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From *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Shawshank Redemption*: Race and the American Imagination in the Biracial Escape Film

Donald Ingram Ulin

- 1 In a *Los Angeles Times* review of Stephen King's tetralogy of novellas, *Different Seasons* (1982), Kenneth Atchity offers what has become almost a cliché of high praise: "To find the secret of his success, you have to compare King to Twain.... King's stories tap the roots of myth buried in all our minds." To approach Mark Twain, it is suggested, is to approach something truly universal or at least something quintessentially American. H. L. Mencken echoes the sentiments of some of the most influential literary critics of the twentieth century when he calls Twain the "true father of our national literature, the first genuinely American author" (Foerster 190). At the pinnacle of Twain's work is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), which Lionel Trilling describes as "not less than definitive in American literature" (115-6). Shelley Fisher Fishkin calls Huck "the representative American" and the novel "the exemplary great American book" (Arac 184). According to Hemingway, "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*" (22). In suggesting such an affiliation between King and Twain, Atchity suggests that we consider King's work as part of that mythopoeic tradition within which, according to critical tradition, Twain stands as the father and the archetype.
- 2 Ironically, Atchity may have been less insightful regarding King's original work than prescient in foreseeing the transformation of one of those novellas, "Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption," by writer/director Frank Darabont into *The Shawshank Redemption*, one of the most popular films of the twentieth century. Although it was not well received by reviewers and fared only moderately at the box office, *The Shawshank Redemption*'s sustained popularity through video sales and rentals is reflected in its top position on the Internet Movie Database's user-generated top-250 list, edging out *The*

Godfather and comfortably ahead of everything else. Such extraordinary popularity for an adaptation of a successful but relatively unnoticed book might (and does, I will argue) attest to the film's ability to tap more effectively those "roots of myth buried in our [American] mind." It does so, largely though not exclusively, through the fortuitous casting of Morgan Freeman to play the character of Red, thereby recasting King's story within the powerful tradition of the biracial escape narrative, reaching back to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

- 3 The film is about hope and the quest for freedom; it is about the resilience of the human spirit and its capacity ultimately to triumph over the oppressive forces of a cruel world. These are familiar themes in American literature and central to *Huckleberry Finn*, but a much more volatile theme, equally rooted in American myth, is that of the possibility of interracial friendship, figured most frequently in a bond between a young white man and an older, sympathetic black companion. In tracing a lineage of cinematic retellings of the Huck-Jim story through the close adaptations and at least one other film loosely modeled on Twain's novel, we discover a persistent effort to reconcile the determining power of race in American society with those broader ideals of hope, freedom, and the resilience of the human spirit.
- 4 What Jonathan Arac calls the "hyper-canoncity" of *Huckleberry Finn* may be attributed in part to the pronouncements of a few influential critics, but the narrative of the triumph of native innocence over a corrupt social system clearly reflects one of the fundamental myths of American liberalism (vii. and *passim*). Much of the teaching and criticism of *Huckleberry Finn* has taken as its starting point Twain's own description of the novel as one "in which a sound heart & a deformed conscience come into collision, and conscience suffers defeat" (Twain 619). More specifically, it seems to these critics an affirmation of the power of our innate goodness to overcome prejudice and a celebration of the capacity of white and black Americans, individually if not collectively, to make racial difference irrelevant. Thus the contradictions posed by America's historical entanglement with slavery seem, at least for the time being, to have been resolved. "The purpose of myth", Lévi-Strauss argues, "is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real)". In such cases, "a theoretically infinite number of [iterations of the myth] will be generated, each one slightly different from the others" (229). The fact that racism remains endemic to American society — a legacy of that entanglement with slavery — makes the solution suggested by *Huckleberry Finn*, founded as it is on the myth of the romantic individual, more reassuring than effective. Thus, as Lévi-Strauss predicts, we find hundreds of versions and retellings of the Huck-Jim story through translations, reprintings, critical commentary, film and TV adaptations, and a long tradition of biracial escape narratives, all suggestive in some way of their most famous antecedent.
- 5 **Race and the retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*: the case of close adaptation**
- 6 The understandable desire of film adapters to justify their work on ethical as well as aesthetic grounds has led to a series of cinematic experiments in the recuperation of Twain's novel analogous to those of its more sympathetic scholars. The first screen adaptation relied heavily on minstrel stereotypes in its depiction of Jim as the good-natured darkie, dancing and rolling his eyes. MGM's 1939 production shifted attention away from Jim and onto Huck, played by the greatest child actor of the day, Mickey Rooney, and billed in the trailer as "the all-American boy in the great American story" (*Huckleberry Finn Trailer*). Jim is a more serious character than in 1920, but his passivity

allows Huck a more heroic status. Having apparently overcome his scruples on the subject, Huck becomes an abolitionist and returns to Miss Watson to argue for Jim's manumission with uncharacteristic eloquence and rhetorical skills:

