The Shawshank Redemption

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"The Shawshank Redemption" is a movie about time, patience and loyalty -- not sexy qualities, perhaps, but they grow on you during the subterranean progress of this story, which is about how two men serving life sentences in prison become friends and find a way to fight off despair.

The story is narrated by "[Red](http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/red-1994)" Redding ([Morgan Freeman](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/morgan-freeman)), who has been inside the walls of Shawshank Prison for a very long time and is its leading entrepreneur. He can get you whatever you need: cigarettes, candy, even a little rock pick like an amateur geologist might use. One day he and his fellow inmates watch the latest busload of prisoners unload, and they make bets on who will cry during their first night in prison, and who will not. Red bets on a tall, lanky guy named Andy Dufresne ([Tim Robbins](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/tim-robbins)), who looks like a babe in the woods.

But Andy does not cry, and Red loses the cigarettes he wagered. Andy turns out to be a surprise to everyone in Shawshank, because within him is such a powerful reservoir of determination and strength that nothing seems to break him. Andy was a banker on the outside, and he's in for murder. He's apparently innocent, and there are all sorts of details involving his case, but after a while they take on a kind of unreality; all that counts inside prison is its own society -- who is strong, who is not -- and the measured passage of time.

Red is also a lifer. From time to time, measuring the decades, he goes up in front of the parole board, and they measure the length of his term (20 years, 30 years) and ask him if he thinks he has been rehabilitated. Oh, most surely, yes, he replies; but the fire goes out of his assurances as the years march past, and there is the sense that he has been institutionalized -- that, like another old lifer who kills himself after being paroled, he can no longer really envision life on the outside.

Red's narration of the story allows him to speak for all of the prisoners, who sense a fortitude and integrity in Andy that survives the years. Andy will not kiss butt. He will not back down. But he is not violent, just formidably sure of himself. For the warden ([Bob Gunton](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/bob-gunton)), he is both a challenge and a resource; Andy knows all about bookkeeping and tax preparation, and before long he's been moved out of his prison job in the library and assigned to the warden's office, where he sits behind an adding machine and keeps tabs on the warden's ill-gotten gains. His fame spreads, and eventually he's doing the taxes and pension plans for most of the officials of the local prison system.

There are key moments in the film, as when Andy uses his clout to get some cold beers for his friends who are working on a roofing job. Or when he befriends the old prison librarian ([James Whitmore](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/james-whitmore)). Or when he oversteps his boundaries and is thrown into solitary confinement. What quietly amazes everyone in the prison -- and us, too -- is the way he accepts the good and the bad as all part of some larger pattern than only he can fully see.

The partnership between the characters played by Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman is crucial to the way the story unfolds. This is not a "prison drama" in any conventional sense of the word. It is not about violence, riots or melodrama. The word "redemption" is in the title for a reason. The movie is based on a story, [*Rita Hayworth*](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/rita-hayworth) *and the Shawshank Redemption*, by [Stephen King](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/stephen-king), which is quite unlike most of King's work. The horror here is not of the supernatural kind, but of the sort that flows from the realization than 10, 20, 30 years of a man's life have unreeled in the same unchanging daily prison routine.

The director, [Frank Darabont](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/frank-darabont), paints the prison in drab grays and shadows, so that when key events do occur, they seem to have a life of their own.

Andy, as played by Robbins, keeps his thoughts to himself. Red, as Freeman plays him, is therefore a crucial element in the story: His close observation of this man, down through the years, provides the way we monitor changes and track the measure of his influence on those around him. And all the time there is something else happening, hidden and secret, which is revealed only at the end.

"The Shawshank Redemption" is not a depressing story, although I may have made it sound that way. There is a lot of life and humor in it, and warmth in the friendship that builds up between Andy and Red. There is even excitement and suspense, although not when we expect it. But mostly the film is an allegory about holding onto a sense of personal worth, despite everything. If the film is perhaps a little slow in its middle passages, maybe that is part of the idea, too, to give us a sense of the leaden passage of time, before the glory of the final redemption.

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