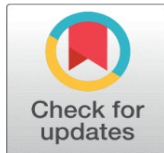


# THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PRISON LIFE IN THE SHAWSHANK REDEMPTION AND THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

Ahla K. I. <sup>1</sup>, B. Sonia Chellirian <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Student, M.A. English IV Semester, Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, Kerala, India

<sup>2</sup>Department of English Language and Literature, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham Kochi Campus, Kerala, India



**Received** 29 March 2025

**Accepted** 21 April 2025

**Published** 25 April 2025

**DOI** [10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6049](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v13.i4.ISMER.2025.6049)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.

## ABSTRACT

Prison Literature is a widening area of study in Literature. The works mainly talk about prison, jail, or any confinement. This paper explores the concept of prison, and how it confines and resists the mind and body of an individual. The paper uses a comparative study to analyse 'Shawshank Redemption', a prison movie, and 'Stanford Prison Experiment', a real-life prison study using Prison Literature as the theoretical framework. The researcher aims to explore how the prison institutionalizes the prisoners internally and externally, how the characters resist or conform to the confinement, and the prison culture, power dynamics, and punitive nature. The main focus, of this paper, is on how people react to confinement.

**Keywords:** Imprisonment, Power Dynamics, Prison Culture, Prison Literature, Punitive Nature



## 1. INTRODUCTION

What is a prison? We somehow answer it as someplace where the criminals are sent for rehabilitation. Does it rehabilitate them? We are unsure. Prison is a place where criminals with various crimes meet. And not all of them would be criminals, most of them are innocent. So, does it rehabilitate them or destroy them? The idea of prison here acquires a different dimension, altering the life of an individual, physically and psychologically, shaping their experiences and behavior. The idea of prison as a rehabilitation center meant for rehabilitation is brought under questioning. If we go further, the prison could acquire more layers of meaning. Once prisoned inside four walls, it would outgrow in an individual's mind, prisoning them forever.

Prison is also a kind of institution where ideas, rules, and behavioural patterns are embedded. And the prisoners are required to follow it blindly. Institutionalization is developing certain rules, ideas, values, or behaviours in a group or organization. With the intensity of this process comes the tendency of decreased independence. This on the other hand can be essential for the rightful working of a nation. The problem arises when the process becomes extreme, focusing only on the benefits of the one who institutionalizes. Unlike other institutions, no one cares to voice against the authority for extreme institutionalization as it is a place for criminals. It is institutionalized so much that there is only dependency.

In the modern world, there has been a slight change in the workings of prison. But that doesn't mean that the entire system has changed. Prison Literature or Prison Studies, has much more significance today. It deals not just with the workings of the prison but also looks deeply into how it affects society. It helps one to understand what is wrong in the prison system.

[Darabont \(1994\)](#). The movie is written and directed by Frank Darabont and is based on a novella titled *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption* by Stephen King. It is about the life of a banker Andy Dufresne who gets imprisoned for the murder of his wife and her lover. The movie portrays how prison affects his life even though he was innocent and parallelly shows the other lives caught up with the walls, of the prison. [Zimbardo \(1971\)](#) psychological prison experiment by Stanford University professor Philip Zimbardo. This experiment was conducted, to examine how situational forces work with dispositions in human behaviours. Zimbardo along with his colleagues aimed to find out whether the sadistic personalities of the guards were the reason for the brutality reported among guards in American guards or the prison environment (i.e., situational). For this experiment, they chose twenty-four male college students randomly and were assigned either the role of a prisoner or a guard. It lasted for two weeks. The basement of the Stanford University Psychology building was chosen as the prison. The students were arrested, by real police officers, handcuffed, and taken to the prison. The guards were entitled to be in the authorial position to enforce rules and regulations to be followed by the prisoners. Initially, both groups conformed to the rules, and a sudden change in the guard's attitude to the sadistic approach led the prisoners to be submissive, and depressed and even experienced mental breakdowns. The prisoners were then released on the fifth day when one of the prisoners had a mental breakdown.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

[Goomany and Dickinson \(2015\)](#) analysed the influence of prison climate on adult prisoner's mental health. The researchers then perceived negativity in the prison experiment and highlighted the need for more research. Kelsey and Esther examined the architecture of an ethical prison. The researchers discussed the 16 environmental domains identified as part of the ethical architecture in prison environments. There is a link between the architecture, of an ethical prison and the well-being of the prisoners. Another research project, *The Prison* done by Michael depicts Freud's notion of uncanny in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Sullivan researched the prison representation in the Nineties Hollywood Cinema from *Con Air* to *The Shawshank Redemption*. The researcher discusses how the challenging media misrepresents prisons and the prisoners are problematic. There has been a lot of studies done on prison and its culture. The main objective of this paper is to

examine how fast the mind and body of an individual succumb to confinement. This paper also analyses the prison culture.

The prison, as a place with more than four walls is analysed through the comparative analysis of the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* and a real-life prison study *The Stanford Prison Experiment* using Prison Literature as the theoretical framework. The initial phase was to watch and read the movie and the experiment and then do a comparative study.

