

Michel Foucault's Strategies of Power and Resistance
in Stephen King's Rita Haywarth and Shawshank
Redemption

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*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

'Invictus' William Ernest Henley

Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption, one of four novellas by Stephen King, was published in the 1982 anthology *Different Seasons*. The anthology was praised for being atypical of King's reputation as a horror fiction writer. As the critic Paul Gay writes: "*Different Seasons* is, in fact, his bid to be recognized as something other than a writer in a fright wig." (Time 30, 1982). The anthology highlights his originality and literary versatility. The novella, *Rita Hayworth and The Shawshank Redemption*, attracted large readership after it was adapted into a movie in 1994 under the name *The Shawshank Redemption*. The novella depicts the lives of long-term prisoners in Shawshank, a maximum-security prison, which is run by corrupt wardens and sadistic guards. The story exposes the inhumane acts exercised over the prisoners to efface their individuality, to create subjects who conform to the prison codes of conduct. The prisoners' subjectivity is redefined by their presence within the penal institution, and by their adherence to the rules of confinement set by the prison authority. As one of the society's institutions, prison represents to Michel Foucault "a concentrated and austere figure of all the disciplines," which is circumscribed by 'panopticism' (*Discipline & Punish*, 255). *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* represents a brilliant illustration of the Foucauldian institution, but with a few modifications. Hence, this paper will attempt to discuss King's novella from a Foucauldian perspective and to dissect the power relations in the penal environment.

Throughout history, the institution of prison evolved into an establishment of incarceration and punishment for law-breaking individuals. Under the 'Panoptic on gaze' the prisoner is objectified and

loses his sense of self. The idea of the Panoptic on – introduced by Bentham in the late 18th Century – as a mechanism of social control that makes the prisoners feel that they are under constant surveillance, is fundamentally pertinent to Foucault’s concept of power. He conceives of power as omnipresent, individualizing as well as totalizing and diffusive. According to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, “prison continues, on those who are entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline” (302-3). However, as the prison system represents “one of power’s mode of institutionalization, ”it subsequently involves acts of resistance to power (Simon During, 147). Despite their institutionalization, the prisoners manage to take advantage of loopholes in the system, which allows for acts of resistance.

The novella is recounted in first person narration from the view point of Ellis Redding (Red), a lifer, and the companion of Andy Dufresne, the protagonist of the story. Andy, a successful banker, has been falsely accused of the murder of his wife and her lover and was sentenced to life imprisonment in Shawshank prison. Through Red’s insightful narration, the reader delves deeply into the dark world of prison life and traces the impact of long-term imprisonment on the self-concept of the inmates. The prisoners’ identity undergoes what Foucault describes in *Power and Knowledge* (1981) as “interiorization”(154). As a result of along and forceful constriction, “interiorization ”leads the individual to forfeit his identity and conform to an institutionalized norm of behavior. Brooks Hatlen, a sixty-eight year old, could not survive in the outside world. He only lasted six months: “They trained him to like it inside the shithouse and then they threw him out” (King 55).

However, Andy Dufresne stands at the other extreme. He has been able to struggle his way through the dehumanizing incarceration techniques and dig out his way to escape. His resilience demonstrates what Foucault has emphasized in “The Subject and Power”: “At the very heart of power relationship... are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom” (790). Red admires Andy’s tenacity and even his collected demeanor; he avers: “I admired him. In spite of the problems he was having, he was going on with his life. There are thousands who

don't or won't or can't, and plenty of them aren't in prison, either... his hands were still neat and clean, the nails well kept" (King 31). Andy's mastering of the hobby of chipping, shaping and polishing rocks, turning them into fine pretty shapes, seems inspiring to many of the inmates, as Red maintains: "To us long-timers who knew Andy over a space of years, there was an element of fantasy to him, a sense, almost, of myth-magic"(King 39). Andy's hobby acts as a seal that protects his mind against the encroachments of his oppressive environment, which, in fact, represents one mode of resistance, explained by Foucault in "The Subject and Power":

At the heart of power relations and as a permanent condition of their existence there is an insubordination and a certain essential obstinacy on the part of the principles of freedom, then there is no relationship of power without the means of escape of possible flight. Every power relationship implies at least in potential, a strategy of struggle.(794)

Andy's perseverance demonstrates the power of the imagination to transcend, as well as overcome the spatial and the disciplinary constraints.