- 7 I've gone a long way since I seen you last, ma'am, and the further I got the more human beings I met 'n' the more I got to feel that no human bein' has a right to own another human bein'. Human bein's make enough mess out of their lives without messin' another human bein's. That's why I'm askin' you to please let Jim go free.
- 8 The change probably had less to do with any newfound racial awareness than with the general seriousness of a nation on the brink of war. Huck's romantic escape from civilization and its problems might have had its appeal, but more would be required of the "all-American boy." Interestingly, this move anticipates a much later objection by Julius Lester to the racial blindness of Twain's novel. Noting that we are required "to believe that an old white lady would free a black slave suspected of murdering a white child," Julius Lester scoffs, "white people may want to believe such fairy tales about themselves, but blacks know better" (203).
- 9 As the civil rights movement gained momentum, Jim emerges as a stronger, more complex character in his own right. In a second MGM production in 1960, Jim is played by boxing champion Archie Moore. Still, in spite of the "warmth, humanity, and courage" that Frank notes in this performance (298), tremendous pains are taken to make sure Moore offers no threats. Huck (Tony Randall) is a cherubic red-headed kid; smiling constantly, Moore treats Huck with kindly, avuncular condescension. Even when he asserts his own rights most forcefully, the powerful boxer compensates at every turn with gestures of submissiveness. When Huck suggests that he go back to Hannibal, since "it'd be a thousand times better for you to be a slave back home where your family is, long as you gotta be a slave," Jim's response is calculated to avoid threatening white audiences whose idea of racial equality might not have evolved much beyond emancipation:
- I ain't gotta be a slave and I ain't gonna be a slave. I'm gonna be free soon's we get to Cairo. Know what I'm gonna do soon's we cross that border? I'm gonna get me a job, a real job where I gits paid, in a store maybe. Can't you see me, Huck? [scraping and bowing] "Yes, ma'am, these needles is the finest we got, ma'am. They only five cents, why thank you ma'am." Now won't that be fine, Huck? ... I'm gonna make me a pile of money so I can buy my wife from that old farmer that owns her. An' we's gonna work hard and save up and buy the two chillun. Aw, Huck honey, everything's gonna be alright. It's all on account o' you helpin' old Jim.
- 10 This film version not only emphasizes Jim's servility, but stops short of his threat to "get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them," something that "most froze" Huck in the novel (124). The film dispenses with Miss Watson's improbable death-bed manumission of Jim, leaving him at the end of the film on the verge of claiming his own freedom by crossing the Ohio River. In the final minutes, Jim urges Huck to join him in that store and eventually to go into business together, but Huck refuses with a version of one of his most famous lines: "I wouldn't be any good in that ol' store, Jim, less'n I got all sivilized 'n' I been there before." Unlike the novel, this film ends with both Huck and Jim poised to claim their own versions of freedom against the dictates and laws of their society. If Jim's offer of a business partnership suggests interracial possibilities unimaginable in Twain's time, the decision to retain the original separation of the two friends — Huck "lighting out for the territory" and Jim returning to struggle toward the purchase of his family — suggests a persistent acquiescence to the idea of "separate but equal" versions of freedom.

- 11 Other film and television versions of *Huckleberry Finn* have demonstrated in their own ways a persistent discomfort with the idea of race and of the racial implications of the novel. One version (1955) solved the problem by entirely omitting Jim (along with all references to slavery) and putting Tom Sawyer on the raft in his place. Some television versions, what Haupt calls the “Royal Nonesuches,” moved the narrative in the direction of farce by emphasizing the king and the duke over Huck and Jim (Rasmussen and Dawidziak 284). More recently, the original script for the 1985 PBS version attempted again to improve on Twain’s novel by dispensing with the death-bed manumission and downplaying the mock escape at the end. In this version, Huck refuses to cooperate with Tom, exposing the cruelty of his romantic worldview: “I’ve had enough of your booky foolishness, Tom Sawyer. You go on with your magic lamps and digging to China and writing journals on shirts. I’m taking Jim out, and I’m doing it now.” Jim escapes to seek out the free black community in New Orleans, at that time one of the largest in the country (Gallo). There is no certain knowledge of his fate, but Huck’s voiceover leaves us with a sense of hope: “I reckon he’s free by now. I hope so. I do.” In explaining his choices, writer Guy Gallo echoes a common critical assessment: “the whole tenor of the book is so much about defining freedom and sacrificing freedom and trying to figure out what it is” that it “falls apart and into parody in the last chapters” (Gallo). Although he says that the studio had given him permission to change whatever he wanted on the condition that the changes were approved by “a committee of Twain scholars,” the studio opted in the end for fidelity and insisted on the simpler ending of Jim’s manumission and return to Missouri.
- 12 Still more recently, the 1993 Disney version, directed by Stephen Sommers, again sidesteps the romantic farce (like both of the MGM versions) by omitting Tom altogether while calling attention insistently to Huck’s developing conscience. “I realized right then that you can’t run away from your problems,” Huck’s voiceover announces, “you gotta make a stand and face ‘em.” However, the resolution relies, even more than it did in 1960 or 1985 on the goodness of white people. Not only is Jim’s freedom owed once again to Miss Watson’s change of heart, but Jim is saved at the last minute from a lynching by the intervention of Mary Jane Wilks (one of the sisters almost disinherited by the duke and the king), and the Widow Douglas confesses to Huck that she is proud of him for having tried to free Jim: “just because an idea is popular, like slavery, don’t make it right.” Two related acts of redemption are accomplished here. First, in vicariously assuming the widow’s moral high ground, we can congratulate ourselves on our collective movement out of a benighted past, a movement apparently driven by white benevolence. Second, that beloved but troublesome novel is redeemed as the principal evidence of our own and our nation’s happy trajectory.
- 13 **From *Huckleberry Finn* to the Biracial Escape Narrative**
- 14 Biracial escape films, while not directly acknowledging their debt to *Huckleberry Finn*, have created opportunities for writers, directors, and audiences to revisit the same unresolved issues with more freedom than might be possible with even a relatively loose adaptation. Yet even as these films have suggested the continuing relevance of Twain’s novel to the story of American race relations, they have consistently obscured the realities of racial struggle in much the same manner as Twain and his twentieth-century adapters. Writing about *The Defiant Ones* (1958), Leslie Fiedler describes both the persistence of the Huck-Jim myth and its power in creating a reality compatible with a

