



HM Prison &
Probation Service



Learning
Together

Keeping connected: introducing ThinkLets

Learning Together builds educational communities that bring together people who live, study and work in universities and criminal justice organisations. Together, we want to use the power of education to improve lives, institutions and communities.

Covid-19 is a major challenge to our health and wellbeing. It means that we cannot physically come together as a community to learn with and from each other. But we can still keep learning and supporting each other to stay hopeful, positive and engaged.

Members of the Learning Together Network have created ThinkLets to help us all keep connected. Each ThinkLet contains resources that will help us to think about new ideas and develop new skills together, even from afar.

Each week, for the next eight weeks, two ThinkLets will be shared across our national community. We hope you enjoy them and find them helpful.

**Keep well. Keep hopeful. Keep connected.
And keep Learning Together.**

Please note:

The following resource was created with love and care by a member of the Learning Together Network. We sincerely hope that the creator's work will be respected by distributors, readers and users, and will not be subject to plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Thank you for your cooperation.

ThinkLet #14

Representation of Prison in Fiction and Film: The Shawshank Redemption and Narrating Hope

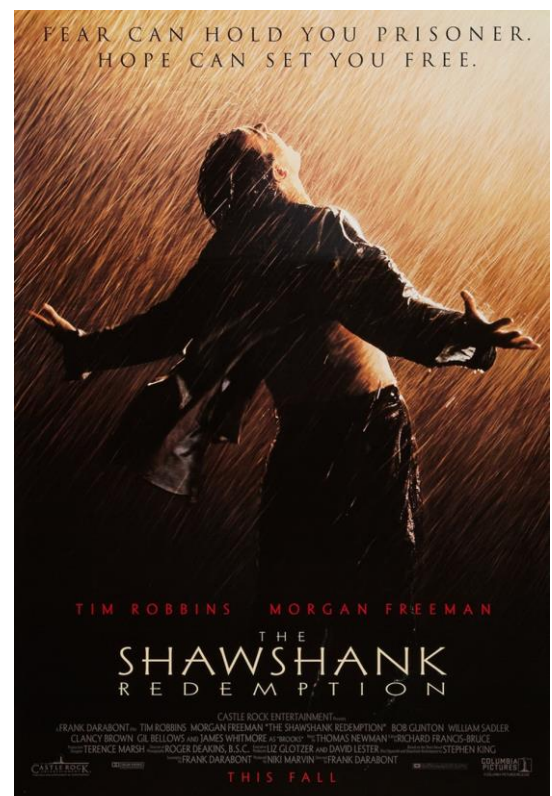
Jo Metcalf (University of Hull)
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Eight weeks into lockdown and I regularly find myself hoping for something. I hope my elderly parents stay safe and well; I hope I can protect my children from the virus; I hope my eldest will forgive my maths home schooling skills and, I hope we have enough milk in the house for my morning coffee. Though we all unconsciously hope for things in our daily lives, at times of crisis it becomes more pronounced. Outside a family's home in Leicester, people have been filling up a "hope board" with things they are looking forward to once the lockdown has ended. The Catholic Bishops of England have just published a message of hope. Boris Johnson has said "I hope, hope, hope" for a vaccine. Even the tagline at the start of this ThinkLet encourages us to "keep hopeful".

"Hope" also features in the tag line of an award-winning Hollywood movie, *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994), based on the novella *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* (1982) by bestselling author Stephen King. Channel 4's "Prison Night" programme (2015) asked inmates to vote for their favourite prison movie and Shawshank secured the top spot. The movie regularly appears in the top five places of lists suggesting the "Best Movies Ever". In this ThinkLet we will encourage you to start thinking about some of the dynamics at stake when studying prison films and prison literature. Using *The Shawshank Redemption* as our case study, we will explore what such narratives tell us about hope both in and out of prison, and what we as individuals think about – or do with – this hope. When you reach an **exercise**, please pause in your reading to have a think about the question posed and how you would answer, before progressing to the next section.

