

Andy Dufresne: an Existential Hero

The 1994 American drama film, *The Shawshank Redemption*, was written and directed by Frank Darabont. Based on the 1982 Stephen King novel, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, the film follows our protagonist and existential hero, Andy Dufresne. Andy Dufresne is a banker, sentenced to two consecutive life terms in Shawshank Prison for the murders of his wife and her lover. Andy knows he is innocent of these crimes, but due to his fate already decided, Andy decides to enact change in a place as unmoving as a prison. Similar to the other “existential heroes” we’ve come to know in our Existential Films course, Andy believes he has the freedom to take his life into his own hands and is in charge of his own destiny. This is yet another film that highlights the existentialism of choices and authenticity. He understands the consequences that come with the power of choice and still chooses to live, from the viewer and narrator can come to believe, authentically. It is this sense of authenticity, integrity, freedom of choice, and the ability to inspire that makes an existential hero. And Andy Dufresne is an existential hero.

Andy was first identified as an existential hero within the first thirty minutes of the film. After his arrest, he was first identified by Red, a fellow inmate, after approaching him and asking for the famous rock hammer. Red noticed, “He had a quiet way about him. A walk and talk that just wasn’t normal around here. He strolled like a man in a park without a care or worry in the world. Like he had on an invisible coat that would shield him from this place. I think it would be fair to say, I liked Andy from the start.” (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 28:34-28:59) As an existential hero, it is normal for them to stand out from others. All of the characters in the film were able to see Andy’s uniqueness, whether they abused or welcomed it. An existential hero is

meant to be a unique character whose role is to stand out in order to fulfill the expectations of such a title.

Andy proves this notion when he wins a bucket of beers for his friends in prison after almost getting himself thrown off a roof for involving himself in the prison guards' financial situation. Lucky for him, he made a solid case for his usefulness to the guard and was rewarded for what he had to offer. But this was not expected from Andy, nor was this a normal situation to occur in the Shawshank Prison. No one had asked Andy to approach the meanest guard in the prison and offer to do his bank filing. Yet, he did and in the end, he watched his friends drink with a smile, a simple beer tasting like freedom for them, and didn't partake himself because he "gave up drinking" (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 38:25-38:30). Like any existential hero, we tend to question their actions and motives, but what is clear here is that Andy wanted nothing more than to bring a sense of freedom to a place where there is none.

Andy's determination to bring a sense of freedom into the prison didn't stop with beers. Once Andy's intellect earned him a position in the prison library and doing the guards' taxes, he was given more lenience in the prison. One day he was let into the main office with a record player. The guard watching him went to the restroom and Andy used the opportunity to lock the guard in the restroom and play music into the prison's intercom for all of the inmates at Shawshank Prison to hear. Andy believed that music brought freedom to those who listened. Andy explained later, "That's the beauty of music, they can't get that from you. Haven't you ever felt that way about music...there's something inside they can't get to, they can't touch. Hope." (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 1:11:35-1:12:03) Despite this incident landing him a month in solitary confinement, Andy felt this was a worthy venture.

This simple gesture didn't fall upon deaf ears, as Red described the moment as "It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our trapped little cage and made those walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free." (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 1:09:49-1:10:02) A Professor of Music Theory and Chair of Music at the University of Hong Kong, Daniel K. L. Chua, agreed with this sentiment in his article *Listening to the Self: The Shawshank Redemption and the Technology of Music* and suggests the sequence represents "a mode of nineteenth-century self-audition where music captures a glimpse of the freedom that lies at the core of the subject" (Chua, 2011) Such a highly acclaimed scene is intended to leave the audience of the film inspired in addition to the characters in the film itself.