The exercise of power is not "a naked fact," Foucault maintains, in "The Subject and Power," that "it is elaborated, transformed, organized; it endows itself with processes which are more or less adjusted to the situation" (792). Andy is not the only one who strives to get around the suffocating prison restrictions. In spite of the powerful surveillance, Red also manages to wield his way through, by bribing the guards to secretly fetch contraband for his fellow prisoners. Red admits that, "The prison administration knows about the black market... Sure they do. They probably know as much about my business as I do myself. They live with it because they know that a prison is like a big pressure cooker, and there have to be vents somewhere to let off steam" (King 38). His underhanded dealings could be regarded as another form of resistance.

In fact, the jobbery of the prison wardens and their guards allows the prisoners to engage in a game of manipulation by which they manage to tentatively disrupt the prison system to their advantage. For instance,

Andy Dufresne, the protagonist of the story, manages to adopt what Foucault calls a “strategy of struggle,” in “The Subject and Power” (794), which enables him to overcome the physical and mental constraints exercised by the prison institution. By offering financial advice and handling the Warden and the guards’ taxation forms and all their money dealings, Andy manages to enjoy certain privileges that distinguish him from other prisoners. Instead of doing laundry work, he is transferred to the prison library, in addition to being spared the sexual harassment and the violent physical attacks to which he had been subjected. Andy’s shrewd tactics never cease to amaze Red, as he wondrously recounts his words on tactics of survival:

Guys like us Red, we know there’s a third choice. An alternative to staying simon-pure or bathing in the filth and the slime. It’s the alternative that grown-ups all over the world pick. You balance off your walk through the hog-wallow against what it gains you. You choose the lesser of two evils and try to keep your good intentions in front of you. And I guess you judge how well you’re doing by how well you sleep at night... and what your dreams are like. (King 53- 54)

Andy’s financial skills gain him leverage to try to enlarge the library and to provide it with new books, journals, and magazines, and most importantly not to share his cell. Hence, Andy manages to wield his financial expertise, making himself a valuable commodity to the prison administration.

However, his privileged status among the other prisoners does not spare him the venom of the institution’s power. When he asks Warden Norton to investigate the story of an inmate that would help prove his innocence, his request is met with sarcasm and is coldly rebutted. A stormy confrontation ensues between Andy and Warden Norton, as he discovers that the latter destroyed the only lead that he could use to prove his innocence. Foucault promulgates, in *Discipline and Punish*, that “the increase of power created by the panoptic machine may degenerate into tyranny” (207). The corrupt warden flagrantly reveals his antagonistic and sadistic mentality:

Because people like you make me sick... I like where you are, Mr. Dufresne, and as long as I am warden here at Shawshank, you are going to be right here. You see, you used to think that you were better than anyone else. I have gotten pretty good at seeing that on a man's face. I marked it on yours the first time I walked into the library. It might as well have been written on your forehead in capital letters. That look is gone now, and I like just fine. It is not just that you are a useful vessel... It is simply that men like you need to learn humility. Why, you used to walk around that exercise yard as if it was a living room and you were at one of the cocktail parties ... But you don't walk that way anymore. And I'll be watching to see if you should start to walk that way again. Over the years I'll be watching you with great pleasure. (King 71)

Warden Norton believes he is legitimately entitled to efface the prisoner's sense of self-worth, which coincides with Foucault's argument that "prisons are concerned with fixing prisoners in terms of their abnormal status... penal procedures tend to confirm prisoners as having a criminal identity"(Danaher, 52).

As a penal institution, prison "takes the form of its specific loci, its regulations, its hierarchical structures which are carefully defined... [Hence]in situations of confrontation... the objective is to act upon an adversary in such a manner as to render the struggle impossible for him" (Foucault, "The Subject and Power" 792-3). King's depiction of Andy's frustration is very intense in its expression of the oppressive and devious exercise of power. The warden's callousness infuriates Andy, who vehemently shouts out in desperation: "Okay. But all extracurricular activities stop now. The investment counseling, the scams, the free tax advice... Get H & R to tell you how to declare your extortionate income"(King 87). The Warden, in turn, threatens to make his life very hard and very difficult: "You'll do the hardest time it's possible to do. You'll lose that bunk down in Cellblock 5, for starters, and you'll lose those rocks on the windowsill, and you'll lose any protection the guards have given you against the sodomites. You'll lose everything"(King 71).

