The Redeemer:

Scene Analysis of The Shawshank Redemption

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COM 302: Message Criticism

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A hero is someone who goes beyond the limits of the norm to achieve something for the greater good of society and mankind. With courage and valor, a hero attempts to destroy what is wrong and unjust with society with their daring actions. With these actions a hero’s purpose is to try to change how people envision life in a different perspective. For example, Mahatma Gandhi was able to destroy the cultural hegemony in India, established by an oppressive British government, with his promotion of peace and revolution. Gandhi’s act of revolution influenced the natives of India, to envision a life of freedom, away from foreign rule. Sometimes a hero’s actions don’t have to be as grandiose and dramatic, like Gandhi, however one must perform some sort of action to inspire one to see life in a different but positive manner. Norman Mailer once said,

“Ultimately a hero is a man who would argue with the gods, and so awakens devils to contest his vision.” (Mailer, 1963)

Mailer uses gods as an allegorical reference to authority and that a hero must oppose authority by awakening devils or in other words opposing ideals of authority. In the film, “The Shawshank Redemption”, the main protagonist Andy Dufresne, a prisoner within the Shawshank Prison, motivated by a falsely accused crime, performs a heroic act that argues with the gods, the Warden, and awakens the devils, his act of defiance to show his vision to his fellow inmates.
Story Background

Prior to this heroic act, Andy Dufresne, a successful accountant, is wrongfully accused of murdering his wife and is sent to prison for the remainder of his years, in Shawshank Prison. Once in prison Dufresne befriends the inmates; however, Andy comes to realize that his fellow comrades have accepted their fate. Andy realizes that his comrades are stuck in a monotonous habitual routine and are content to live a life of regulation and discrimination. This mindset is established by Warden Norton, who emphasizes his rule with a conservative Christian moral structure, professing that the inmates’ stay at Shawshank Prison will be pleasant, if they comply with these regulations. To defy this train of thought, Andy attempts minor acts of defiance to show the inmates that there is a life outside of these walls, and that anyone who falls under the warden’s spell, is deemed unfit to live. The most infamous quote in the film is Andy talking to his best friend, Red, who talks himself down, that he, cannot make it in the outside world, because he’s an institutionalized man. Andy retorts with, “I guess it comes down to a simple choice, get busy living or get busy dying.”

Scene Summary

The scene, that is the focus of the theme of being a hero, begins with Andy cleaning out the Warden’s office; the reason being for cleaning the office is due to the fact that Andy is in charge of all of the guards and the Warden’s taxes because he was once an accountant. When cleaning, Andy successfully locks out all the guards in the office, and begins going through a stack of vinyl records, and puts one on the player. He proceeds to turn on the microphone that
circulates the entire prison for all to hear the record player. The song Andy chooses is “Marriage of Figaro”, a beautiful Italian opera piece, sung by two female opera singers. The song captures the attention of prisoners and guards alike; they are in awe of the song. For a good two minutes, Andy is able to leave the music sing throughout the prison before the Warden and guards are able to break through the door and apprehend Andy, and punish him. However, Andy accepts his punishment knowing full well, that this act would inquire punishment.

The Controlling Idea

The controlling idea or theme of this particular scene in the film is told through Andy’s heroic actions of defiance and courage, showing his fellow inmates that there is beauty, freedom, and life outside the prison walls with the song, “Marriage of Figaro”. The theme is that one must be exposed to the littlest forms of beauty, like a song, in order to enlighten oneself to what is truly important in life, and that we must stray from monotony. Additionally demonstrating Andy’s rebellious nature and love for his comrades in prison showcases his willingness to sacrifice himself to punishment in order to let his friends experience freedom.

Editing

Frank Darabont, the film director of the movie, shoots this scene with mastership and dynamic scene selections. The camera, at the beginning of the scene is focused on Andy’s hands as he rummages through the vinyl selection, and turns on the microphone switches. This conveys the message that this heroic action is created by the hands of Andy Dufresne. As the music plays throughout the prison, the camera switches to the prisoners facing towards the
window with the sun shining in their face, as they search for the beautiful voices. This shot establishes the notion that these prisoners have finally seen the beautiful light from this eternal pit of darkness, which is Shawshank. The scene transitions to a dynamic shot of the courtyard where the prisoners are all motionless, looking up towards the speaker. The shot pans out so the viewer can see the entire courtyard of people standing still. This shot angle tells the viewer that Dufresne has significantly impacted the thoughts and minds of all the prisoners with this song of beauty and hope. Darabont also has, the character Red, played by Morgan Freeman, narrate his experience with the opera song as the scene progresses,

