

# An Interpretation of Influences of Institutionalization on the Fate of Characters in “The Shawshank Redemption”

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## Abstract

Institutionalization is mentioned over and over again in film “The Shawshank Redemption”. In this film, the institution refers to the fixed prison institution, and institutionalization refers to a process of rigidifying prisoners’ behaviors, thoughts and mindsets in some imperceptible constraint mechanisms. In this process, the prisoners are forced to change their original behaviors, thoughts and ideas, and begin to accept, get used to and even depend on the current situation little by little. As a result, they become obedient to such prison management. They don’t want or dare to change their realistic conditions, but have to depend on them for survival. The death of Brooks, pigeon Jake and Tommy, the fear of Red and the escape of Andy are all associated with institutionalization. In this paper, influences of institutionalization on the fate of characters in “The Shawshank Redemption” were analyzed. In addition, the wisdom of coping with and avoiding institutionalization was preliminarily analyzed.

**Keywords:** institutionalization, anti-institutionalization, survival strategies

## 1. Connotations of institutionalization

### 1.1 What Is Institutionalization?

To define institutionalization, Red has vividly described his personal experience of decades-long prison life in the film: “These walls are funny. First you hate them, then you get used to them. After long enough, you get so you depend on them. That is “institutionalized.” Red’s metaphor reveals the true nature of Shawshank -- the walls of the prison restrict the physical freedom of prisoners; not only that, but institutionalization even puts the prisoners in terrible mental chains, shackling their minds as well as their bodies, making them part of the prison itself. According to Red’s definition of institutionalization, once institutionalization is embedded in behavioral consciousness, people will be fixed to the institution, no longer wanting to or daring to change the reality, no longer having any ambition and dream. In this paper, “institutionalization” is the institutionalization of people’s behaviors, thoughts, and ideas; that is to say, through some imperceptible restricting mechanisms, people are fixed into one thinking box so that they change original behaviors, thoughts and ideas to accept the reality, adapt to it, depend on it, and finally become a subject of the institution.

### 1.2 Five Categories of People under the Institution

1.2.1 Makers and supporters of the institution. Xue Wen(2016) pointed that the warden and jailers are the typical makers and supporters of the institution, restricting the prisoners’ freedom through the concrete walls and ruthless rules of Shawshank.

1.2.2 Assimilators of the institution. According to Xue Wen(2016), librarian Brooks is the product of the institutionalized prison who is thoroughly assimilated by the institution, who finds senses of existence, value, belonging and satisfaction under the institution, and finally ends in tragedy after deinstitutionalization.

1.2.3 Subjects of the institution. Red Redding is the epitome of subjects of the institution who possesses some abilities and gains senses of existence and satisfaction under the institution, but his thoughts and actions dare not go beyond the walls, only limited to what can be done within the walls. Indeed, his thoughts and actions have been “institutionalized” or thoroughly transformed by the prison, but there is still hope within him, so he finally breaks with the institution under Jack’s encouragement.

1.2.4 Outright opponents of the institution. Tommy is representative of outright opponents. He gets shot for disobeying the unspoken rules of the prison and harming the benefits of institution makers.

1.2.5 Substantial resisters to the institution. Andy is among those fighting for deinstitutionalization to overcome this syndrome of institutionalization.

## **2. Influences of Institutionalization on Characters in “The Shawshank Redemption”**

### *2.1 Influences of Institutionalization on Brooks in “The Shawshank Redemption”*

2.1.1 Before His Release from Prison: Brooks had been institutionalized and found his value in the institution. Brooks had worked at the prison library for more than 40 years. He had a job that he liked and was respected by others. Thus, he had sense of worth, belonging and satisfaction. However, when he was about to be released from the prison after his 50-year sentence, he put a knife on the throat of his friend who came to congratulate on his release. Brooks did it because "this was the only way to make them allow me to continue to stay in prison." Red gave an excellent explanation, "Brooks has been completely institutionalized."

2.1.2 After His Release from Prison: Brooks could not adapt to life outside prison. After being released from prison, Brooks was tormented by conflicts of values. At the same time, conflicts of habits resulting from institutionalization undermined his enthusiasm and desire for freedom. In confusion, he thoroughly broke down. He had no choice but to eliminate his anxiety and fear through death. In the Shawshank State Prison's institutionalization, Brooks' yearning for freedom wore away. He believed Shawshank was all of his life and indispensable to him. Although he was released from prison and no longer restricted by Shawshank's institutionalization, his soul had been deeply institutionalized. He could not remove this mark from his soul, nor could he adapt to or integrate into the free life outside Shawshank. He was tired of being free. To Brooks, the free world outside the Shawshank State Prison was another prison, because he had to go through another institutionalization process. Finally, he ended his life with a rope. It is a tragedy resulting from institutionalization.

### *2.2 Influence of Institutionalization on Jack*

Jack is a pigeon raised by Brooks in prison. Brooks regarded Jack as a relative and carefully fed Jack in his arms when eating. It had become a habit for many years. Brooke released Jack the day before his release. A week later, Jack was found lying in the corner of the playground, dying, like a pile of dirty sheets, Jack fled back to the prison where the unfed bird once lived, had been fed and institutionalized, and finally died. The bird had been institutionalized like the prisoners there. Brook spent decades in Shawshank prison, Shawshank prison is his whole world, so did the bird.

### *2.3 Influences of Institutionalization on Red*

2.3.1 His Attitude towards Conditional Releases: Red was used to the fact that his request for conditional release was always rejected. Finally, asking for a conditional release seems to be a mechanical behavior. He did not care about whether he can get out of prison. He thinks that he may be bound to live in prison.