Andy is punished by isolation for two months, living on bread and water only. The Warden's retaliatory act asserts Foucault's claim in "The Subject and Power" that "the mechanisms of subjection cannot be studied outside their relation to the mechanisms of exploitation and domination" (782). His punishment is a reminder by the institution's authority that he is under its thumb and that total subservience to the hierarchical order is non-negotiable. Andy resumes his 'extracurricular' services after a period of solitary confinement, but Red perceives that Norton crushing his hopes to catch the real killer has left a permanent scar beneath the cool façade: "If Norton had wanted to break Andy as badly as he had said, he would have had to look below the surface to see the change" (King 89).

Notwithstanding the traumatic impact of his current adversity, Andy gradually rallies and continues to "stroll off, as if he was a free man" (King 100). The interplay of power relations between Andy and the prison warden and his guards demonstrates what Philip Barker describes as strategies of power that "fabricate dispositions, maneuvers, tactics and techniques... to be transformed, reversed and resisted" (King 43). If the fundamental goal of disciplinary power is to create docile subjects, still it respectively engenders resistance, as in Andy's case, who is depicted by Red as,

"Wearing his freedom like an invisible coat, never really develop[ing] a prison mentality. His eyes never got that dull look. He never developed the walk that men get when the day is over and they are going back to their cells for another endless night... that flatfooted, hump-shouldered walk. Andy walked with his shoulders squared and his step was always light, as if he was heading home to a good home-cooked meal and a good woman instead of to a tasteless mess of soggy vegetables, lumpy mashed potato. (King 73)

When Andy asks Red to get him a big poster of Rita Hayworth (followed by other posters of other movie stars), no one ever suspects its use as a ruse for escape. Till his last day in prison, he continues to abide quietly by the prison routine and never reveals an inkling of suspicion as to his intentions. According to Foucault in *Power and Knowledge* (1980),

punitive power operates on the body (the outside), but the mind is a different matter:

[It] is centered on the body as a machine; its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the disciplines: an anatomy-politics of the human body.(139)

However, despite the 'Panoptic on' apparatus of surveillance, which imposes a state of constant visibility, the individual's mind has its secret workings that remain invincible to subordination. Andy's success in breaking out of jail underlines the fact that the idea of resistance could never be really obliterated from the imagination, since as Foucault emphasizes, in *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1 An Introduction* (1978), "where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (951). His equanimity and poised attitude enable him to resist institutionalization, and render him rather inscrutable to the 'Eye' of power.

Andy represents an inspirational figure with his exceptional intellectual abilities and nonchalant manner. He is able to transcend his incarceration and "spatial confinement" (Zygmunt, 208) through the creation of his 'mental personal space' Red admits that Andy was not an ordinary prisoner:

If you asked me to give you a flat-out answer to the question of whether I'm trying to tell you about a man or a legend that got made up around the man, like a pearl around a little piece of grit-- I'd have to say that the answer lies somewhere I between. All I know for sure is that Andy Dufresne wasn't much like me or anyone else I ever knew since I came inside. He brought in five hundred dollars jammed up his back porch, but somehow that gray meat son of a bitch managed to bring in something else as well. A sense of his own worth,

maybe, or a feeling that he would be the winner in the end... or maybe it was only a sense of freedom, even inside these god-damned grey walls. It was a kind of inner light he carried around with him. (King 53-54)

He also staunchly resists the continuous sexual assault of three inmate bullies – “the sisters” –who are “to prison society what the rapist is to the society outside the walls” (30). The solidness of Andy’s faith in his ability to win his freedom fortifies his mental and physical endurance.