### 3. PRISON, RESISTANCE, AND SUBMISSION

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, most of the characters are the victims of institutionalization. Brooks is one such character in this movie. He was a prisoner for about 50 years in this movie. He held the position of a librarian in the prison library. Brooks got used to life in prison so much that even though he is a good man he tried to kill one of the inmates to extend his life in the prison. No one is interested in being imprisoned for a very long time. Unless that person has no life outside. In the case of Brooks, his life outside was engulfed by the 50 years he spent in prison. How was his life affected by the prison? If you ask this question, it can be answered, if we look at the life of Brooks after he gets released from prison. Brooks got a room to stay, a job to feed himself but the tag of being a prisoner was on him. He was looked in that way. Changes happen every day and it has been 50 years since he was prisoned. So, he is amazed and finds it extremely hard to adapt to the newer world outside. He was looked down on for being slow. Soon he gets exhausted from this life and this exhaustion, was never present in him while he was in prison. Here, we see a stark contrast between his life in prison and outside. He was so institutionalized that he failed to adapt to the unsystematic and changing world compared to the never-changing, systematic life. Brooks was used to living inside four walls and had never seen the world outside. Prison in this aspect played the role of blindness, which blinded him from the outside world. The intensity of this trauma that got internalized in him is evident in his suicide. We aren't given any idea about who and when he was found dead. The reality of Brooks's life with no one to care for outside the prison is clarified here.

Red is another character in this movie. He can be analysed in contrast with Andy Dufresne, the protagonist and only innocent prisoner in this movie, and Brooks. Andy is the only character in this movie who escaped this idea of institution. He escaped with his intelligence. Andy always believed in the hope. His belief in hope can be seen in his constantly sending request letters to the state legislature to improvise the prison library. Later, his request was granted. When Andy talks with Red about escaping from prison, Red opines his idea of hope is vague and bad. Here, Red becomes the real victim of institutionalization. It took away even the last light of hope from him. While Andy on the other side still hopes for his escape. He was never institutionalized. He had his way to not getting institutionalized. Finally, Andy escapes from prison and starts a new fresh life. He escaped by sharing a little hope with his prison friend Red. Red never escaped the prison, he was released. Like Brooks, he got the same room and the job. Slowly, he gets bored and loses himself. As a viewer, one would get frightened at this scene, as he might choose Brooks's decision in the end. To our surprise, he follows the path of Andy. Red was also institutionalised like Brooks but with Andy's intervention in his life, he was able to escape. But in reality, this escape is not that easy. At this point, we have to look into society, as they become one of the main reasons for making this process of undoing life at prison impossible. The prison thus not just locks the body of an individual but their mind too. Even after the body gets

released their mind will be completely distorted by the hands of the prison, locked inside its iron bars failing to escape because of the vagueness of the space it has.

In The Stanford Prison Experiment, the prison is a made-up institution for the experiment. Still, certain rules and regulations were set up for prisoners and the guards. In the beginning, the guards were accurate and followed the rules but there was a shift in their behaviour to the sadistic ones. This resulted in causing submissiveness and mental retardness in the prisoners. The prison would have already established rules and regulations and inside there would be a set of rules the guards hold the responsibility to not to abuse the prisoners. The fact that this was just an experiment and the guards began to impose an animalistic prison has a culture shaped by the guards. The instincts leave more importance to the ethics of prison workings. The prison has a culture created by the guards. The prisoners at first would find it difficult to adapt to this culture and then they will with a great pace change themselves into the weaker ones accepting this culture. As a centre for rehabilitation, this culture can't be accepted. It will only worsen the minds of the prisoners and they might become mentally retarded which will increase their criminal instincts.

When the prison becomes institutionalised it brings certain aspects to it. The first one is situationism. In The Stanford Prison Experiment, it is visible. Situationism is a psychological theory that explains how a person's behavior is primarily determined by external factors rather than internal traits. It shows how even normal, well-mannered individuals could change into the role of abusers or perpetrators when placed in certain situations or roles. The Stanford Prison Experiment illustrates how situational factors affect prisoners, in shaping their behaviour. The uniforms, the caps, the living conditions, and the rules contributed to this. This also illustrates how social norms can influence behaviour. Deindividuation comes next. Deindividuation is a psychological state, where the sense of individuality of a person is lost. Then they begin to act differently in a group. In this experiment, those who were given the role of the guards are seen eventually losing their individuality and moral codes. Them with or without knowing transforms into the role of abusers. The guards lost their self and started acting differently. The deindividuation process starts from here. After arriving at the prison, the prisoners were made naked, and deloused and all their possessions were removed and locked away. And they were given prison clothes to wear. The prisoners were issued a uniform with numbers and referred, to by their numbers. This method of using ID numbers made the prisoners feel anonymous. All guards were made to wear identical khaki uniforms. They wore special sunglasses, to avoid eye contact. They had rigid daily routines like roll calls, work assignments, and so forth which led to the eradication of prisoner's identities. This is horrible if we think about the real prison and then compare it to this one which was just a setup. Dehumanization is the other aspect. Dehumanization is the act of denial of humanity and treating humans as if they were never human. The prisoners in this experiment after getting exposed to the abuses from the guards start to lose their autonomy, values, and their self. This then becomes the cause for them losing their mental health and self. So, the prisoners were dehumanized by the guards.

