in Shawshank, Andy becomes good friends with Red and a few other men, although he also runs into some serious trouble with some other inmates called “The Sisters” who rape, beat, and harass him regularly. However, Andy’s luck changes after the chief guard Byron Hadley discovers that Andy is an extremely intelligent and talented banker. Andy starts to give financial help to the Warden and the guards and he begins to become very favored in Shawshank. To help Andy out, Hadley and some other guards beat up the leader of The Sisters so badly he is left paralyzed and has to transfer to a different prison. Andy continues to work for the Warden as well as significantly improve the prison’s library. Over the years, he witnesses an enormous amount of cruelty and corruption among the guards and the Warden especially. Eventually, Andy decides to escape Shawshank by crawling through a tunnel hidden by his Rita Hayworth poster that he had been carving in the wall with his rock hammer for the past fifteen years. He brings the Warden’s paperwork and clothes in a bag, and the next morning goes to a bank to take out money under a false identity. Andy sends a letter to the newspaper exposing the corrupt practices of Shawshank and leaves for Mexico where Red meets him after he finally gets paroled.

Starting in 1975 with the release of *Jaws*, the film industry began to move away from the New Hollywood age and onto the high grossing films of the Blockbuster. Blockbusters were all about the theme of good vs. evil and heroes (who were always white) and villains (who were almost always of some other ethnic background). Blockbusters strived to put on a huge spectacle and be something that the whole family could enjoy. These films were vastly different than the previous ones of New Hollywood which were more complex and required more engagement than just sitting in front of a screen watching a bunch of special effects and lavish spectacles. People began to figure out that through synergy, films can bring in huge amounts of revenue. Studios began to be integrated with media conglomerates so the number of companies that controlled the media became smaller and smaller. According to author of *The Media Monopoly* Ben H. Bagdikian:

“In 1983, fifty corporations dominated most of every mass medium and the biggest media merger in history was a \$340 million deal. ... [I]n 1987, the fifty companies had shrunk to twenty-nine. ... [I]n 1990, the twenty-nine had shrunk to twenty three. ... [I]n 1997, the biggest firms numbered ten and involved the \$19 billion Disney-ABC deal, at the time the biggest media merger ever”

The film industry was becoming more of an industry than ever, and less of an outlet for creative expression and innovation. As the 90's began, high budget blockbusters were still extremely prominent in the film industry, although indie films were also gaining notoriety. Directors like Quentin Tarantino began producing extremely successful indie flicks such as *Pulp Fiction*, which was nominated for Best Picture along with *Shawshank* at the 1995 Academy Awards (although both films lost to *Forrest Gump*). *Shawshank* did not in any way resemble the

blockbuster; it presents itself in a slower, quieter fashion and is a very clever film with a lot of underlying messages. It requires a higher level of attention and one may need to watch it more than once to pick up on all of its undertones. It was a low budget film that cost around 25 million dollars, and was directed by a relatively new director. The film did not seem very appealing- who would want to go to the theaters and sit through a 2 ½ hour prison drama? There were virtually no women in the entire cast, no huge Hollywood actors, no exciting special effects or intense action scenes. *Shawshank* failed to even make back its budget, grossing around 18 million at the box office initially. Although it was nominated for seven Academy Awards, it was completely overshadowed by *Forrest Gump* and *Pulp Fiction*. *Shawshank* was a true underdog. However, word of mouth began to create buzz for the film, and thanks to a shift in the media industry *Shawshank* made a triumphant comeback.

