

Receiving redemption: the transformative power of hope



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The 1994 movie *Shawshank Redemption* directed by Frank Darabont tells the familiar tale of Andy Dufresne, played by Tim Robbins, a successful investment banker turned convicted felon who must spend the rest of his days at Shawshank Prison for murdering his wife and her lover. *Shawshank Redemption*, based on a short story written by Stephen King, captures the hearts of American audiences and audiences worldwide because it does more than exist as a prison film. It highlights and puts narrative to the emotions and sentiments common to all humanity. Among all the myths that *Shawshank Redemption* presents, the power of hope in maintaining the soul during trials and tribulations is the myth that propels the entire script forward.[1]

This paper will argue that all aspects of this movie revolve around the myth of hope as the strongest characteristic of the human soul. The myth of hope and the resiliency of the human spirit directly correlates to the Greek myth surrounding the appearance of all the evils in the world. The myth of Pandora's box feeds directly into the myth of hope presented in the movie. Furthermore, key cinematic scenes within *Shawshank Redemption* help to convey to the audience the resiliency of the human soul. Lastly, elements of the movie not related to the form of the movie but the context allow the movie to transcend to mythical levels. The construction of the plot, the mystery of the main character, and the voiceover narration are features of the movie that have been appropriated from the typical structure of mythology and adapted to fit a cinematic medium.

Before the myth of hope and the resiliency of the human spirit can be examined, a common myth that relates directly to the movie itself needs to

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be addressed. In *Works and Days*, Hesiod's collection of myths written around 700 BCE, he tells the story of the creation of man and woman and the reasoning behind the order of the world. Within this collection of myths lies the reason for the existence of evil and suffering in the world.[2]

The myth starts with Prometheus, a mythical figure known for stealing fire from the gods and giving it to the mortals. Zeus, in his fury, created Pandora as a plague to man. This gift was sent to Prometheus' brother Epimetheus as punishment. Zeus also gave to Pandora a jar which he instructed her to never open. Pandora, with her unparalleled curiosity due to her womanly nature, opened the jar (more commonly known as Pandora's Box). This jar was "full of evils" that "caused sorrow and mischief to men." [3] The myth also states that within inside the jar was Hope and Hope did not escape. Thus, hope is seen as the one factor that allows humans to get manage their lives in spite of all the cruelties and suffering the world has to offer.

This myth of Pandora's box relates to the myth of the resiliency of the human soul that is presented in *Shawshank Redemption*. This myth of Pandora's box plays such a crucial role in the movie that it was used as the tagline: "Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free." [4] The relationship between the two myths is found once one asks the question why a good thing like hope was even placed in a jar of evils. Within the lines of the movie, Red (played by Morgan Freeman) gives a poignant speech about the nature of hope: "Let me tell you something, my friend. Hope is a dangerous thing. Hope can drive a man insane." [5] Red's speech is not inaccurate. Hope is a dangerous thing, but not an evil. Hope is dangerous

because it has power beyond all measure when placed in the heart of the right man, a man like Andy Dufresne.

The myth of hope is the central focus of the movie Shawshank Redemption. The preservation of the soul and humanity through hard times, chasing of dreams against impossible odds, resilience when facing hard circumstances all revolve around the singular idea of hope. Shawshank Redemption is a powerful cathartic device because it allows viewers to see the world from Andy Dufresne's perspective and remark at the extraordinary odds he has to face.[6]

The circumstances surrounding Andy Dufresne's situation allows viewers to see the transformative power of the myth of hope. From the beginning of the movie, Andy Dufresne's situation is stacked against him. He is sentenced to serve two consecutive life sentences for the murder of his wife and her lover. The audience feels the overwhelming sense that Andy's life is completely over. He will forever rot away in his cell for his mistakes. Even when Andy Dufresne arrives at the prison, the viewers learn that the present inmates are betting against him.

Within the walls of the prison, Andy is raped repeatedly by the inmates. One of Andy's mentees, Tommy Williams, is killed due to an order from the Warden Norton after Tommy delivers to Andy information that may help him secure his freedom. However, the warden is not happy with losing his personal bookkeeper and money launderer. After the warden refuses to listen to Andy's pleas, Andy calls him obtuse. For this minor offense, Andy must serve two months in the hole, also known as solitary confinement. This

set of circumstances and unnecessary retribution causes the audience to feel for Andy Dufresne. Viewers connect emotionally and psychologically to his trauma and experiences.

Regardless of these outside factors, one inside factor allows Andy to prevail in these trying circumstances: hope. Andy, with his brains and skill, avoids being thrown off a building the inmates are tarring. Instead, Andy trades financial favors for beers for his fellow inmates. Andy keeps his humanity and preserves his soul by building a library and doing good deeds for others in the jail, such as helping inmates to receive a high school equivalence of education. Andy Dufresne's hope never fails as he attempts to get funds for the library. He writes a letter a week, and for his efforts, he is gifted with \$200 and donated books. However, Andy seeing the power of hope and determination, continues to write letters to get funds for his library. He makes a commitment to write two letters a week. Because of his efforts he is able to get an annual stipend of \$500. This shows how Andy used his hope to keep his sanity during the rough times he spent at Shawshank.

All the while, Andy keeps up his strength. He focused his mind on his one master plan because he knows that he is not built for the prison life.