Film Synopsis

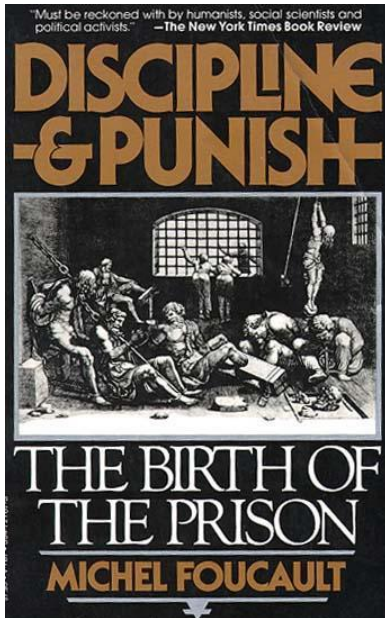
The film follows the lengthy incarceration of Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), a middle-class banker who maintains his innocence in the murder of his wife and her lover, and his developing friendship with Ellis "Red" Redding (Morgan Freeman), an inmate popular for his trafficking of contraband in Shawshank State Penitentiary (in real-life the former Ohio State Reformatory). After nearly two decades of life within an unforgiving institution where Andy is repeatedly sexually assaulted, he oversees the prison library alongside the elderly Brooks Hatlen and manages financial matters including tax returns for the guards, we witness him abscond in remarkable ways. It transpires Andy has spent nearly twenty years tunnelling behind posters of female actors (including Rita Hayworth) in his



cell with a tiny rock hammer procured by Red. Upon escaping, Andy frames the prison warden for the money-laundering racket he had been forced to run inside Shawshank and sends a note to Red – once Red finally manages to defy his parole board – to join him on a beach in Mexico.

Exercise 1: What do you think of the movie's tagline: "Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free"? Do you think this can help us understand the popularity of the movie at all?

The Popularity of *Shawshank*



In his famed work *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the French philosopher Michel Foucault outlines how prison was designed to make punishment invisible, hiding it away from the rest of the population. The big screen is as close as most of the public will get to experiencing prison. Prison movies arguably appeal to the inquisitiveness of human beings, wanting to access “first-hand” experiences of normally inaccessible lives. When movies are filmed at “real-life” prisons (Alcatraz is the most notable example), audiences might naively assume they are seeing an authentic slice of prison life. And yet if accuracy equates with popularity, then *The Shawshank Redemption* would have been discarded by the studios a long time ago. A group of inmates drinking beer on a prison building roof with beers purchased for them by the guards? Unlikely! An inmate managing to lock himself in the warden’s office and play opera over the prison’s entire speaker system? No chance! Realism is not always a vital criterion for the success of prison movies.

Scholars and film critics alike have attributed the popularity of *Shawshank* not to its prison context but to its engagement with hope as a universal power or state of mind. We can all relate to hope regardless of our background, we don’t have to be a prisoner. Indeed, there is no reference to prison in the movie tagline, nor on the official marketing poster. This arguably encourages the viewer to apply this hope to their own everyday life. We all want to sometimes escape horrible situations in our daily lives – a bullying manager at work, a difficult divorce, a global pandemic. Extensive online movie forums note how *Shawshank* has inspired people worldwide from a range of backgrounds to emerge triumphant in the face of hardship, even if they have never been to prison. Andy teaches his fellow inmates at Shawshank, and global movie audiences, about the importance of maintaining hope and humanity even in inhumane situations. *Shawshank’s* director, Frank Darabont is acutely aware of this compelling formula: “I’ve gotten mail from people who say, ‘Gosh, your movie got me through a really bad marriage...or it got me through a really bad patch in my life or a really bad illness; or it helped me hang on when a loved one died’.” This certainly helps us to understand the continued admiration for his film (last year it celebrated its 25th anniversary); its principles have not aged.

Exercise 2: Foucault stresses how the modern-day prison system seeks control of the inmate’s psyche (mind / soul) as well as their physical body. In so doing, he contends that the modern-day prison creates “docile bodies” – prisoners who are passive and compliant. Can you think of any evidence of “docility” being challenged in Shawshank?

On (Not) Beating the System

I have often heard students in the classroom enthusiastically praising Andy for “beating the system” (the iconic image of Andy with arms outstretched on the movie poster speaks to this). Along these lines, we could cite numerous examples from the film in which he, Red and other inmates challenge the prison system’s

wish to ensure their docility. We have already mentioned Andy's rebellious act of playing music over the loudspeakers ("for the briefest of *moments*, every last man in *Shawshank* felt free"), and noted Red's status as a contraband smuggler. In Foucauldian terms, any act of disobedience offers prisoners an opportunity to defy their docile status and reclaim their autonomy, if only temporarily. This further helps us understand the popularity of the movie – it is human nature to root for the character who can "get one over" the authority figure or structure. Within the walls of Shawshank, hope becomes another small means of resisting docility: "Andy: there's something inside...that they can't get to, that they can't touch. That's yours. Red: What're you talking about? Andy: Hope".

