

Shawshank: the injustices of the justice system



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Stephen King's 1982 novella "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption", as well as its motion picture counterpart *The Shawshank Redemption*, follows the story of a falsely accused murder convict and his journey throughout the bowels of Shawshank State Penitentiary. Like many other prisoners, our protagonist Andy Dufresne naively enters the system expecting his honesty to be met with fairness and equity, but ends up unraveling the hypocritical system of affairs within the prison. Rape, theft, violence, and various other crimes run rampant within the walls of Shawshank, not only committed by the inmates, but also by the overseers. King reveals the driving forces that give way to this ironic exchange of morality, in a justice system where "justice" is but a façade.

As shown in the novella and film alike, justice itself is just as complex and multidimensional as the characters it affects. Its characteristics also seem to depend on its relationship with the various personalities within the story, as it hinges on the idea that justice ultimately is decided and administered solely by those with the upper hand. Andy's experiences are a prime example of this, as his journey sets off with a great amount of injustices. He is an innocent man who was carted off to Shawshank Penitentiary, where he was repeatedly raped and harassed for simply appearing to be "weak-looking" (King 14). The tides only started to shift after he offered financial advice to the prison guards, gaining their favor, and eventually moving up the ranks to personally assist the warden with his embezzlement and laundering. But all that comes crashing down as soon as he acquires suitable evidence of his innocence and decides to bring it up with the warden. The warden, desperate to keep his knowledge of his crimes within the prison

walls, says: " You see, you used to think that you were better than anyone else. I have gotten pretty good at seeing that on a man's face. I marked it on yours the first time I walked into the library. It might have well been written on your forehead in capital letters. That look is gone now, and I like that just fine. It is not just that you are a useful vessel, never think that. It is simply that men like you need to learn humility" (King 44). From this dialogue it is clear that Andy is not being punished for being guilty, but because someone in a position of power is desperate to administer their own version of " justice" upon the guilt-ridden inmates. With this, King is able to show different people's perspectives and their own ideas of what justice means to them.

King portrayed justice as a struggle, as something to be worked towards. That is the reason why Red was merely a narrator, and not a protagonist like Andy was. Andy had a fire inside of him. Like the warden mentioned, he carried his head and his hopes high, never caving in to institutionalism, never losing sight of himself and his goals. It was for that particular reason that he was able to achieve justice in the end, with the resignation of the warden and his eventual escape from Shawshank. King wrote it that way to show that no matter how many times you've been wronged, it is possible to come out of the other end kicking. Even though they ultimately portrayed the same message, there were many discrepancies with the methods of how the film and novella delivered it. The film definitely gave more emotional impact and satisfaction to the viewer in many ways. The most notable example would be the fate regarding Warden Norton. In the novella, Norton suffers from a nervous breakdown subsequent to Andy's escape, and quietly

resigns from his position as warden. In the film however, Andy takes records of all of Norton's illegal activity within the prison and sends it to the police. But before the authorities can arrest him, Norton kills himself. This is a much more impactful ending for such a villain, as he would rather be dead than have to live like the prisoners at Shawshank do.

Life is an arbitrary thing, as is justice. While the film ended on a satisfying, touching note, the novella retained a bit of reality, in the sense that things don't always align perfectly. While Andy did escape the prison to run away to Mexico, he is will remain living life as a fugitive in hiding. And although Warden Norton resigned, he also remained unpunished for his crimes. Red too, did not actually reunite with Andy, but instead lived on hoping to see him again. But that is the message that King did so well to deliver. Even though the bad guys may get away, even though the innocent suffer so much, justice will always come to you if you are willing to fight for it.

Works Cited: King, Stephan. *Different Seasons*. " Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption". Viking Press, 1982.