Inspirational Convicts

To some, a prison may just seem to be a place that houses criminals who are not fit to live as free citizens. To others, prisons are filled with delinquents, but those people may not be as bad as they seem. The classic films, “Cool Hand Luke” and, “The Shawshank Redemption” are excellent examples of the latter, as they focus on protagonists who are not as awful of people as one might think. In fact, in both movies, the most evil characters are the ones who are supposed to be good: the wardens. Both The Shawshank Redemption’s Andy Dufresne and Cool Hand Luke’s Lucas Jackson demonstrate that they can be positive influences on others by acting out in the face of authority in an effort to gain more freedom than what the prisons granted them. “The Shawshank Redemption” and, “Cool Hand Luke” both feature protagonists that challenge an ultimate power in order to inspire hope in their fellow inmates and themselves in the pursuit of freedom.

“Cool Hand Luke” is a movie about a man named Lucas Jackson, who was arrested after drunkenly destroying parking meters and then sentenced to two years at a hard labor prison in Florida. There, Luke was introduced to the oppressing Warden, referred to as, “The Captain”, and his guards as well as the leader of the prisoners, Dragline. Dragline initially did not like Luke because he refused to conform to the rules, but he later gained respect as Luke’s stubbornness and cunning personality were revealed. The movie follows the minor adventures of Luke as he repeatedly defies authority while seeming to be unfazed by the punishments bestowed upon him, usually by spending time in, “The Box,” the prison’s solitary confinement. Luke later
tries to escape three times after his mother passed. After the second attempt, Luke was forced to do pointless labor until he “broke.” On the third attempt, Dragline tagged along, got both of them caught, and subsequently watched in horror as the guards fatally shot Luke. The final scene is of Dragline telling the legend of Luke and describing how he never gave up.

“The Shawshank Redemption” follows banker Andy Dufresne, who was falsely arrested for the death of his wife and the man with whom she had an affair. Sentenced to life at the Shawshank State Prison in Maine, Andy is forced to adjust to his new harsh realities with the help of Ellis “Red” Redding. Red, a man known to get prisoners minor things like posters and cigarettes, was initially skeptical of how Andy would adjust to Shawshank. Andy did end up adjusting well, as he used his banking experience to become the financial consultant of almost the whole prison staff as well as the launderer of Warden Norton’s dirty money. After almost twenty years of putting up with the guards, Norton, and the other prisoners, Andy was able to successfully escape from Shawshank and flee to Mexico where he ended up meeting with Red when Red was granted parole.

Philip G. Zimbardo, a psychology professor at Stanford University, is the mastermind of the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971. After the experiment was completed, though, Zimbardo noted that he could not effectively emulate an actual prison. He wrote, “‘Real’ prisoners typically report feeling powerless, arbitrarily controlled, dependent, frustrated, hopeless, anonymous, dehumanized and emasculated” (Zimbardo 108). Though his “prisoners”
did not experience all of those emotions, the characters in “The Shawshank Redemption” and “Cool Hand Luke” did, with the exception of their respective protagonists. In the “Shawshank Redemption,” Andy was generally a positive guy. The rest of the prisoners did not have such a demeanor. Under the reign of Warden Norton and the head guard, Heywood, the prisoners were constantly abused and taken advantage of due to their insubordination. Every day for several years, Andy wrote letters to the state requesting books for the prison’s library, and he eventually had his wish come true. On the day that he got his shipment of books and records for the library, Andy snuck into the Warden’s office with one of the records. He then played that record over the intercom for all in the prison to hear. Andy knew that he was going to get caught and get in a lot of trouble, yet he did not care. He played the record because he did not feel threatened by the powers of authority, and he believed that none of the prisoners should be oppressed by the corrupt system. He felt like antagonizing Norton so he could show that the all-powerful Warden was not perfect, but human. When Andy was caught, he was put into solitary confinement for two weeks, a punishment seen by many prisoners as unbearable. Andy kept his composure and described the two weeks as if they were nothing. The other prisoners were amazed by the way Andy carried himself. No one before him had the courage to perform such an act of disobedience.

In the other film, Luke also defied authority in order to express his intentions to stay independent and, at the same time, inspired the other prisoners. Luke, from when he was incarcerated all the way until his death, was perceived as a calm and cool guy that did not care about anything. None of the other prisoners were as daring. So, when “Cool Hand Luke”
returned to jail months after escaping, all of the prisoners were eager to ask him about his adventures on the outside. While Luke was away, he used a week’s pay to send a photograph of him dressed nicely, with two women, in a magazine in an effort to make the prisoners feel like he was happy on the outside. In reality, Luke was not doing well. He did not go into much detail, but he said he had a job he really did not like, and it was his employer that turned him in. However, the prisoners refused to believe Luke, because they all viewed him as some kind of suave and adventurous anti-hero, when, in fact, he was just a loner that did not like routine. Luke even told the prisoners to stop living vicariously through him, since he was not someone to admire. To them, Luke was a symbol of freedom and made them think that if they kept it cool like Luke, they could get by in life with ease like he did. Luke was an inspiration to the prisoners, not as an example of what to do, but rather a symbol of independence. In this sense, Luke and Andy were highly influential individuals that inspired their peers by simply sticking to their beliefs.