Andy performs what could be described as an inversion of power mechanisms, as “he inscribes in himself the power relations in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection”, according to Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (202-3). If solitary confinement is a dreaded “hardship” to most prisoners – in Andy’s case it was not that terrifying, since as Red notes: “He got along with himself” (35). Becoming “the financial wizard,” of Shawshank granted him protection against further sexual abuse. The prison guards and Andy engage in what Foucault describes as “complex reciprocal relations,” (*Discipline and Punish* 25). However, his “enforced immobility” (Bauman 207) makes him accessible to penal authority wrath and malice, as mentioned earlier in connection with the Warden Norton incident. Andy’s breaching of the norm of prison order makes him ironically unfit to be a free agent (207) in the eyes of the disciplinary – crooked – authority. However, his defiant will and calculating mind set his imagination free to dream of procuring his liberty against all the odds. Andy’s dreams of escape are a source of bewilderment to Red, who regards such dreams as an impossible fantasy that could have disastrous consequences: “All at once he must have realized that, instead of just playing a game, he was playing for high stakes... in terms of his own life and his own future, the highest” (King 94).

Andy’s unflinching efforts to improve the library, and provide it with diverse material are like opening a window of fresh air. He wants his prison inmates to feel human once again, if only for a few moments in their dreary existence. Red notes Andy’s dedication to his new appointment, as prison librarian:

Andy succeeded to Brooksie's job, and he was head librarian for twenty-three years. He used the same force of will I'd seen him use on Byron Hadley to get what he wanted for the library, and I saw him gradually turn one small room (which still smelled of turpentine because it had never been properly aired) lined with Reader's Digest Condensed Books and National Geographic into the best prison library in New England. (King 49)

The library serves a crucial function, besides functioning as Andy's 'office' for financial counseling. Foucault in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (1998) makes an interesting statement about the 'library' as a fascinating place: "The imaginary is not formed in opposition to reality as its denial or compensation; it grows among signs, from book to book, in the interstice of repetitions and commentaries; it is born and takes shape in the interval between books. It is the phenomena of the library"(Faubion106). Encouraging his prison inmates to read and see pictures of the outside world is like giving their imagination wings to escape their spatial confinement and enjoy their mental freedom. His keenness to make the library an attractive place to encourage his inmates to read could be interpreted as another act of resistance.

The deep friendship that evolves gradually between Andy and Red has a profound effect on their destinies. Andy depends on Red to provide him with the rock hammer and the huge posters of famous movie stars, the secret tools for his later grand escape. Red remembers asking Andy about the significance of the posters:

He gave me a peculiar, surprised sort of look. 'Why, they mean the same thing to me as they do to most cons... Freedom. You look at those pretty women and you feel like you could almost... not quite but almost step right through and be beside them. Be free, I guess that's why I always liked Raquel Welch the best. It wasn't just her; it was that beach she was standing on. Looked like she was down in Mexico somewhere. Some place quiet, where a man would be able to hear himself think. (King 55)

Red is astounded by the financial arrangements and precautions that Andy has managed to procure, that would allow him to live safely after his escape. He is even terrified by Andy's proposal to join him in Zihuatanejo in Mexico, after receiving his parole:

'I couldn't do it,' I said. 'I couldn't get along on the outside. I'm what they call an institutional man now.

.....

'I couldn't hack it outside, Andy. I know that.' He got up. 'You think it over,' he said casually, just as the inside whistle blew. And he strolled off, as if he was a free man who had just made another free man a proposition. And for a while just that was enough to make me feel free. Andy could do that. He could make me forget for a time that we were both lifers. (King 79)

Red has become 'institutionalized,' and the idea of going to the outside has become scary. He gives a perceptive description of the prisoner mental state:

When you take away a man's freedom and teach him to live in a cell, he seems to lose his ability to think in dimensions. He's like that jackrabbit I mentioned, frozen in the oncoming lights of the truck that is bound to kill it. More often than not a con who's just out will pull some dumb job that hasn't a chance in hell of succeeding ... and why? Because it'll get him back inside. Back where he understands how things work. (King 83)

Red's fear and doubt in his ability to function in the outside world attests to the incapacitating impact of the 'panoptic on gaze' on the prisoners. Foucault maintains that the best way of managing prisoners is to make them the potential targets of the authority's gaze at every moment of the day. This, in effect, leads the prisoner to be the subject of his own gaze, and consequently live in 'carceral continuum' (Danaher53-4).

