Concept Of Stoicism In Shawshank Redemption: Film Analysis

The film Shawshank Redemption (directed by Frank Darabont) having made its debut in 1994, received favourably well written reviews. Yet despite that failed to make a good turn around in the box office, barely recuperating for the budget of the film and other costs such as advertisements. However, the film soon became a cult-classic ‘man drama’ and was later rightfully recognised as one of the greats when it topped IMDB’s ‘Top 250 cinema-favourites list’ beating heavy hitters such as ‘The Godfather’ and winning the 2011 ‘BBC Radio favourite-film poll’ among other awards.

There are many differing interpretations of Shawshank Redemption, whole essays on the characteristics and symbolism of Christianity found in the film, with Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins) representing a Christ like figure and the iconic scene towards the end of the film where Andy is seen standing outside the prison, arms wide open while rain pours down onto him. Considering Andy’s story arc, it wouldn’t be a leap to interpret the scene as symbolic of a cleansing in the religious/biblical sense. Then there are the more, philosophical interpretations, perceiving the film to be more about ‘Stoicism’. I will endeavour to discuss such things through-out the rest of this analysis.

To start us off, we will first be looking at Andy Dufresne and his journey of development through the perdition that is Shawshank Prison. With Andy’s discovery of the ongoing affair between his wife and her unknown lover. Seated in an old Pontiac outside the location that his wife and lover are getting frisky, Andy can be seen drinking a bottle of bourbon and loading a firearm. Leading the audience to believe that he is in a rather distressed state and that he most likely has the intent to kill them, he stumbles out of the car, begins to walk towards the cabin only to change his mind and drive off. Scene cuts and we’re in the courthouse, his wife and her lover have been shot and killed and Andy’s on trial for it. The trial in a way replicates a “Call to Adventure” much like Joseph Campbell’s “Monomyth”. Of course, for the sake of continuity Andy is found guilty for the crime and thus sentenced to two consecutive life sentences, leading us into the adventure that being Shawshank Prison and Andy’s home for the next 19 years.

Upon arrival to the prison, Red soon to pick up the mantle of mentor for Andy, lays eyes of Andy for the first time. Red and the fellow inmates have a ritual for every time there are newcomers, they bet cigarettes on which prisoner is to cry on the first night. Red bets against Andy explaining

“I must admit I didn't think much of Andy first time I laid eyes on him. He might'a been important on the outside, but in here he was just a little turd in prison grays. Looked like a stiff breeze could blow him over. That was my first impression of the man.”

Further reaffirming the fact that visibly, externally, people do not appear to perceive him very much as a person at all. But rather as something that can be shunned upon with ease, given little respect, brushed off, it all further goes on to show that Andy is beginning his story in more of a weak manner. That this journey for him is one of development as a person, that his monster, his dragon guarding the treasure that is a newfound connection to the world and a

better way of being… is himself. With regards to the external world, Andy goes on to have his first encounter with the obstacle that is most detrimental to his escape, Warden Norton (Bob Gunton). Whom after giving his short little speech to the new inmates, also goes on to state that “Salvation lies within.” Foreshadowing in a way how Andy hides the rock hammer that he uses to tunnel out of Shawshank in his bible. As given the character that is Warden Norton, he most likely meant this in the religious sense as the bible acts as a pathway to finding ‘salvation’. While Warden Norton may be Andy’s greatest external obstacle, he must first overcome more of a physical threat, The Sisters. While the sisters continue to beat and rape Andy through out the first act of the film, Andy persists through wit and unending courage and bravery. He overcomes the threat by doing a favour for the wardens right hand man which then leads into Andy’s slow and methodical subjugation of the warden and eventually the prison itself. See that is how Andy finds true freedom, through the conquering of the prison – the sisters – the warden – the culture – through selfless unnecessary acts

Stoic difference in Red and Andy – Red knows that fantasizing about freedom is dangerous to ones mental health, so he abandons faith and hope. Where as Andy maintains faith and hope in his dream of freedom but manages to not tie it to the physical world and maintains an inner freedom. Stoic Dreaming. Stoical Resolve to see the dream through to its fruition still relying on a “first principles”logical approach derived from probabilistic reasoning that would be right at home among philosophers in ancient Greece, one which says an important task must be done even if the odds of failure are high. Certainly, nothing will change if nothing is tried.