white liberal view of racism as an historical aberration we can pride ourselves on having overcome. In *The Defiant Ones*, he writes,

the old story is told again: Huck and Jim run from their pursuers through field and swamp once more—though this time they are escapees from a chain gang... Though they are captured at the end, they have learned to love each other with a love pure enough to transcend their mutual prejudices and bitterness.... The white man...ends up lying in the arms of the colored man, who sings to him like a mother to a child; and still together, more than ever together, they are borne off to jail. As the myth sinks deeper and deeper into the national mind, intertwined with nostalgic memories of books that we have read as children, like our fathers before us and theirs before them, it comes to seem truer than the reality of headlines. (388-9)

- 15 With three Academy Awards and the first nomination ever of an African-American for best actor, *The Defiant Ones* broke ground both artistically and culturally in ways that no close adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn* ever has. Vera and Gordon call it “a pioneer film” and “a message film that would have been inconceivable even a few years earlier in the decade,” coming on the heels of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the integration of Little Rock’s Central High (155). In the heat of the civil rights struggles, *The Defiant Ones* challenged white audiences with a serious and complex black protagonist, Cullen (Sidney Poitier), chained to his racist fellow prisoner Joker (Tony Curtis). Through their common struggles, they shed their prejudices and discover a common bond of humanity stronger than any chain, though they refer jokingly to the chain as their wedding band.
- 16 In 1958 the film’s intertextual identification with *Huckleberry Finn* would have reassured a white, liberal audience of its ideological soundness without raising the specter of any real revolution in race relations. By this time, according to Arac, Twain’s novel was being “enlisted on the side of civil rights, implicitly defined not as the active, collective ‘movement’ of African Americans, but as the feelings of liberal Northern whites: sympathy toward African Americans and horror toward the South” (41). In this regard, not much had changed from 1885 when Twain’s northern readers might have congratulated themselves on their own moral superiority to the likes of *Huckleberry Finn*’s antipathetic southerners. Yet certain elements had to change in this new take on the “old story”: Poitier plays a more complex character than Jim and is never forced to submit to the sort of degradation Jim endures at the end of the novel as Tom Sawyer’s plaything. Unlike Jim, who quite inexplicably follows Huck into the Deep South after passing Cairo, Cullen prevails over his friend Joker and leads both of them to the North. Yet, if a civil rights era audience required these more realistic emendations to the Huck and Jim story, they were no less in need of moral reassurance. Like Jim who gives up his freedom to nurse the wounded Huck, Cullen chooses captivity with his white friend over freedom on his own. As James Baldwin explains, “He jumps off the train in order to reassure white people, to make them know that they are not hated” (Vera and Gordon 157). Finally in the end, the “pietà” of Cullen holding the wounded Joker in his adoring arms and “feeding” him a cigarette suggests “a fantasied mutual sacrifice that unites the races: the white Christ figure needs a black male virgin Mary to comfort him,” an image repeated 30 years later with Danny Glover and Mel Gibson at the end of *Lethal Weapon 2* (Vera and Gordon 157; fig. 1).



Figure 1 Cullen and Joker as multi-racial "pieta" (*The Defiant Ones* [Stanley Kramer, Curtleigh Productions, 1958])



Figure 2 Andy Dufresne and "Red" (*The Shawshank Redemption* [Frank Darabont, Castle Rock Productions, 1994])



Figure 3 Shawshank Bleachers (*The Shawshank Redemption* [Frank Darabont, Castle Rock Productions, 1994])

