

**Deterrence in *The Shawshank Redemption*: A criminological
analysis**

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Deterrence theory was developed and influential during the 1600s-1700s, particularly the Age of Enlightenment, (Schram & Tibbetts, 2021) and it was the influence of Thomas Hobbes, Cesare Beccaria, and Jeremy Bentham that has created the modern-day deterrence theory. This theory is a part of the classical school of criminology which assumes that a rational person will weigh their options before making a decision. Deterrence theory “proposes that individuals will make rational decisions regarding their behavior” (Schram & Tibbetts, 2021, pg.54). This is a study of weighing the deterrents, which are things that may prevent people from committing crimes, like longer sentences, vs. the benefits of committing a crime, which could be financial gains, for example. Even though Beccaria is known as the Father of Deterrence Theory, Thomas Hobbes influenced Beccaria with his ideas based on a social contract. This led Beccaria to theorize that people have a free will in choosing to commit a crime or not, which also led to his belief that because people choose to commit a crime, they all deserve the same punishment (Avalos, 2022). Later, Jeremy Bentham used Beccaria’s influences of rational choice on deterrence to create his hedonistic calculus study that describes how the weighing of pleasure vs. pain can affect a person’s decision to commit a crime. This paper intends to analyze how deterrence theory has been incorporated and seen in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*.

In 1994, the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* was released, and it was about a man named Andy Dufresne who was wrongly put into prison for the murder of his wife and her lover (Marvin, 1994). Andy Dufresne is sentenced to two life sentences and spends his time under the torment of Captain Hadley, the warden, and other inmates. He learns about the harsh truth of Shawshank prison and the prisoners who live there, and he tries to make the prison feel like a normal life by completing tasks that he would have done for his old job, like doing taxes for all of the guards, including the warden. He also helps his fellow inmates’ educational standpoints by

fixing up the library and helping them earn equivalence diplomas for life after parole. After learning from a fellow inmate, Tommy, that he knew the name of the person who actually killed his wife and her lover, Andy told the warden who did not want to let the one person who knew about his money laundering leave, therefore, the warden put Andy in solitary confinement for 2 months and had Tommy killed. Andy's friend throughout the movie, named Red, worries about Andy who seems to be having suicidal thoughts and is acting strange when Andy tells Red that his hopes for if he gets out and if Red gets out, there is a package near a specific tree he tells him about that is for him. The next morning, Andy is discovered to have escaped, with an elaborate plan that has been in motion since he got to Shawshank, he uses the money laundered for the warden to pay for his trip to Mexico, notifies police of the warden, and after Red is released, he has been left money to come and join Andy.

In applying deterrence theory to the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Andy Dufresne weighs his options at the beginning of the movie when he decides whether to enter drunk into the house where his wife and her lover are at, with a gun, or to leave. Andy decides to leave and throws his gun in the lake, but is convicted in court for the murder of his wife and her lover due to evidence that he was there that night. Later in the movie, while Andy is in Shawshank prison, Andy tells Red that it was his fault that his wife left anyway, this is probably what convinced him not to go into the house, as well as the idea of being put behind bars. This represents Andy's rational decision making described in deterrence theory, particularly Beccaria's definition of severity of punishment, because he would be sentenced two life sentences for two murders which outweighs any future benefits (Avalos, 2022). Even though he is angry with his wife and her lover, he was not willing to serve prison time, especially since he feels guilty about driving his wife away. Another part of the deterrence theory is seen in the severity of punishment in how the

inmates are treated at Shawshank prison. Captain Hadley, the prison head of security/patrol, was very aggressive and brutal to the inmates as far as getting in their faces, mentally beating them down, and physically beating them to a point where they would have to go to the infirmary and in one case, a man died from the beatings. This brutality could deter any future engagement in similar or other types of crime to avoid having to go through this brutality again, and is therefore a characteristic of deterrence through severity of punishment (Schram & Tibbetts, 2021). Andy's shift in becoming a criminal once he entered prison shows deterrence theory because he is already in the worst place he could be, Shawshank prison, and therefore, his benefits for committing crimes outweighed his option to not commit crimes. In prison, Andy committed crimes of fraud and money laundering, particularly for the Warden of the prison, Norton. He found loopholes in the system, and did not care about the outcomes because he was already a criminal according to the court. Warden Norton is the last person showing deterrence theory, and for him, he decides that the benefits of committing a crime outweighed the consequences. He accepts bribes from outside businesses and has Andy launder the money away from being taxed, making Norton rich. Not wanting to be exposed with Andy's release, Norton hides all evidence and he feels that he won't get caught, which represents another characteristic that Beccaria explains, certainty of punishment, especially since Shawshank prison had been run brutally for a long time, and the killing of an inmate, to him, was a regular brutal tactic, and therefore he felt he would not get in trouble (Schram & Tibbetts, 2021). These characters represent real-life rational thinking about whether people will commit a crime or not, and what influences their decisions.

Overall, deterrence theory is scattered through this sad and interesting movie in ways that help the characters make decisions about committing crimes according to how they would get

punished, and all that would entail, or how they would benefit and get away with the crime.

Andy alone is a very complex character who expresses both sides of deterrence theory in rationalizing his choices to commit crimes or not. He is expressed to be a rule follower in the beginning, but becomes even more cunning after he learns the ways of the other side, in prison. He was only a criminal in prison, where deterrence is shown through the feeling that “everyone is innocent in here” (Marvin, 1994) because the rules of the system aren’t fully applied in Shawshank prison when the rules can be broken to benefit others, like the laundering of money for the Warden. Deterrence is seen as a two-sided mirror inside and outside of prison, one side shows the severity of punishment for someone who could be put into the prison, and therefore would more than likely not commit a crime to avoid the brutality. While on the inside of the prison, the other side of the mirror, prisoners like Andy, who are wrongly accused, become criminals due to the lessened possibility of them being punished, and the separation from the outside world, especially when the crimes are for the benefit of those in charge of the prison.

References

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