But if Andy is so self-assured of his hope, the character of Brooks calls into question whether hope is ever enough to overcome one's status as a docile body that is controlled by the state. While relegated to a minor character in the novella, in the film Brooks' character is further developed along these lines. During the course of *Shawshank*, Brooks is paroled after serving 50 years. In the film he actually takes over the narration to talk about how difficult life is after release from prison. Even being provided with a job and housing upon release cannot help Brooks's tragic narrative; he is "tired of being afraid all the time" and hangs himself in his resettlement accommodation. Shawshank "institutionalises" prisoners to the extent that they then can't make it on the outside once they are no longer required to be "docile". For ex-prisoners who are negotiating community reintegration, it regularly seems as if hope is literally walking by them, but we know from research that keeping hope alive is important to success post release. Thus, while the film is set in prison, there is a tendency to forget that the narrative is also about life *post*-prison. *Shawshank's* official tagline, "Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you free" can be applied to a whole host of situations facing prisoners upon release.

Exercise 3: If you were a Hollywood script-writer and had been tasked with converting a novel by a high-profile author into a film, would you seek to remain "faithful" to the book? What would your priorities be?

Adapting Fiction to Film

As a general rule, film adaptations do not remain wholly truthful to their literary forerunners. The two will unsurprisingly tell a similar story but in diverse ways according to their form and own stylistic capabilities (in simple terms, films "show" whereas books "tell"). But film adaptations do not need to promise veracity, after all the word "adaptation" itself implies a variation or version of the original one. We have already noted the development of Brooks' character on the screen. Near the start of *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* we are supplied graphic details of the "hideous, heinous crime" that landed Red a significant sentence. The film omits any such references to his



offense, presumably to ensure the audience are immediately drawn to him (film is subject to time constraints). The three wardens of the novella are replaced with just one in the film – it is easier to encourage the audience despise this "stock" prison film character if they are not changing every few minutes. In the written version, Andy arrives at Shawshank a "short, neat little man with sandy hair and small, clever hands. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles". This stands in stark contrast to actor Tim Robbins's looming six feet five inches hulking frame. In *Rita Hayworth* Red is Irish and has red hair. The choice of legendary African American actor Morgan Freeman to take on the filmic role has been attributed by scholars and film critics to a range of reasons varying from his distinctive voice, to showing prison – and its accompanying friendships – can

unify and transcend race at a time of segregation in the US. Perhaps most notably, at the end of the novella Red never actually sees Andy again (he just hopes he does), though in the movie we witness Red walking along the Mexican beach to see Andy working on a boat.

One of the key similarities between the film and book is that much of the dialogue remains the same. Though the final moments are different, the poignant words in Andy's note remain identical in both: "Remember that hope is a good thing, Red, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies. I will be hoping that this letter finds you, and finds you well". The reader / viewer is reminded of Red's earlier comment about Andy that "you could never smell hopelessness on him". Red's response to himself is also duplicated: "I hope I can make it across the border. I hope to see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope". It is interesting to think that *hope* can translate so readily and easily across diverse cultural forms.



What does hope mean to you?

For some time now, we have conducted study and writing groups with groups of ex-prisoners who are returning to our local communities. We use American prison poetry, films, memoirs as starting points for discussions about class, race, gender, citizenship, the economy, morals and immigration this side of the Atlantic too. These conversations then feed our creativity - for instance, we read *Poems from Guantanamo Bay* and then write "cup poems" (one line each) just as prisoners in Guantanamo had done. The ability of Guantanamo's inmates to maintain hope in the face of such adversity is nearly always deemed a remarkable feat by participants. And this leads us once again back to *Shawshank's* message of hope. The most popular classes we ever ran in our study groups were the ones discussing *Shawshank*, both novella and film. Participants loved conversing about hope, and what it meant to each of them individually. Hope and the hopelessness that comes with trying to maintain optimism in certain situations (both in and out of prison) underpinned the collection of writings that we published from these groups – *Hope Walks by Me* (2019).

Exercise 4: Choose one of the following excerpts from poems about Shawshank / hope in our collection, and use it as a starting point to think or write a few lines for yourself (either prose or poetry) about what hope means to you. Aim for 250 words. If you'd like to, you can send what you have written to Jo Metcalf, c/o Learning Together, Institute of Criminology, Sedgwick Avenue, Cambridge, CB3 9DA.

- ***"Hope is a weary traveller..."***
- ***"Hope can turn around on you / So be sure to keep your guard / Cause if you find yourself disappointed / You're going to find it hard"***
- ***"Hope is something that we own from birth / Right through to heaven"***

"Hope walks by me / all dressed in green / the most beautiful sight / I've ever seen"