



JUSTICE AS A GAME FOR THE MARGARIDED: AN ANALYSIS OF WHITE SUPREMACY AND STRUCTURAL RACISM IN 'THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION'

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how *The Shawshank Redemption* portrays justice as a game for those marginalized through white supremacy and structural racism. Using descriptive-qualitative methods, this study analyzes dialogues and scenes with sequence tables to assess character dominance, glorification dialogue tables to identify explicit and implicit glorification, and positive-negative binary oppositions in character characterization. The results show that Andy Dufresne dominates the narrative, emphasizing the centrality of the white protagonist. Explicit glorification of the protagonist's values reaches the peak of presentation, while implicit glorification is relatively low, indicating hidden structural bias. Minority supporting characters tend to be given negative characterizations more often than main characters, reinforcing the structural racism mechanisms behind the justice narrative. These findings reveal that popular films help reinforce white supremacy and structural racism, influencing how audiences understand the concept of justice. This study recommends that audiences and filmmakers adopt a more equitable approach to representation and be aware of hidden narrative biases in film production and consumption. With this awareness, cinema can contribute to more inclusive social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) has become an icon of American popular culture thanks to its powerful narrative of the struggle for justice, hope, and freedom behind bars at Shawshank State Penitentiary. The film's success lies not only in its

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moving storyline, but also in cinema's ability to reflect and shape social discourse—including long-standing racial conflicts in American society, where the legacy of white supremacy and structural racism continues to influence perceptions of justice and power.

Historically, structural racism flourished after slavery officially ended in January 1865 through the Emancipation Proclamation amendment, when the US Congress approved the abolition of slavery. However, as (Aden et al., 2021) notes, structural racism functions as an “invisible evil” that maintains inequities through institutional policies, norms, and practices in housing, education, government, and the justice system. Hollywood films, as a very influential propaganda medium, often present narratives that affirm the dominant role of white characters and marginalize characters of color, both through explicit and implicit representation (Leurs & Seufferling, 2023).

The imbalance of character representation in *The Shawshank Redemption* reveals how dominant ideologies subtly operate within cinematic narratives. The film centers its narrative around the white protagonist, Andy Dufresne, whose intelligence and moral strength are continuously highlighted through screen time and dialogue structure. This portrayal is supported by data showing that Andy dominates 49% of the dialogue, while the Black character, Red, only accounts for 28%, a disparity that reflects racial bias embedded in narrative construction (Marlina et al., 2021). Additionally, the privileging of white characters aligns with an ideological framework that historically grants white individuals' superior access to political, economic, and cultural capital (Mayani & Ayu, 2016). This tendency illustrates how white supremacy persists through seemingly neutral storytelling strategies, and in the researcher's view, it reinforces unequal power relations by marginalizing non-white perspectives within popular media.

Meanwhile, structural racism in this film is detected through a positive-negative binary opposition framework (Ramadhan et al., 2023). Characters of color in supporting roles tend to be portrayed with negative characterizations—seen in stereotypes of criminality and helplessness—while white characters are positioned as wise and empowered savior heroes. This pattern shows how the narrative structure of the film reinforces racial power relations, so that justice in the film becomes a “game” that is more advantageous for white protagonists and marginalizes prisoners of color in the film's moral and legal constructions.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to explore the manifestations of white supremacy and structural racism in *The Shawshank Redemption* through the lens of justice

as a game for the marginalized. This study seeks to identify explicit and implicit forms of the glorification of white supremacy, describe the construction of structural racism in characterization, and examine the influence of both phenomena on the representation of justice for prisoners of color in *Shawshank*.

To support this analysis, the study draws on Critical Race Theory and Postcolonial Theory. The former emphasizes the institutional and systemic production of racial power, while the latter examines residual colonial ideologies that continue to influence contemporary media narratives (Fazriyah, 2021). In addition, this study utilizes the concepts of cultural stereotypes (Hidayat & Muslim, 2013) and critiques of the “white savior” trope to assess how the protagonist’s glorification is constructed at the expense of minority representation.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on interpreting justice in *The Shawshank Redemption* not merely as a moral theme, but as a mechanism that privileges whiteness and marginalizes non-white prisoners. This approach—framed by a definition of structural racism that emphasizes the systemic and symbolic totality of racial exclusion (Ma’arif et al., 2021)—offers a fresh multidisciplinary perspective. Empirically, this research contributes to film studies by foregrounding how racial power is encoded in popular cinema, while advocating for critical media awareness and more inclusive representational practices in the pursuit of social justice.