It is because of the rise of cable TV, videos, and the internet that *Shawshank* eventually gained enormous popularity years after it was released. In the 80's, the number of cable networks began to steadily increase until the 90's where they suddenly rose at an enormous rate. Cable technology improved and direct broadcast satellite television provided viewers with more channels. By the late 90's, 98% of homes in the U.S. had one or more television sets that were usually on for several hours a day. Ted Turner sold the rights to *Shawshank* to his own network, TNT, for a considerably lower price. Because of this, the station was able to play the film very often, and made *Shawshank* part of its "New Classics" campaign. Thanks to IMDB and other websites that emerged dedicated to spreading the word about *Shawshank*, its popularity continued to grow. Warner Brothers shipped 320,000 rental copies of the film to video stores all over the U.S., and it became the most rented film of 1995. In 1999, The Wall Street Journal

Published an article called *Shawshank's Redemption, How a Movie Found an Afterlife*. The story explained that even though *Shawshank* won no Oscars and initially received mixed reviews and little hype, many people regard it as one of the best movies ever made. In an IMDB survey of thousands of people, *Shawshank* was voted the #1 movie of all time. It is pretty astounding that a movie that did not do terribly well at the box office would even make it in the top ten movies, let alone land at the top of the list. One answer to this can be summed up well by Tim Robbins (Andy Dufresne):

“Why has it endured? ... The reason why it's had a profound impact on people has a lot to do, I think, with its spirit, and the hope within it. The idea that over a long period of time, someone's ambitions can come true, that resilience and persistence pay off.”

The plight of the film and its success can be compared to Andy's plight throughout the entirety of *Shawshank*. One of the strongest messages of the film is the idea that through hope and perseverance, one can prevail. Andy comes into Shawshank a quiet, unimpressive man who has to endure the harshness of prison life until the day he dies. However, he continues to have hope that he will one day be free despite many setbacks and his friends telling him that hope is a dangerous thing. In the end, Andy finds a way to escape prison and lives out the rest of his life in beautiful Zihuatenejo, Mexico. Just like Andy, *Shawshank's* beginnings seemed rather dismal and hopeless, however throughout the years the “little film that could” slowly gained popularity and is now regarded as one of the greatest movies of all time.

Since *Shawshank Redemption* was released in 1994, it is important to have a basic understanding of society and culture in the late 80's and early 90's. The 80's were largely influenced by the policies brought about by President Ronald Reagan who was in favor of tax

cuts for the wealthy, smaller government, and increased military spending. Consumerism rose, and by the end of his eight year presidency the federal government had more debt it ever had in our country's history. The Wall Street Crash of 1987 also left the country in an economic depression. However, Reagan was still extremely popular when his term ended in 1989, earning the highest approval rating of a president since Roosevelt. The 80's also brought about a growing panic over the spread of AIDS, the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* and the highest murder rate in all of U.S. history. The Christian/Catholic movement was gaining popularity, and there were increasing occurrences of sex scandals within the Catholic Church. 1992 brought about the end of the Cold War and the beginning of The World Wide Web, and the LA riots. The U.S. began to take on the role of the world's "peace-keeper" or policeman, intervening in countries like Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, etc. The 90's were full of President Clinton's scandals, health care, social security reform and gun control debates. Also, between 1980 and 1996, incarceration rates in the U.S. increased by 200 percent.

One of the biggest underlying themes in *Shawshank Redemption* that was a reflection as well as a critique of society at the time was religion, specifically Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity. This sect of religion experienced a lot of changes, growths and scandals in the 80's and 90's. In the 1990's, both Evangelical and Catholic churches experienced a very substantial growth. However, the Catholic Church also experienced some very serious reports of sexual abuse that began to gain public attention starting in the 80's. In 1985, the first case to gain national attention centered around a Louisiana priest who was charged with 11 counts of molestation and served 10 years in prison. In 1992, Massachusetts priest James Porter was sentenced to 18-20 years in prison for sexually abusing over 40 young boys and girls. In that