- 17 Thirty-five years later, *The Shawshank Redemption* offered another narrative of a young white man and an older black man marginalized by a society racked by greed and corruption. Life is hard in Shawshank Prison (as it can be on the raft), but the men find each other and, in each other, the security and stability denied them in the outside world: what Trilling calls (in reference to *Huckleberry Finn*) “a family, a primitive community,” if not quite, in their case, “a community of saints” (108; see fig. 2). In the novella, Red calls this “our happy little family” (King 15). Darabont emended that to “our happy little Shawshank family” (26), emphasized with frequent, carefully crafted shots of camaraderie in the yard, library, or dining room (see fig. 3).
- 18 The so-called “sisters” — inmate rapists who prey on Andy — are excluded from this community and even, according to Red, from humanity. In an exchange added by Darabont, Red tells Any that the sisters are not homosexuals: “You have to be human first. They don't qualify.” Like Twain's Duke and Dauphin, who likewise violate codes of conduct more fundamental than statutes, the lead sister, Boggs Diamond (Mark Rolson) is finally subjected to a brutal and humiliating defeat.
- 19 Like the sisters, the guards threaten the security of that “community of saints” with their self-serving abuse of power, but they tend to operate from a distance or one-on-one with individual inmates and are not represented as part of the daily life of the inmates as they are in some other prison films (e.g. *The Green Mile* or *Escape from Alcatraz*).¹ Even more significantly, their identification and the motivation behind their brutality lie outside the prison walls in illegal contracts, money laundering, and political schemes. From the guards and the sisters, we learn two important lessons famously summed up by Huck: first, that “Human beings can be awful cruel to one another” (290), and second, that “what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others” (165). Even when Brooks Hatlen (James Whitmore) threatens to kill Heywood (William Sadler) to avoid being released, the small community encircles the pair and helps restore the “right and kind” feelings of the group.
- 20 What makes *The Shawshank Redemption* so different from other biracial escape films is that in both the screenplay and the novella on which it was based, all of the main characters

are implicitly white. Nowhere is Red described as “white,” because of course whiteness is typically invisible, but in both he identifies himself as Irish and, in the novella, he remembers his younger self as “a kid with a big mop of carrotty hair” (54). Most important, in the novella, he describes his former marriage to the daughter of a prominent local businessman (at the businessman’s insistence), which would have been nearly impossible for a black man in 1930s Maine (15). A reading of this story as a retelling the Huck-Jim story therefore becomes possible only with the casting of an African-American for this part. The screenplay retained only the reference to being Irish as a gently self-mocking explanation for why things “seem to fall into my hands” (King 28; Darabont 22). In the actual film, Freeman delivers the same line as the conclusion to the same dialogue: when Robbins, slightly confused, asks why he is called Red. Freeman pauses, smiles, looks into the distance, and answers, “maybe it’s because I’m Irish.” Such a purely evasive answer only adds a bit of humor, lightening the relationship between Red and Andy, and giving Red’s character an enigmatic quality. Yet the exchange also typifies the way the film as a whole mystifies the issue of race in America by seeming to avoid it altogether.

- 21 According to Mark Kermode, Darabont “was first startled, then immediately converted” when Freeman was suggested for the role (28). Local casting director Lynn Meyers claims that it was Darabont who chose Freeman as the man he would most want to have as his best friend in prison (personal interview). Race was irrelevant, Meyers explains, nor was the film “diminished into a parable about the races getting along.” No doubt Freeman was chosen for reasons other than the color of his skin – for the kindness, the quiet confidence, and the moral rectitude that have come to be associated with him. Yet whatever the original motivation may have been, the decision to cast Red as a black man entirely altered the intertextual resonances of the film, situating it in the powerful tradition of the biracial escape narrative going back through *The Defiant Ones* to *Huckleberry Finn* and beyond.
- 22 Race relations had come a long way between *Huckleberry Finn*’s publication in 1885 and 1994, when *The Shawshank Redemption* was released, but Americans were not and are still not color blind. Although we are often told to act as if that were the case, people of color and those who take their stories seriously know it is not. American audiences would be no more able to ignore race in *The Shawshank Redemption*, than they were later that year in the trial of actor and football legend O. J. Simpson for the murder of his white ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her lover, Ron Goldman. As recently as 1992, African-Americans in Los Angeles had rioted when an all-white jury exonerated a group of police officers who had been videotaped beating a helpless African-American, Rodney King. Likewise, the best-selling *Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994) proved, if not that intelligence is correlated with race as its authors hoped, then at least that Americans retained a powerful fascination with the idea.
- 23 One thing that had changed between 1958 and 1994 was the ability of *Huckleberry Finn* to provide a satisfactory account of race relations in American history. From at least 1948, the critical consensus among American scholars and educators had followed Lionel Trilling’s much quoted assessment of the novel as “indeed a subversive book”:
- no one who reads thoughtfully the dialectic of Huck’s great moral crisis will ever again be wholly able to accept without some question and some irony the assumptions of the respectable morality by which he lives, nor will ever again be certain that what he considers the clear dictates of moral reason are not merely the engrained customary beliefs of his time and place. (112-3)