“Cool Hand Luke” featured the unique companionship between Luke and Dragline. Initially the two bickered, and they eventually settled their differences by boxing, an affair that saw Dragline beat Luke to a pulp. After Luke told Dragline that he would have to kill him before he gave up on their fight, Dragline decided that he liked Luke. From then on, the two became buddies who looked after each other in all of the misadventures that occurred throughout the film. Dragline’s affection towards Luke is most evident in the end of the movie when he is trying to convince Luke to join him after they had escaped, though Luke declines and walks
away. There, Dragline, with a faint sense of hope in his tone, asked Luke to come with him to help break their friend out so that the three could take on the world together. He thought that the three of them would be an unstoppable force and that they had a long and prosperous life in front of them. Dragline believed in Luke more than anyone else, and he looked up to Luke as a role model as well. Therefore, Luke, in a sense, became Dragline’s idol.

In “The Shawshank Redemption,” Red and Andy had a special relationship. No prisoner was impacted by Andy quite like Red. Over the years, the two became as close as two can be, as is evident in the ending. After Andy escaped and Red was granted parole, the two met up in Mexico, ran into each other's arms and embraced. Andy cared about Red deeply, and that is why he left a letter telling Red to come live with him in Mexico. He made the arrangements so that the two of them could live in peace. This is what sets the two films apart. Compare the relationship between Red and Andy with what was previously mentioned about Luke and Dragline. Luke left Dragline after Dragline was begging Luke to stay with him so they could take on the world, Andy planned a life for him that included Red at his side. Consider the words of Crispin Sartwell. He claims that people tend to go towards a general sort of social unity. “People are herd animals,” he says, “they seek to associate themselves with a consensus of their acquaintances” (Sartwell 118). People will almost always say and think the way their friends do. In “The Shawshank Redemption,” Red was obviously swayed by Andy’s views on life and decided to live the rest of his own with him. In “Cool Hand Luke,” Dragline was mesmerized by Luke’s character and wanted to become more like him. The difference between the two films
is how Luke and Andy handle the admiration they get from their best friends. Andy invited Red, while Luke rejected Dragline.

Retired Colonel Kenneth Allard, trained in interrogation, was cited by Newsweek column writer Jonathan Alter when discussing Americans taking terrorists as prisoners. In Alter’s article, Allard said that, “Prisoners have only one objective - to end the pain,” which is evident in these two films (Alter 130). In the case of both movies, the prisoners are not under interrogation by the U.S. Military, but they were subject to boredom, which is what some would say is the most excruciating thing about prison. Therefore, the definition of “pain” could be stretched to fit the idea that prisoners are just trying to keep their minds occupied. In, “The Shawshank Redemption,” Andy was just trying to keep his mind busy, therefore he begged the state to give Shawshank the funds to open a library. After years of writing daily letters to the state, Andy’s wishes came true, and the prison was granted money to renovate the library. With this, Andy could keep his mind occupied maintaining his library. From the very beginning of the library’s renovation, Andy managed to also save the others from boredom. By using the new library, prisoners then could read proper books or listen to records. In “Cool Hand Luke,” on the other hand, Luke tried to keep his mind occupied by doing the work that he was told to do. Though, there is a scene in particular where Luke was able to free all of his fellow inmates from the agony of work for a day by motivating them all to put the sand on the freshly laid oil in order for them to finish work early. He managed to encourage all of the prisoners to work harder and faster and they finished two hours ahead of schedule so that they could relax. So, Luke and
Andy may not have actually been in physical pain, for the most part, but they sure did keep themselves and others from the pain of monotonous repetition and boredom.

Both films are great examples of how to make a bad situation good. Andy used his can-do attitude and persistence to open up his own library, escape from prison, and also make long-lasting friendships. Luke was more conservative, yet he gained more admiration because he always kept his cool and stood up for himself. He also, inadvertently, inspired the prisoners to dream of better lives. In both cases, though, the main character was able to truly inspire others by simply not complying to things that they felt were unjust. This shows that in prison, people become institutionalized and are dependent on a system of rules and regulations that keep prisoners in check. Andy and Luke never gave in to the system. In both, “The Shawshank Redemption” and, “Cool Hand Luke,” the protagonists managed to successfully influence several of their peers by not letting the prisons break them down and become institutionalized, something that was accomplished by continuing to pursue justice and freedom.

People throughout history have attempted to inspire others while defying unjust authority. Nearly fifty years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. led the Civil Rights Movement in order for equality of all races in the United States. MLK was in the pursuit of justice and freedom, and he was arrested numerous times for defying police. By standing up for what he believed in and not conforming to the oppressing authority, he was able to change millions of lives for generations. Luke and Andy may not have been in the pursuit of freedom for everyone, but they still inspired
others by never giving up on hope. King was always speaking of hopes and dreams to motivate the people to act for their own. Andy and Luke acted upon their own hopes and dreams so that they could lead by example to show that the human spirit cannot be broken, no matter what obstacles may be in the way.