“To this very day, I still don’t know what those two Italian ladies were singing about. Truth is I don’t wanna know, some things are better left unsaid. I would like to think it’s something so beautiful it cannot be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it.” –Red(Darabont,1994)

This establishes that Andy has successfully shown not only to Red, but the other inmates as well, that there is more to life than just this continuous routine. The “drama” of the message is realized when Andy uses the song as a symbol of hope and enlightenment that is experienced by all within the confines of the prison. This is evident in Red’s monologue about his relationship with, “Marriage of Figaro”. The emotion of the scene comes from the song; the song possessed so much drama that it’s felt by everyone in the scene.

Burke and Other Ideologies

Burke’s Pentad is useful to interpreting the ways people construct their own meaning of realities because it covers such a wide variety of ways people perceive messages. For example
in this particular scene, Andy identifies and persuades the prisoners by sharing his ideals, that we need to step outside our routines and in order to experience the minor things in life that makes this world worth living. Another method of analysis that is pertinent to this scene, is the ideological philosophy of hegemony. Like Gandhi, Andy was able to disrupt the ideological hegemony, the dominant belief system, within Shawshank, that was established by the Warden. The Warden knows that his sphere of influence is beginning to diminish hence the excessive punishment Dufresne receives from this heroic act.

The claim would be that Andy had successfully enlightened and influenced the inmates of the Shawshank Prison, with this heroic action and that the Warden had lost his control, his hegemony within the prison, to Andy. This claim can be supported with the reactions of all the inmates and the reaction of the Warden when the song plays.

(Above: Darabont’s shot of the inmates in the courtyard, in awe of the song, “Marriage of Figaro”)(Fanpop!)

The Director’s Focus

Darabont, prior to the scene, develops Red, the voice of the inmates as a submissive lifer in prison, who have lost hope on life, due to the fact that prison has taken a toll on his
psyche. This character development makes this scene more significant due to the fact that Red’s monologue the viewers hear him begin to realize that there is beauty and hope, which was provided by Andy Dufresne.

The audience members are able to identify with the characters and the scene, because we’ve all experienced a moment in time where one gets lost within their monotonous routine of life, and are rescued by something small but so beautiful, that it allows one to appreciate what the world offers.

The creator of this scene, and the director of the film, “The Shawshank Redemption”, is Frank Darabont. The ethos that Darabont creates is that we can always be inspired by hope and freedom, in the deepest and darkest pits of despair, like a prison. Darabont maintains his ethos with this scene. The ethos is maintained with Andy’s action of playing the song, to draw inspiration within every inmate, even though it might cost him with a severe punishment from the Warden.

**Personal Opinion**

I personally find this message carries weight and substance due to the fact that it draws inspiration from something as insignificant as a song and that it is relatable to any audience member. Critic Leonard Klady of Variety magazine states, “It’s vivid, grueling and painful, and passes with the appropriate tedium and sudden bursts of horror that one imagines reflect the true nature of incarceration.”(Klady,1994) Roger Ebert, former critic of the Chicago Sun Times says, “Some have said life is a prison, we are Red, Andy is our redeemer. All good art is about something deeper than it admits.”(Ebert,1999) These reviews sum up the overall
conscience that this film depicts the true nature of prison and how it consumes one’s soul. I believe that is why Darabont created his protagonist as a messiah like character, to help save these poor souls. This film was created in 1994, and this particular scene resonates and is still relevant for today’s audience.

Darabont created a character in the film, “The Shawshank Redemption”, Andy Dufresne who takes on this heroic role to inspire his fellow comrades with this simple action of playing “Marriage of Figaro”. Bringing a sense of hope and freedom to all, Andy showed his comrades this different perspective in life that wasn’t seen or experienced by any prisoner within Shawshank, due to the Warden’s reign of corruption and excessive punishment. A hero is one who fights through the trenches of hopelessness and despair, to conquer something that will bring hope and inspiration. Whether it’s through the biggest of battles or the smallest of victories, a hero can arise from any situation. Andy Dufresne was able to win a small victory, saving the lives of many from a life of monotonous, mundane, habitual life in prison by exposing them to something that is worth living for.
Bibliography

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