same year, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops admitted that some of them have tried to cover up some of the sex abuse within the church. Although some people left the Catholic Church after this, many of them did not. This situation implied a lot about the church, and left a lot of people feeling betrayed, confused, and angry. Catholicism is intended to be all about faith, kindness, and forgiveness. Treating others with grace, respect, and understanding is what Jesus Christ preached to his followers. So, to consider that someone who has devoted their entire life to this religion could be capable of doing something so awful to a child is absolutely unimaginable. This wasn't an isolated incident either; today it practically seems to be a regular occurrence. Not only that, but so many highly respected figures in the Catholic Church were aware of these incidents and didn't say anything or even worse, tried to cover them up. The entire situation seems to go against everything that the church stands for. On top of all of this, Catholics were criticizing people for being gay, getting an abortion, having premarital sex, etc. To think that the church would condemn someone to hell for being attracted to the same gender but would help cover up a priest sexually abusing a child is absolutely insane and disheartening for a lot of Catholics. Many people started to realize the flaws and hypocrisies that existed within the church, but the most frustrating part about it was that Catholicism still had so many loyal followers and even today continues to be a hugely popular religion.

Shawshank Redemption can be interpreted as a giant metaphor for the system of the Church in America. The first person that introduces the religious theme and is the embodiment of Catholicism/Christianity throughout the entire film is the character of Warden Norton. One of the first lines Norton has in the very beginning of the film is: "I believe in two things: discipline and the Bible. Here you'll receive both. Put your trust in the Lord; your ass belongs to me. Welcome

to Shawshank.” This line sets up Norton as a character and what life at Shawshank was going to be like. It is obvious from the beginning that he is a strict, cruel man who believes in punishment instead of rehabilitation. He has lines from the scripture all over his office walls and often quotes the bible. Norton seems to prescribe to the teachings of the Old Testament which portray God as angry and wrathful. He runs his prison based on fear because he believes that will make the prisoners respect him and keep them in line. He shows no mercy, allows the guards to routinely beat and even murder prisoners, and is responsible for many corrupt financial practices such as money laundering. He really embodies quite the opposite of what a “good Christian” should be, yet he claims to be one. Norton looks down on the prisoners because they are seen as sinners, and he believes he has a very high moral standing because of his religion. This is a critique of the Church’s guilt and fear mongering practices. It preaches that as long as one strictly follows the Scripture then they will be deserving of heaven, and those that do not will go to hell, even if they seem like a “good person”. Norton resemble corrupt church officials, and the prisoners resemble the masses of followers who are trapped inside a backwards and hypocritical ideology. Not only this, but the prison itself is representative of the constraint that the church puts around so many people. Lots of Christians/Catholics are dependent on the church for different reasons, many of them being centered around fear and guilt. Even if they disagree with some of its practices and ideas, they stay because they are afraid that if they leave the church they will be condemned to hell. Many of them are afraid of death and go to the church for comfort, and many of them have grown up being told that there is no other way to be a good person other than the “Christian Way”. They are imprisoned by this system and have no way out so they begin to be dependent on it and comforted by it. This is the exact same predicament the prisoners of Shawshank find

themselves in. They begin their time as an inmate scared and resentful of the walls that constrict them, but over time they grow to get used to and even like them. At Shawshank they have friends, a bed, and food. They don't have to worry about hectic everyday life, finding a job, paying bills, etc. Warden Norton represents the church officials who coerce people into complying with his ideology, and eventually everyone falls into the trap. He believes that salvation lies in religion, and that being trapped in Shawshank and reading bible verses all day is the only thing that can "save" the inmates.

There are several references to Scripture that help reinforce the film's religious undertones. For example, in one scene Norton is heard whistling the hymn "Eine feste Burg ist unser Gott" which is translated as "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." This quote perfectly exemplifies how the Warden feels about Shawshank and how it parallels how many officials feel about the Church. Warden believes in discipline and a strict, vengeful God. He believes that living life behind the walls of Shawshank is the only way for the prisoners to live. This is representational of ideals that the church holds; stay true to the bible, condemn others for not doing so, and do what the church tells you no matter what. The verse "his judgment cometh, and that right soon" that hangs on the wall of the Warden's office is pointed out twice in the film. Once, towards the beginning, when Norton proudly tells Andy that his wife hand made the sign for him. It is evident that he believes the ones that will be judged are those who are sinners like the prisoners in Shawshank, and he considers himself their moral superior. The judgment will not be laid upon him, because he is a "good Christian" who follows God's word. The second time the sign is shown is at the very end of the movie when Norton reads an article in the paper exposing all of the corrupt practices at Shawshank. He hears police sirens in the distance, and