Empirically, this study fills the gap by highlighting the representation of prisoners of color as a marginalized group in film, while enriching American film studies through the lens of racial justice. These findings are expected to help audiences and filmmakers become aware of hidden narrative biases and encourage more equitable representation practices. Thus, film can contribute to a more inclusive critical consciousness and social justice in the contemporary era.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine how *The Shawshank Redemption* serves as a cultural text reflecting injustice, white supremacy, and structural racism. Through thematic content analysis of key scenes—especially interactions between white authority figures (e.g., Warden Norton) and marginalized inmates (e.g., Red and other Black prisoners)—and by integrating insights from Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), sociology, and philosophy of justice, the

research uncovers patterns of white hegemony, systemic oppression, and moments of resistance. Data were gathered via close readings of dialogue, character dynamics, and symbolic imagery, supplemented by literature reviews, and analyzed according to (Braun & Clarke, 2006) thematic framework. The study's validity is strengthened by theoretical triangulation across multiple lenses and by acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role, consistent with qualitative tenets (Sugiyono, 2017); (Moleong, 2017); (Sandelowski, 2010). Ultimately, the findings not only illuminate the film's portrayal of racialized power dynamics but also underscore its relevance for contemporary discussions on injustice in legal and social systems, demonstrating how popular media can both reproduce and critique entrenched racial hierarchies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Distribution of Presence and Narrative Power

In the film *The Shawshank Redemption*, narrative dominance is clearly embodied in the character of Andy Dufresne. As the protagonist, Andy is not only the focal point of the plot, but also functions as the primary agent driving the progression of the story. From the outset, the audience is invited to engage with Andy's emotional trajectory, beginning with his controversial life sentence and culminating in his strategic pursuit of freedom. This centralization reflects a broader cinematic trend in which white characters are positioned as transformative figures who carry the moral and thematic weight of the narrative. Bonds and Inwood (2016) identify this as a recurring convention in Hollywood, where whiteness is often equated with leadership, change, and resilience. Such narrative framing, in the researcher's view, contributes to the normalization of white-centric perspectives and reinforces racial hierarchies within popular media discourse.

The analysis data shows that the frequency of Andy's appearance far exceeds that of other characters in the film. Based on the sequence table processed from the script and film screening, Andy appears in 60 main scenes, which means he dominates around 70% of the entire story. In contrast, the character Ellis "Red" Redding, who is also important—and the narrator of the story—only appears in around 18% of the scenes. Other characters such as Warden Norton and Brooks Hatlen appear even less frequently, which confirms their role as complements in supporting Andy's narrative. The following is a summary of the frequency of appearance of the main characters in the film:

Table 1 Frequency of Main Character Appearance

Characters	Frequency of Appearance Scenes
Andy Dufresne	60 ($\approx 70\%$)
Ellis "Red" Redding	15 ($\approx 18\%$)
Warden Norton	5 ($\approx 6\%$)
other (Hadley, Brooks, etc.)	5 ($\approx 6\%$)

From the table, it is clear how dominant Andy Dufresne's presence is in the course of the film. This is a strong indication that the characterization of the story is very focused on white characters as saviors and victims, while black characters, such as Red, serve to emphasize the greatness of the main character through loyal and faithful supporting roles. As stated by (Beliso-De Jesús et al., 2023), the dominance of white characters in film narratives often serves to reproduce hegemonic norms regarding the superiority of a particular race in the imagination of popular culture.

The character of Andy also shows a distinctive element of glorification. Described as an intelligent, patient, highly moral, and innovative character, Andy becomes an ideal figure in a harsh and unfair prison narrative. This characterization is not neutral; it is laden with value biases that implicitly indicate that justice, intelligence, and toughness are the main attributes of white characters. In fact, other characters such as Red who are depicted as wise and experienced figures are still placed in subordinate positions, namely as narrators who worship the main character.