- 24 By enlisting Twain's narrative as the framework within which to illustrate such a conversion on the part of two convicts (one black and one white), *The Defiant Ones* tends to validate Trilling's assessment of the novel and, at the same time, offer the story of Huck and Jim as an object lesson for further conversions in the movement toward civil rights. The film frankly acknowledges what was obvious to Americans of every political persuasion and ethnic background in 1958, that racial conflict was a serious issue in American life.
- 25 Already by 1958, however, the same civil rights movement that had produced *The Defiant Ones* was beginning to erode the moral pedestal on which *Huckleberry Finn* had been placed and from which it had assumed such authority in matters of racial understanding (Arac 63-89). Parents and scholars alike were challenging the idealization of the Huck-Jim relationship, pointing out the childishness and minstrel stereotypes embedded in Jim's character (Woodward and McCann), the farcical resolution to Jim's serious dilemma as a runaway slave in the Deep South (Lester), or the casual and pervasive use of the word "nigger." Liberal opinion was thus polarized on the subject of *Huckleberry Finn*, with some denouncing the novel as "racist trash" and others hailing it as "a weapon against racism that we can't afford to take out of our classrooms" and "one of the fiercest denunciations of racism in American culture" (Arac, 63, 10, 14). Defenders of the novel continued to focus on the idea of the ironic narrator (it is, to quote Twain, the voice of Huck's "deformed conscience" not of Twain himself or even of Huck's own "sound heart") or else of historical verisimilitude. We might at least read the novel historically, as one high school teacher testified in 1996, to "raise our consciousness because it shows how terribly blacks were treated back then. We need to know who we are and what we come from" (Foerstel, 191).
- 26 But just who are "we," and what do we come from, and what might *Huckleberry Finn* (and the controversy surrounding it) really offer us to clarify or confuse the situation? Although a 1957 editor had declared "the inequality of races" to be "nonsense" (Arac 65), the popularity of *The Bell Curve* demonstrated that by 1994 a significant number of Americans still sought evidence to the contrary. Paradoxically, this continuing fascination with race accompanied a growing denial of race as a meaningful factor in American society: although the O.J. Simpson trial uncovered deep reservoirs of racism in the justice system, most white Americans read only a narrative of jealousy, murder, and the power of Simpson's wealth to circumvent justice. African-Americans understood that, whether or not Simpson was guilty of the crime, this was also a story about the way black men are handled by the justice system. What white Americans wanted was a story about American justice in which race no longer mattered. In this story, racial profiling and racist denigration could be treated as individual aberrations well on their way to extinction in an otherwise color-blind system. Such a story could hardly make its affiliation with *Huckleberry Finn* as transparent as *The Defiant Ones* had in 1958 before the novel's racial significance had become so equivocal, but it had to attempt on its own terms, once again, to overcome the contradictions of race in American culture.
- 27 Fortunately, since neither King's novella nor Darabont's screenplay was written with race in mind, they present the perfect opportunity for such a narrative. As King noted, Red really "could have been cast as a white man," because the text already makes race irrelevant (Magistrale 14). Thus there is nothing in the film to remind viewers that Red was supposed to have been white and nothing but the color of his skin to call attention to the fact that he is not. Unlike the biracial couples in previous escape films, Andy and Red

have no racial animosity of their own or anyone else's to contend with. The term "nigger," which had been used twice in King's text and has been the most frequent target of recent attacks on *Huckleberry Finn*, had already been omitted in the screenplay. Had Red called Andy a "good nigger" even metaphorically, as he does in the novella, it might have seemed an amusing parallel to his allusion to himself as being Irish, but it would have reminded viewers of the pervasive history of American racism, which the film seems otherwise so effective at denying. (The term was still so inflammatory that CNN and the *New York Times* refused to include it in their reporting of the O.J. Simpson trial [Arac 23].)

- 28 In considering *The Shawshank Redemption* as a retelling of the old story of Huck and Jim, perhaps the most striking structural contrast is the point of view. *Huckleberry Finn* is unequivocally Huck's story from beginning to end, told from his point of view, but given depth and seriousness by his relationship to Jim. In King's novella the situation is partly reversed: one man is telling the story of another man's flight to freedom. On the surface it is a story about Andy Dufresne's flight to freedom, but Red insists that "it's all about me, every damned word of it. Andy was ... that part of me that will rejoice no matter how old and broken and scared the rest of me is. I guess it's just that Andy had more of that part than me, and used it better" (100). Andy achieves a mythic stature, and Red acknowledges some truth to the idea that there was "an element of fantasy to him, a sense, almost of myth-magic, if you get what I mean," but that tag, "if you get what I mean" helps to establish Red's strong character and control of the narration. So, too, does his insistence on "one important difference: I was there and I saw what happened, and I swear on my mother's name that it's all true. The oath of a convicted murderer may not be worth much, but believe this: I don't lie" (39).
- 29 In the transformation of King's narrative first to a screenplay and then to a biracial escape film with Freeman's voiceover, the possibility emerges that this time the black man will get to tell his own story, and had Darabont stayed truer to King's novella, it might have been so. But the medium changes everything, and as effective as Freeman's voice-overs are in establishing the tone of the film, the omniscient dramatization (often of events of which Red could have had no direct knowledge) sidelines him as a narrator and undermines any impression we might have had that the story, "every damned word of it" is really about Red (a claim that is omitted in the film). In contrast to King's story, which really is about Red, Hampe notes that Darabont "takes Andy's story as the dramatic backbone, ... simply using Red to tell the story" (19). From being simply the "man who knows how to get things," Red emerges as Andy's hagiographer in a relationship that is always instrumental and asymmetrical: Red gets Andy a rock hammer and a poster of Rita Hayworth. Andy is Red's mystery and ultimately his redeemer, saving him from despair at the frequent rejections by the parole board and ultimately empowering him to "get busy living" rather than giving up or committing suicide like Brooks Hatlen. A poignant scene in the film shows Red, released from prison but near despair, looking at a display of guns and compasses in a pawn shop window. Remembering Andy's words, he chooses the compass, literally and symbolically setting his life on the correct path. Kermode goes so far as to identify Andy as a Christ-figure, "only partly of this earth, a displaced angel traipsing through the dirt of the world, untarnished by its imperfections" (30).
- 30 Although they were not intended this way, Andy's and Red's characteristics are thus consistent with some of the stereotypes familiar to American audiences from other biracial escape narratives. Andy is both the planner and the doer, while his non-white friend provides material and emotional support without fully understanding the nature