Furthermore, he knows that he does not deserve it. Once Andy comes to terms with the lack of love he gave his wife, he realizes that he is unjustly incarcerated because he did not kill his wife, or at least from his perspective he did not kill his wife. Red reveals this fact to us when he says, " I have to remind myself that some birds aren't meant to be caged. Their feathers are just too bright." [7] Andy's hope is what keeps him grounded in reality but

keeps his spirits high. Red comments on the power of Andy's hope saying <https://assignbuster.com/receiving-redemption-the-transformative-power-of-hope/>

that Andy had “ a walk and a talk that just wasn’t normal around here. He strolled, like a man in a park without a care or a worry in the world, like he had on an invisible coat that would shield him from this place.”[8]

Not only does the construction and circumstances of the plot reveal the power of the myth of hope and its relation to the myth of Pandora’s Box, but the cinematic techniques and effects within the movie help to reiterate the point that hope is the central feature of the movie *Shawshank Redemption*. In order to show how the myth of hope functions in the movie, it is best to select and analyze key scenes that show and depict the nature of the myth. These key scenes include the scene in which the freedom of outside is taken away, Andy decides to decide his own fate, Andy rejoices in the newfound freedom of outside, and Andy and Red find redemption on the beach.

The first images shown of the prison are dark, cold, gray and impersonal. The colors are de-saturated and washed out. An eagle’s eye view of the prison is shown as the camera pans over it. The gray colors of the prison starkly contrast with the surrounding green landscape. Viewers immediately sense that Andy has reached the lowest point possible in his life. The camera then shifts to Andy’s perspective as he walks into *Shawshank* prison. The pale blue sky, Andy’s last glimpse of the outside world as a free man, passes overhead and the scene goes black, signaling Andy’s downfall.[9] The upward shot of the scene also makes the viewer seem insignificant against the power of the prison. It gives the impression that the imposing situations are far greater than anything the individual has to offer. This scene, coupled with the following scenes of Andy’s sexual harassment and treatment within

the jail, can be viewed as the moment that Pandora opens the jar. There is the sense that no good can come of this.

Andy learns that the only way to overcome these obstacles and external situations is by controlling the things that one can control. This one thing is the attitude with which he approaches situations, and in Andy Dufresne's cause, this is with his overwhelming sense of hope. Andy's hope, the myth that circulates throughout the film and gives it life, is best summed up in the scene of the inmates at the dinner table discussing Andy's latest escapade and achievement. Andy tells the other inmates, " There are places in this world that aren't made out of stone. That there's something inside...that they can't get to, that they can't touch." [10] Andy is clearly talking about the hope that keeps him going through the tough times.

Apart from these two scenes, the scenes after Andy's escape present a nice contrast to the first scenes of the prison. The first of these scenes is when Andy emerges from the sewer and stands in a position of victory and triumph, his arms raised to the heavens. This scene is crucial because it employs the symbol of rain. Andy stands underneath the rain, being cleansed of any of his transgressions and emerges a new man on the other side, both figuratively and literally. [11]

The second scene that illustrates the transformative power of the myth of hope is the final scene of the movie in which Red joins Andy on the sandy shores of the Pacific Ocean as Andy polishes a beat up boat. This scene is in direct contrast with the muted scenes of the prison in the beginning of the movie. Instead of de-saturated colors, the final scenes of the movie are

filmed in vibrant, highlighting the colors on Andy's boat and the expansive ocean.[12] Both scenes, those showing the prison and those showing the Pacific, use extreme angles. The former is filmed using an extreme upshot and the latter utilizes an extreme eagle's eye view of the beach and the two microscopic characters below. Whereas the first set of shots represents the daunting and dismal nature of the situations, the second and final set represents the open possibilities and optimism of life.

There is no doubt that the myth of the hope and resiliency of the human spirit pushes the plot forward. However, outside of the myth of hope, the movie contains elements that are in themselves mythical. Briefly, an element that is reminiscent of Greek mythology is the length of the struggle that Andy endures. Andy spends nineteen years in jail. This is reminiscent of the epic voyages undergone by Homeric heroes such as the Achilles in the Trojan War and Odysseus' journey back home.

Shawshank Redemption also contains the elements of mystery and questionable narration. The mystery of the movie is whether Andy Dufresne killed his wife and her lover. The movie allows audiences the freedom to make their own decisions about the story and Andy's actions. This mystery presents a key feature of the mythical hero. Mythical heroes rarely can be said to be completely good or bad. Andy occupies the same middle ground as many other heroes of Greek mythology.

Lastly, the fact that the movie is not told from Andy's perspective or in Andy's voice gives the movie Shawshank Redemption a mythical quality. Instead, the movie is told from the perspective of Red. Red narrates the

movie, exalting the story of Andy Dufresne and his escape from Shawshank prison from mere gossip to a tall tale of legend and glory. The use of the voiceover shows that Andy and his story has gained enough glory and popularity for his name and memory to be transmitted through the ages, another key factor found in myths and the value system of the Greeks.

The myth of hope and the resiliency of the human spirit is important to keep in mind when analyzing this movie because it is the one factor that transforms the gray skies of the prison into the blue waves of the Pacific. Hope carries Andy from the beginning of the movie to the end. Without it there is no natural arc to the story. The myth of hope and the mythical elements found in the movie *Shawshank Redemption*, such as plot construction, mystery, and narration, gives the movie a mythological and spiritual nature. These universal nature of hope and the inclusion of stylistic mythical elements combine to produce a film that highlights the transformative power of the myth of hope and resiliency.

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