2.3.2 He Does not Dare to Have "Rule-breaking" Thoughts and Behaviors: when Andy asked Red to help him get a little hammer, Red kindly reminded Andy that it would take 600 years to dig a tunnel with it and that Andy had better be realistic. When Andy said that music allowed people to retain "a ray of hope" that always belonged to them, Red said that music was useless here. Meanwhile, Red believed hope was something dangerous and made people insane. In prison, hope is useless. So, Andy had better get used to this. When Andy told Red that he wanted to spend the rest of his life on a Pacific islet of Mexico and was willing to invite Red to be his assistant, Red said that Mexico was as far as heaven, and they were both prisoned here. Red added that he had lived in prison for most of his life, and thus had been dramatically changed. Just like Brooks, he could do nothing outside the prison. Anyway, both Red's thoughts and behaviors had been institutionalized by the prison. In other words, he was dramatically changed. That is why he did not dare to think or do things outside the prison.

2.3.3 His Behaviors after His Release from Prison: after being released from prison, Red felt as uncomfortable as Brooks. He was used to asking for permission every time he peed as if he had been still in prison. Otherwise, he could not discharge even a drop of urine from his body. Like Brooks, he often felt scared and was eager to return to the prison. However, the agreement between Andy and him stopped him.

2.3.4 With Hope, He Wants to Get Rid of Institutionalization: Encouraged by Andy's letter to him, Red decided to fulfill his promise to Andy. With courage, he began his journey to Mexico to look for Andy. After going through hardships, he finally reunited with Andy. Although Red was lucky enough to avoid suicide, which was Brooks' fate, his struggle against institutionalization was tough. So, we can point out that it is tough for anyone

to get rid of institutionalization once he or she is institutionalized.

#### 2.4 Influences of Institutionalization on Tommy

Tommy was put into prison due to robbery, and Andy helped him acquire knowledge. One year later, Tommy obtained a general certificate of secondary education.

Then, Tommy revealed a stunning secret: Andy was not the murderer, and he knew who the murderer was. Andy asked the warden to rehear his case. However, jailer Hadley followed the warden's instructions to shoot Tommy to death. Tommy died of his breach of the prison's rules and his infringement of the rule maker's interests.

#### 2.5 Influence of Institutionalization on Andy

2.5.1 Have faith and spread hope. Most prisoners sentenced to life in prison will have a gloomy look of despair; however, Andy always maintained a faint smile as he believes: "Do not forget that there are places in the world that are not made up of stone, there is something inside that they cannot get to, that is hope. Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies." Instead of dying down his inner hope during the 20 years in prison, he kept a positive spirit.

2.5.2 Obey institution seemingly. Andy did not kill his wife and her lover but was innocently sentenced to two life sentences, and after resistance but in vain, he obediently entered Shawshank. After being sent to prison, he did not cry but did everything according to the requirements. Even Andy wanted to do something special, and he seemed to be no different from the rest of the prisoners. For example, what he found to do to avoid the emptiness of the mind, like other prisoners, was to find stones to do small carvings and buy sexy actress posters. Later, he used his financial skills to help the warden to launder money and help prison officers to declare dutiable goods in a seemingly smooth and loyal way. To some extent, in order to comply with this unreasonable system, Andy even paid the cost of his personality.

2.5.3 Behave in an Anti-institutionalization way. He asked Red to buy a small hammer and sexy posters to dig an escaping tunnel, resisted the unreasonable provocation and abuse of the "three sisters "; won beer for his fellow inmates from his accounts for the chief prison officers and warden; Andy helped Tommy to get a senior-high-school diploma and play music secretly; he got a job in the library, applied for funds for the library, and changed a small room into the best prison library in England. These may not seem anti-institutionalization, but they are a soft counter-attack because of the moves played an important role in helping the inmates to resist the institutionalization of the prison. Besides, Andy resisted institutionalization by keeping his "hope" in his heart. He convinced that a good "hope" in his heart would enrich his mind and make him feel that he had a future so that he would not be deprived of his sharp initiative and self-esteem by being held in prison.

What Andy has done above paid off handsomely, and for nearly 20 years, he had not only been institutionalized, but also succeeded in digging through tunnels that Red thought would take 600 years to dig through to escape Shawshank and achieve self-redemption. At the same time, he also saved Red and affect many of the Shawshank's fellow inmates, making them feel to live rather than die, redeeming others when redeeming himself. Andy lived in the institution without being institutionalized, which shows that his strategy of coping with institutionalization is worthy of our perception and reference.

### 3. Survival Strategies and Redemption in Institutionalization

In real life, people cannot live without institutions. In the absence of institutions, our society will fall into chaos. In other words, institutions and even institutionalization are inevitable in our life. Should we thoroughly yield to institutions and let them change, assimilate and restrain us? It is a question worth careful reflection of each of us in institutions. Is it right to be thoroughly assimilated by institutions and end with a tragedy, just like Brooks and Red did? Or, is it reasonable to violate institutions in public and be shot to death, just like Tommy did? No, Tommy's ending is more miserable. Andy's way of coping with institutions seems to be the best. To avoid being institutionalized, tormented and punished, one should keep the faith all the time, do things under institutional requirements, follow institutions superficially, fight and revolt against institutions secretly. In this way, you will get benefits from the institution instead of punishment and institutionalization. This is what we can learn from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*.

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