of the undertaking (not entirely unlike Tonto to the Lone Ranger or James Fenimore Cooper's Chingachgook to Natty Bumppo). Nero describes their relationship in terms of those "racialized binaries of white/black and superior/inferior" that have informed racial discourse at least as far back as *Huckleberry Finn* (55). Within the limiting sphere of the prison, Red exercises more leadership and self-determination than Jim, but far less than Andy, who "decides the location [where they are to meet], has the knowledge about how to escape from prison, and provides the money for the escape, while Red acts as his assistant"(55). Red is the true felon, convicted of a street-crime (murder), while Andy's criminal activity, commenced in prison, consists of the intellectual, white-collar crime of money laundering and other financial sleights of hand. According to Jay Alber, Andy's triumph over prison bureaucrats and working-class rapists "glorifies the restoration of the clever white working class" (173). Predictably, Andy's success is due in large measure to his facility with cultural capital unavailable to Red or the other working-class criminals, whether he is building a library, impressing the warden with his knowledge of the Bible, or enthralling the other inmates with *The Marriage of Figaro* (a scene created entirely by Darabont). Andy confounds his would-be-rapist with a confident deployment of scientific language about the autonomous response to brain injury (entirely false but effective). He tells Red to look for the money in a field "like something out of a Robert Frost poem."

- 31 Like the white lead in most biracial Hollywood or literary partnerships, Andy's greater complexity suggests a greater moral ambiguity: what is unethical by common understanding becomes ethically heroic in his hands. Huck chooses to go to hell for acting like an abolitionist rather than betray Jim; Andy is clearer about the ethical implications of what he is doing, but he nevertheless cooperates with the warden's illegal activities for the good of the other inmates and ultimately for his own much greater good. Simpler than his lead partner, the foil-of-color exhibits little or no moral ambiguity. Red's crime, though heinous, figures as an incident out of his past, not as part of who he is now: the affable, honest, even selfless friend and benefactor of the other inmates, "the guy who can get it for you" (King 15). Darabont's Red is also less threatening than King's and thus more readily assimilated to the black half of a biracial escape film. When King's Red first agrees to get Andy a rock hammer, he threatens that, should Andy ever tell who got it for him, he would never again get him "so much as a pair of shoelaces or a bag of Bugler [chewing tobacco]" and would "send some fellows around to lump you up.... I can't allow it to get around that I can't handle myself. That would surely finish me" (30). The screenplay replaces the "bag of Bugler" with a "stick of gum" and dropped all threat of violence (23). Thus, even before Freeman had been chosen, the role was already beginning to embody those characteristics that white audiences have always admired in African-American characters.
- 32 Near the end of the film, Freeman's character rises heroically above the servility of those black characters of whom an audience might earlier have been reminded. In what Donald Bogle rightly calls "a tour-de-force moment in the film," Red refuses to kowtow to the all-white parole board, throwing back at them their question, "have you rehabilitated yourself?" (Bogle 413-4):

I know what you think it ["rehabilitated"] means, *sonny*. To me, it's just a *made-up word*, a politician's word, so young fellas like yourself can wear a suit and a tie and have a job. What do you really want to know? Am I sorry for what I did?... There's not a day goes by I don't feel regret, and not because I'm in here or because you think I should. I look back on the way I was then, a young, stupid kid who did that

terrible crime. I want to talk to him; I want to try to talk some sense to him, tell him the way things are. But I can't. That kid's long gone and this old man is all that's left. I gotta to live with that. (beat) "Rehabilitated?" That's a bullshit word, so you go on ahead and *stamp your form*, sonny, and stop wasting my time. Because to tell you the truth, I don't give a shit. [italics added]