The same initiative he took at that moment to play music for the inmates, he took to expand the prison library. Red explains, "He wrote two letters a week instead of one. Senate finally clued into the fact that they couldn't buy him off with just a \$200 check. Appropriations Committee voted an annual payment of \$500 just to shut him up. And you'd be amazed how far Andy could stretch it" (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 1:16:30-1:60:52). He even took on a pupil, Tommy, before he was killed by the warden. Professor Heidi Möller in the Institute for Psychology at the University of Kassel explains the significance of this moment. In her article *Organizational culture in feature films*, she described how "He [Andy] literates many prisoners or gives them a high school diploma. He proves to be an excellent motivator reaching out to fellow inmates. With his stamina he can "infect" the others." (Möller, 2017) Andy's consistency in his passion to address and reconcile the mental prison in which the inmates have been living with no motives or reward proves his integrity and authenticity.

This concept of a mental prison is one that is very consistent throughout the film. The film uses the term "institutionalized" to expand upon this idea of a mental prison. Red explains

the notion best when he explains to his fellow inmates, “I’m telling you these walls are funny. First, you hate them, then you get used to them. Enough time passes, you get so you depend on them. That’s institutionalized. (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 59:45-1:00:04) Brooks Hatlen was a notable character in the film that committed suicide shortly after receiving parole due to his struggle to adapt and survive outside the prison walls. He was still mentally imprisoned. Brooks spent 50 years in prison and studies have shown the older population struggles significantly more than younger prisoners. An article in *The American Journal of Sociology*, *Stress and Hardship after Prison*, conducted a study that proved “Younger respondents were more likely to be collected by family or friends, while over 60% of respondents 45 years or older were transported from prison by the state. State transport from prison is a vivid sign of the initial isolation that regression analysis showed to be linked to poor social integration six months later.” (Western, Bruce, et al., 2015)

In Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she addresses the “Man exists. For him it is not a question of wondering whether his presence in the world is useful, whether life is worth the trouble of being lived. These questions make no sense. It is a matter of knowing whether he wants to live and under what conditions.” (Beauvoir, 1947, p. 15) I argue that it is critical for existential heroes to not only recognize the limitations and freedom that come with this notion but to act on it authentically. Whether Andy is aware of this notion the entire length of the film or not, we are given a definitive answer when Andy explains to Red, “I guess it comes down to a simply choice, really. Get busy living or get busy dying” (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 1:45:45-1:45:54). Shortly after explaining this, Andy executed his notorious escape out of the Shawshank prison.

As explained in my thesis statement, it is also required of an existential hero to inspire existential consideration in others. Andy achieves this with many characters, but his most successful and notable case is with Red. After Andy's escape, Red reflects on Andy's choices and who he is at his core; a man who craves freedom for himself and others above all else. Simone de Beauvoir explains "Freedom is the source from which all significations and all values spring. It is the original condition of all justification of existence. The man who seeks to justify his life must want freedom itself absolutely and above everything else." (Beauvoir, 1947, p. 24) Red begins to understand this concept when he admits, "I have to remind myself that some birds weren't meant to be caged. Their feathers are just too bright. And when they fly away, the part of you that knows it was a sin to lock them up does rejoice." (*The Shawshank Redemption*, 2:05:15-2:05:34) When Red receives his parole in 1967 after 40 years in prison, the audience sees Red live the same experience as Brooks. He is a bagger at a grocery store living in a halfway house, isolated, scraping by to survive outside those "tricky walls" he'd come to know for the past 40 years. But unlike Brooks, Red chooses a different path due to Andy's last wish. Red's existential decision to stay alive to reunite with Andy in Zihuatanejo, Mexico's Hidden Jewel, is a direct result of Andy's influence as an existential hero.

Andy persistently and authentically displayed and acted on the qualities of an existential hero throughout the film. Each time a moment arose to make an existential choice, Andy acted with integrity, authenticity, and with as much freedom as he could muster in any given situation. Which was more freedom than was allowed to him at any time. These unprompted moments by Andy inspired Red to stay alive after he is approved for parole, inspired Brooks not to kill Heywood in an effort to evade release from prison, and inspired Tommy to educate himself and become a more compassionate person. Like any hero, Andy's influence also created villains out

of the guards and the Warden. But even in moments where he was tested by such villains, Andy triumphed and acted above those around him. Overall the movie depicts an influential and inspiring existential hero. Andy Dufresne was a hero that mustered the ability to ascend and execute change in an impossible space by making a little opening and chipping away.

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