The 'domination' over the prisoners conduct – exercised through surveillance and punishment – is regarded by Foucault as a transcription

of a mechanism of power.”(Faubion348). When after 38 years Red gets his parole and returns to the outside world, he feels that even his body has become programmed to the prison time:

Going to the bathroom, that was another thing. When I had to go (and the urge always came on me at twenty-five past the hour), I had to fight the almost overwhelming need to check it with my boss. Knowing that was something I could just go and do in this too-bright outside world was one thing; adjusting my inner self to that knowledge after all those years of checking it with the nearest screw head or facing two days in solitary for the oversight... that was something else. (King 102)

His feelings of inadequacy and inability to cope with the outside tempo of life suggests to him committing any pet theft that would make him return to the world to which he has been accustomed. However, Andy's impact on him emerges at such a moment of despair: “If I had never known Andy, I probably would have done that. But I kept thinking of him, spending all those years chipping patiently away at the cement with his rock-hammer so he could be free. I thought of that and it made me ashamed and I'd drop the idea again”(King 103).

Although Andy's story is the main focus of narration, yet Red's role as the internal focalizer who adopts the viewpoint of the experiencing 'I,' functions as a rhetorical device to create immediacy and suspense (Dan Shen85). King succeeds in representing a close; quick paced and condensed portrayal of prison life with all its grim details. Through Red's eyes, readers follow up Andy's struggle against penal coercion, in which they themselves play a crucial part. Red acknowledges the presence of the reader throughout his retrospective narration, as he admits:

Well, you weren't writing about yourself, I hear someone in the peanut-gallery saying. You were writing about Andy Dufresne. You're nothing but a minor character in your own story. But you know, that's just no so. It's all about me, every damned word of it. Andy was part me of me they could never lock up, the part of me that will rejoice when the gates

finally open for me and I walk out in my cheap suit with my twenty dollars of mad-money in my pocket. That part of me will rejoice no matter how old and broken and scared the rest of me is. I guess it's just that Andy had more of that part than me, and used it better. (King 100)

Throughout the twenty years of his imprisonment, Andy never gives up on his dream of freedom, but persists in “wrestling with that tiger –that “institutional syndrome” (King 99). Mark Kermode highlights the transformative power of art and its “crucial import to understanding Andy’s ultimate escape, in which he will literally step through a movie poster to freedom, suggesting that the escapist possibilities of the medium [the cinema] are powerful enough to transcend physical reality”(38). Through the movie poster, which covers his tracks, he burrows his way out of his cell and his redemption is achieved, “as [his] dreams take flight, and miracles become a reality rather than an abstraction” (Kermode 36).Andy’s success in escaping from Shawshank represents the materialization of his long imagined freedom. Zihuatanejo, his destination dream, is not just a town, but as Kermode describes, it a “state of mind toward which King’s ... narrative has been inexorably leading us – a state of hope”(86).

Foucault’s postulation of the tyrannical operations of power might seem to undermine the individual’s act of resistance. However, he promulgates: “Even though power dominates and subjects, because it is a relation and not a substance, by definition it always leaves open opportunities for resistance. Therefore, in its operation whenever power is being exchanged, being circulated, the possibility always exists that it can be reversed, transformed and resisted” (‘The Subject and Power’ 37).Andy’s resilience and determination to resist dehumanization exemplify the novella’s subtitle ‘Hope Springs Eternal’. His invitation to Red to join him in ‘Zihuatanejo, peeps up his friend’s enthusiasm and spurs him to feel hopeful at the end of his narration:

I find I am excited I can hardly hold the pencil in my trembling hand; I think it is the excitement that only a free

man can feel, a free man starting a long journey whose conclusion is uncertain.

I hope Andy is down there.

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. (King 107)

Red witnesses a moment of epiphany as he overcomes his fear of freedom and embarks into the unknown.

The fact that King has divided the novellas in his anthology according to seasons, in which *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* represents spring, intimates a mythical resonance since spring symbolizes the season of rebirth. The novella starts with a note of hope and ends with an act of hope, which is the key for transcending the coercion of prison confinement and affirming the potential of resistance. King has accomplished what Foucault believes is the writer's job, "[to make] windows where there was once walls."

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