- 33 Freeman has improvised brilliantly if subtly on the screenplay, playing up his strength, independence, and moral high ground: he has added the first “sonny”; “I think it’s just a made-up word” becomes more emphatic as “To me, it’s just a made-up word”; and the conclusion is drawn out, building up more dramatically to the final, “I don’t give a shit.” Reducing “stamp that form there” to the slightly more condescending “stamp your form,” acknowledges the form as piece of petty bureaucracy unconnected with Red’s real self or worth as a human being (Darabont 109-10). As written, this speech might be understood as the outburst of one aggrieved man, or more universally as the rebuke of the downtrodden individual to the Kafkaesque machinations of power. Spoken by a lone black man to an all-white committee, the scene is inevitably racialized, and Freeman’s words implicitly take on more precise historical significance than they would have coming from any white actor. This moment is significant as an indication of the film’s potential to confront the unspoken politics of race, as *The Defiant Ones* had earlier. Instead, that potential is consistently undermined as the film manages instead to deny the reality of those politics altogether.
- 34 Although Lynn Meyers assured me that casting of extras and minor characters was done without regard to skin color, significant deviations from historical reality and from the film script may have been necessary to maintain the illusion of race’s irrelevance to the film and to American history. In 1955, when the *Marriage of Figaro* scene is supposed to have taken place, the African-American population of a Maine state prison would have been close to zero. Even by 1985 (the year after *Shawshank Redemption* was released), that population had reached only 1.2 percent (Holman). Nevertheless, in one shot of roughly 140 inmates in the yard, about eight (six percent) are black. Shots of the infirmary and woodshop add at least three to that number, raising the rate to over seven percent. Although race may not have contributed to the initial decision to cast Freeman as the second principal, its impact on the audience’s interpretation of his character would have been far greater set against the otherwise all-white backdrop of an historically accurate *mise-en-scène*. Thus the film chooses an appearance of racial diversity over historical accuracy and, in sharp contrast to the realities of prison life, a diversity unmarred by any racial identifications or conflicts. Red remains the exceptional individual insofar as the speaking roles are otherwise exclusively white, but the happily integrated *mis-en-scène* reassures us that such matters are irrelevant and perhaps always have been, at least since the 1950s.
- 35 One small but significant deviation from Darabont’s script further discourages any acknowledgment of race as an element of conflict or community. In the script, the landlady who shows Red to his room in the Brewster Hotel is described as “a black woman,” one of only two cases where race is actually specified (112). (It is presumably a different landlady from the one who, years earlier, shows Brooks Hatlen to the same room.) The moment should be one of intense loneliness and alienation, an effect that might have been compromised by the appearance at that moment of a fellow African-American in this otherwise uniformly white Maine town. It is a small, uncredited role and may not have been cast with these intentions, but one result of the alteration is to

prevent even the unintended implication that race might still be of any consequence in America.

36 **Lighting out for the Territory: Rewriting the Ending**

37 As we have seen, the most serious issue for anyone attempting a popular retelling of the Huck-Jim story lies in the ending. Even among the novel's adherents, few seem to have agreed with T.S. Eliot's assessment that "it is right that the mood of the end of the book should bring us back to that of the beginning. Or, if this was not the right ending for the book, what ending would have been right?" (110). The variety of alterations introduced by screenwriters in the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* suggest that most of us would like to believe with Hemingway that "the real end" is "where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys.... The rest is just cheating" (23). Certainly the formal problems with Twain's ending are at least as serious as the ideological ones, even leading Twain to abandon the novel for several years once the raft had passed Cairo.

38 However, the magnitude of the novel's formal failure to achieve a satisfactory resolution may be better understood as an indicator of the magnitude of America's social problems in addressing its racial history. David Smith argues that the novel's value as social critique lies precisely in its own aesthetic problems, that in *trying* to bring a satisfactory resolution to a narrative enmeshed in the discourse of racism, Twain *must* fail because America was not and is still not ready for an honest confrontation with its own racism. In founding its hope for redemption on the myth of the romantic individual, Twain effectively shuts out the public discourse that surrounded the issue of slavery and thus unwittingly exposes the complicity of the liberal tradition in the continuation of racism. "If we, a century later, continue to be confused about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, perhaps it is because we remain more deeply committed to both racial discourse and a self-deluding optimism than we care to admit" (Smith 261).

39 Script writers, both of close adaptations and of comparable biracial escape films, have been no less concerned than scholars with the problem of the ending. In their case, though, Eliot's rhetorical question, "what ending would have been right?" takes on immediate and practical significance. Yet there is a paradox. On the one hand, as film critic Michael Ross argues, the lead characters in the biracial escape film, stand "outside of society. They're outcasts or misfits against the system, and they link up with one another. In that sense, it's like Huck and Jim on that raft - two men chained together, outside of the established order." It is that critical distance that allows them to comment ironically or directly on society's failings. On the other hand, Ross also notes, these "film relationships suggest the kind of black-white friendships that Americans like to think represent reality." However devastating the critique offered by the film's conflicts, the resolution must ultimately reclaim those outcasts as favored sons if the audience is to feel satisfied with the film and, even more important, with themselves as moral beings.

40 In devising their own conclusions, the biracial escape films confront some of the same problems and adopt some of the same solutions as the film and TV adaptations of Twain's novel. In *The Defiant Ones*, the romantic gesture of lighting out for the territory is sacrificed to allow for a resolution in which Cullen and Joker can presumably live out their new friendship absent their old prejudices. Like Huck, Joker refuses a woman's efforts to tie him down, but this time it is to rejoin his black companion, Cullen, in what still seems a doubtful bid for freedom together. In the end, it is Cullen who gives up on a genuine chance for freedom when the wounded Joker is unable to leap with him onto a northbound freight train. In a gesture ridiculed by black audiences, Cullen jumps off the

train, choosing prison with his white friend over freedom on his own. In at least one film version, Huck gives his money to Jim, but there is never any suggestion of him sacrificing his freedom. Perhaps *The Defiant Ones* director, Stanley Kramer, understood as well as Twain that in the real world outside of the charmed circle of the raft, such a biracial “marriage” would still be unimaginable or, at the very least, unrepresentable in any acceptable or convincing way.