In The Shawshank Redemption, Andy Dufresne first resists the process of institutionalization but eventually, adapts himself and finds ways to survive within the system. Dufresne plays Mozart's 'The Marriage of Figaro' over the loudspeaker in the prison. This scene illustrates Dufresne's resistance to prison authorities and the institutionalization of prison. This act of him defies the authorities and challenges the monotonous prison life. It also represents Andy's individuality. For

his survival in prison, he needs hope and freedom, music represents this. Here music acts as a form of resistance. While, in The Stanford Prison Experiment, the guards had created arbitrary rules to assert their authority to control the prisoners. Guards used punishment to enforce and maintain their power, and the prisoners to be submissive. The character Brooks in this movie shows the effects of long-term institutionalization. Red doesn't escape this institutionalization but gets released. It indicates the impossibility of escapism. In The Stanford Prison Experiment, this process is rapid. There is a sudden descent into institutionalization. The guards easily attain the authoritarian role and the prisoners become submissive. This illustrates the rapid pace of institutionalization. The guards began asserting their power over the prisoners from the first day onwards. The prisoners started to fight against them on the second day but they were fired by carbon dioxide gas. Their protest was completely suppressed. There was a special place for the prisoners who silently accepted the guards. Even after knowing that the prison was an experimental setup, the prisoners became completely submissive to the guards. Compared to the movie, this one is a real-life experiment and successfully illustrates how fast this process of institutionalization of individuals leads them to be submissive and mentally ill. They weren't even able to fight back, despite knowing that the prison and the guards were just part of an experimental setup. This is how people would react if they were institutionalized. Power dynamics is evident in both the movie and the experiment. In The Shawshank Redemption, a warden named Norton is corrupt and exercises abusive power. How the prisoners react to this should be taken into consideration. Andy Dufresne, the protagonist finds his ways to resist. He along with Red find ways to resist and subvert the system. For example, Andy uses his accounting skills to expose the corruption of the warden Norton. He uses it to resist the power and later as a tool to destroy. The characters except Andy aren't even bothered to fight back. On the contrary, the guards in The Stanford Prison Experiment have complete power over the prisoners. Here the resistance is absent. In other words, the resistance was completely shut. This also illustrates the dangers of unchecked power. Prison is meant to provide rehabilitation. The Shawshank Redemption and The Stanford Prison Experiment thus is a critique, of the punitive nature of the prison system. In Shawshank Redemption, Brooks illustrates rehabilitation failure, his 50 years of life in prison and this failure highlights the prison system's inadequacies. With characters like Andy and Red, there is more hope for rehabilitation in this movie. They both transcend the system's punitive nature. For example, Andy uses his education and skills as a tool to improve his fellow prisoner's lives. In The Stanford Prison Experiment, the system is highly punitive. It depicts a bleaker vision of punishment. It has become necessary to look upon the guards along with prisoners to understand the prison culture.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The idea of prison is not just the four walls, it goes beyond it. After the comparative analysis of the movie The Shawshank Redemption and The Stanford Prison Experiment, it is clear that the prisoners react to the prison culture in a submissive manner. It plays upon them as a master having complete control over their mind and body. It institutionalizes them both internally and externally the only solution that they see for the unknown world outside is death. Rather than bringing out rehabilitation, it inflicts upon them a never-ending disease that isolates them from society, which forces them either to go back to prison or to seek death. The main aim of this paper was to examine how prisoners react to the

prison culture. It is now clear that the prisoners undergo a process of deindividuation and situationism which forces them to be submissive. Here the prison, as an institution, is constructed by the guards rather than by society. The society also works as an open prison with certain rules that disallow the prisoners to live normal life like them. Some argue that the prison is effective as a rehabilitation centre. However, the evidence suggests that these are often limited and ineffective. Others argue, that prisons serve as a crime deterrent, but their effectiveness is limited, as they fail to reduce crime. Thus, the study brings forth the need for a more effective approach to address the crime and its underlying causes. Prison should not feed criminal behaviours.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

### **REFERENCES**

- Darabont, F. (Director). (1994). *The Shawshank Redemption* [Motion Picture]. United States: Columbia Pictures.
- Goomany, A., & Dickinson, T. (2015). The Impact of Prison Climate on Mental Health. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Practice*, 15 (3), 257–275.
- Kelsey, J., & Esther, P. (2018). The Architecture of an Ethical Prison. *Journal of Correctional Education*, 69 (2), 6–23.
- King, S. (1982). Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption. In *Different Seasons* (pp. 1–119).
- Stanford University. (2025). *The Stanford Prison Experiment*.
- Sullivan, R. (2017). Representing the Incarcerated: Nineties Hollywood Cinema and the Prison Film. *Film Quarterly*, 71 (2), 14–25.
- Wikipedia contributors. (2025). *Prison Literature*. Wikipedia. Retrieved 2025, January
- Zimbardo, P. G. (1971). *The Stanford Prison Experiment*. Stanford University.