abruptly looks to his sign on the wall, as if he realizes that his judgment day was here. He opens up his bible to find a note that reads “Dear Warden, You were right. Salvation lay within. -Andy” Then, Norton flips to the middle of the book and finds a space that Andy carved out to hide his rock hammer. The page he turns to is a story of the Jews’ escape from bondage from the Book of Exodus. This entire scene is extremely significant to the film and its message about religion; although Norton claimed to be the epitome of moral and religious virtue, that did not excuse him from his extremely corrupt and cruel practices, and he was eventually punished for them. Even though Andy was a prisoner and looked upon by Norton as a “sinner”, he was one of upstanding moral values and in the end he reached his own “promise land” on the beaches of Zihuatenejo, Mexico. By escaping prison, Andy was able to achieve true salvation. The film uses this as a way to express the idea that salvation does not lie in religion (or at least specifically in the church that was prominent at the time). The church preaches that by strictly adhering to the bible, attending church regularly and repenting for your sins, you will be allowed into the “promise land”. Even though the same church also discriminates against gay people, completely shuts out women, and is totally willing to cover up a sex scandal involving a child. When analyzed, *Shawshank* is trying to tell us that instead of setting us free, this system set forth by the church will keep us behind bars. It is only when we escape from this fortress of fear guilt that we can find our true selves and what makes us happy, just as Andy escaped from Shawshank to live out a happy, peaceful life in Mexico. Being a good person has nothing to do with going to church every week and has everything to do with treating others with kindness, dignity and respect. Living in fear of a wrathful God and an eternity in hell is no way to get through to people. As stated famously in the film “Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free.”

The topic of prison was also extremely relevant at the time *Shawshank Redemption* was created. The 1980's and especially the 90's saw a drastic increase in the number of prison inmates; in the 80's the prison population rose from 119, 545 to 424,006. From 1990 to 2000, this number reached 532,448, increasing 16 times the average of previous decades. According to the Justice Policy Institute: "By year end 1999, far more prisoners will have been added to America's prisons and jails than in any decade in recorded history. The 532,448 prisoners added to America's institutions during the 1990s is 25% higher than the number of prisoners added during the 1980s, and is nearly 16 times as many as the average number added during the five decades before 1970 in which the incarcerated population increased. "Also starting in the 80's, some studies emerged that concluded the system of rehabilitation that had been in order for a long time was not working; so a new system was created called the "Warehousing Model". This approach was based on the idea that trying to rehabilitate criminals was useless and they should just be put away "without the earlier frills of treatment and coddling" so they can no longer be a harm to society. "This seemed to be the model used in Shawshank; there was little no activities to help better the prisoners (before Andy came, at least), and the environment was extremely harsh. It was obvious that all the employees of Shawshank were not interested helping reform these men; they did not believe they were worthy of help and rehabilitation, their only aim was to punish them and keep them behind bars for as long as possible. The film was obviously critical of this system as is apparent in the character of Brooks who is finally released after spending a lifetime behind bars, and ends up committing suicide because he doesn't know how to handle life on the outside.

Shawshank Redemption is an incredibly smart, moving film that is an excellent reflection of its period. It outlines the changes that were going on within the entertainment industry and what a huge difference utilizing Cable TV and video rentals can make for a film. It also is an excellent critique of the hypocrisies of the Catholic/Christian church at the time, and the backwards, inefficient system of prison and the negative effect it can have on inmates.

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