This dominance is also related to the depiction of power. Andy not only survives in a corrupt prison system but is also able to change the system to his advantage and eventually escapes. He fixes the library, helps the Warden in money laundering, and finally exposes corrupt practices. This entire plot solidifies Andy's position as an "agent of change," a trope often given to white characters in contemporary Hollywood narratives (Quinn, 2013); (Hunt & Ramón, 2020). In this context, the construction of Andy's character reinforces broader narrative conventions that associate whiteness with capability, leadership, and moral authority, while sidelining the agency of non-white characters.

This phenomenon needs to be seen more deeply from the perspective of the discourse of power and racial representation. Andy's representation shows how films

shape audiences' perceptions of who deserves to be a hero, who deserves justice, and who plays a loyal supporter. With the dominance of the frequency of appearances and the giving of higher heroic characteristics, *The Shawshank Redemption* subtly reinforces the racial hierarchy structure that is already rooted in Western film production.

Thus, the analysis of Andy Dufresne's presence in the narrative of *The Shawshank Redemption* proves the existence of a structured narrative supremacy practice. This is in line with contemporary criticisms of the film industry's continued failure to provide equal representation across races (Hunt & Ramón, 2020); (Quinn, 2013). These findings open up space for further discussion about how narratives of justice, while couched in heroic tales, often remain a play on structural bias in popular culture.

Glorification Patterns: Explicit vs. Implicit

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne's character is placed at the center of highly visible glorification; both through direct praise from supporting characters and through subtle narrative emphasis. This glorification reinforces Andy's image as an idealized white figure of intelligence, determination, and high morality—attributes rarely associated with characters of color in film. Explicit glorification is evident in dialogue that directly praises Andy's abilities and virtues. For example, when Red states, "Andy has a way of making you feel like you have a purpose in life," this kind of praise reinforces Andy's position as a savior and hero (Alvina & Saragih, 2023). In contrast, implicit glorification is present in the way camera angles, background music, and scene placement highlight Andy at key moments—giving the impression that Andy's actions have a higher value, even though this is not always expressed through direct dialogue.

The data below will later show the dominance of explicit praise (15 dialogues) over implicit praise (12 dialogues). This contrast illustrates that the film openly glorifies Andy, while more subtle reinforcement of his heroic image is relatively limited. The following is a summary table of the amount of explicit and implicit glorification of Andy Dufresne:

Table 2 Glofication Patterns in Andy Dufresne's Dialogues

Glorification Patterns	Number of dialogues
Explicit (Visible)	15
Implicit (Invisible)	12

The dominance of explicit glorification demonstrates how Andy is positioned as the moral center of Shawshank prison. Compliments such as, “He’s the smartest man I ever met,” openly emphasize his intellectual and ethical superiority, leading the audience to identify justice with Andy’s actions (Alvina & Saragih, 2023). Although less frequent, implicit glorification plays a significant role in deepening Andy’s heroic image. The lighting that highlights his face behind the bars, the choice of orchestral music as he plans his escape, and the cutting to scenes that focus on his small steps all add to the glorification without the need for direct words of praise.

Both of these patterns of glorification are consistent with the white savior narrative in contemporary Hollywood films, in which white protagonists are portrayed as irreplaceable agents of change (Tierney, 2006). By placing Andy within a hero framework that is revealed through dialogue and imagery, the film implicitly affirms the supremacy of the white narrative. Ultimately, Dufresne’s patterns of explicit and implicit glorification of Andy reinforce the film’s narrative of justice as a play on white privilege. Despite the implied praise, the dominance of explicit dialogue positions Andy as the protagonist who “deserves” justice and sympathy, while inmates of color remain marginalized. These findings underscore the importance of critical awareness of how films construct heroes and establish who deserves justice. By understanding patterns of glorification, viewers and researchers can uncover hidden biases and challenge narrative dominance that often diminishes the complexity of marginalized experiences.

Structural Racism in Binary Characterization

The Shawshank Redemption features a narrative structure that subtly reflects structural racism through its portrayal of racialized characters. Structural racism here is understood as “the normalization or legitimization of a set of dynamics that routinely benefit White people while producing cumulative or chronic disadvantages for People of Color” (T. Rose). In the context of cinema, this structure is often manifested through symbols and stereotypes that reinforce racial hierarchies, such as the use of certain objects or situations as representations of power or threat. A study of gun symbolism in film found that “fictional narratives often depict White characters as entitled to calculated violence, while characters of Color are discourses as criminal or dangerous entities,” thereby reinforcing the framework of structural racism through visual and contextual

representations of Nature.

An analysis of binary characterization in *The Shawshank Redemption* reveals stark differences between White and Black characters. White Andy Dufresne is almost always given positive attributes—from intellectual poise to moral fortitude—while Black characters, including Red, are more often depicted with negative connotations such as moral doubt or violence. The following data summarizes the number of scenes with positive and negative characterization of the main and supporting characters.

Table 3 Number of Scenes and Positive and Negative Characterizations

Character	Positive (Number of Scenes)	Negative (Number of Scenes)
Andy Dufresne (White)	22	2
Red & Lainnya (Black)	16	31

This sharp difference shows that the film narrative places Andy in a dominant positive portion, while characters of color are emphasized in negative scenes. Andy's actions in helping fellow prisoners, restoring the library, and planning a heroic escape emphasize the image of the white protagonist as a bringer of change, while Red et al. appear more often in situations of conflict or moral dilemmas (data processed by researchers). Andy's depiction is in line with the finding that the representation of black ethnicity in television and big screen films is still often limited to the stereotype of "an inferior, criminal, or morally problematic minority community". Andy, with all his intellectual and ethical superiority, is depicted almost flawlessly, thus forming a moral framework that implicitly places characters of color in a subordinate position.

Meanwhile, researchers assert that negative stereotypes of characters of color in American films "portray African-American culture and behavior as inferior, criminal, and of questionable morality," a form of internal racism maintained by the media industry. Red and other characters of color in *Shawshank* are more often involved in scenes of violence or legal dilemmas, so that the narrative emphasizes their inferiority compared to Andy. This phenomenon reflects the practice of institutional racism in film, where "systemic

tendencies within the film industry perpetuate unequal representation and discourage true diversity.” By foregrounding white protagonists and minimizing space for characters of color in favor of “heroic” narratives, the film indirectly reinforces the supremacy of racial narratives. This binary pattern of depiction emphasizes that the justice depicted on screen is not universal justice, but rather a “game” that benefits the group already in power. Awareness of these structures of bias is essential to critiquing how popular films influence public perceptions of race, morality, and who is worthy of being a hero.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that in *The Shawshank Redemption*, the character Andy Dufresne holds a very dominant narrative control, appearing in about 70% of the scenes and almost half of the dialogues. His existence as an educated white man is not only positioned as an innocent victim, but also as a savior actor who is always given explicit praise—15 lines of direct praise—compared to 12 lines of implicit praise. This pattern of glorification confirms that justice in the film is more “played” to elevate the white protagonist, while other characters—including the black narrator Red—are positioned as loyal but subordinate supporters.

Furthermore, the analysis of binary characterization confirms the existence of structural racism embedded in the storyline. Andy almost always appears positive—22 scenes—while he only gets 2 scenes showing his negative side. In contrast, characters of color experience a dominance of negative scenes of 31, compared to 16 positive scenes. This inequality shows that the film's narrative constructs a hierarchy of racial morality and power: white characters are portrayed as superior, intelligent, and deserving, while characters of color are often trapped in criminal stereotypes or moral dilemmas.

These findings reinforce the argument of Critical Race Theory and Postcolonialism that popular films not only reflect but also reproduce structures of white supremacy and systemic racism. Practically, the results of this study demand critical awareness for audiences and responsibility for filmmakers to design more equitable representations. In the future, comparative studies of other films set in law or prison as well as experimental research on the impact of audience perception are needed, so that cinema can make a real contribution to inclusive social justice.

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