- 41 Darabont follows King in allowing Andy (like Huck) to light out “ahead of the rest” for his own promised land, Zihuatanejo, Mexico, “a warm place that has no memory” (King 75, Darabont 88). However, while King leaves Red, Jim-like, to make his way in the world, Darabont resolves what for modern readers has always been a troubling conclusion to *Huckleberry Finn*. As welcome as Jim’s freedom may be, no compassionate reader can overlook the fact that, while Huck enjoys complete freedom, Jim has years ahead of him working for a black man’s wages to pay a white man’s price for the freedom of his own wife and children. In Darabont’s version of the story, no such obstacle prevents Jim from joining Huck in that territory.
- 42 Leo Marx argues that a less certain ending in which Jim’s quest for freedom was “unsuccessful but not abandoned ... would have been [more] consonant with the symbols, the characters, and the theme as Clemens had created them--and with history” (127). Yet there are historical reasons for such an ahistorical conclusion. A mere decade after the North’s victory over slavery and the South, Jim’s emancipation offered a correlative victory and thus a reaffirmation to Twain’s northern readers of their own moral and military superiority. To have left Jim enslaved would have meant questioning the grounds on which the North at least believed it had fought the Civil War. As we have seen, Guy Gallo’s original screenplay (before the ending was altered by PBS) attempted to provide the sort of ending Marx wished for, with Jim still on the way to freedom through the plausible mechanism of New Orleans’ free black community. In his novella, King also leaves us with hope, tempered by our recognition of the psychological and physical obstacles still facing Red.
- 43 Whereas King’s novella is primarily about hope, “the theme of the screenplay really seems to be about the triumph of good over evil” (Hampe 19). The novella ends with Red’s hopes for a reunion with Andy, but he is still sitting in his room at the Brewster hotel. “For Darabont, hope is not enough for closure. We need triumph. Which is why he adds one more scene, in Mexico, where the good guys reunite in the promised land outside Shawshank” (Hampe 25). In fact, Darabont’s first screenplay concludes more like the novella, with Red on the bus headed uncertainly toward Mexico. It was only at the suggestion of Liz Glotzer from Castle Rock and after the rest of the film had been shot that he wrote in the unification of Red and Andy on the beach. Even then, it was only after an enthusiastic audience response at a test screening that he was convinced of its value in “providing emotional catharsis” and “even more than that, ... a tremendous sense of closure” (Darabont 158).
- 44 In a film characterized, like most prison films, by close shots in confined quarters, the final shot of the two men on the beach must echo the earlier shot in which we are first introduced to Shawshank Prison (see figs. 4 and 5). This is no return to romance, like *Huckleberry Finn*, but a stark contrast between the cold, gray confinement of the prison and a perfect freedom. “By ending with that final image,” Darabont explains, “we’ve brought the viewer on a full journey that begins in tight claustrophobia defined by walls and concludes where the *horizon is limitless*; the movie has traveled fully from darkness to

light, from coldness to warmth, from colorlessness to a place where only color exists, from physical and spiritual imprisonment to *total freedom*" (158; emphasis added). To work, such a scene has to be very brief, because such illusions are terribly difficult to sustain, and the fragility of that illusion haunts the film's final moments. Ironically, the old boat that Andy is working on is beached at mid-tide, suggesting (though surely Darabont did not intend this suggestion) that in only a few hours the beginnings of their new freedom will be undone by powerful forces still operating beyond their control.



Figure 4 Shawshank Beach (*The Shawshank Redemption* [Frank Darabont, Castle Rock Productions, 1994])



Figure 5 Shawshank Prison (*The Shawshank Redemption* [Frank Darabont, Castle Rock Productions, 1994])

- 45 The conclusion to the published screenplay (as rewritten in response to Castle Rock's request) includes two significant lines of dialogue cut in the editing room. As Red approaches him on the beach, Andy looks up from his work and comments, "You look like a man who knows how to get things," to which Red replies, "I'm known to locate certain

things from time to time” (Darabont 116). Instead of providing the ironic juxtaposition between the limitations of prison life and the “total freedom” of their new one, where things could be gotten with relatively little difficulty, Darabont felt that these lines “trampled the clarity and emotion of the moment” and “had a cloying ‘golly-gee-ain’t-we-cute’ quality” (157). I would suggest, however, that the greater problem with these lines is the extent to which they would have established the subordination of Red as Andy’s hired handyman, reminding viewers of the subordination to which black people and black characters have historically been subjected. Earlier in the film, in the prison yard, the same lines establish Red as a man of some authority within the limited scope of prison life. In the precariously idyllic scene at the end, they would have threatened the illusion of limitless horizons by reaffirming the class and racial differences we would like to imagine were left behind in the narrative of the film and of our nation’s history.

46 **Shawshank and the Erasure of History**

47 As we have seen, cinematic representations of biracial relationships respond in precise ways to the specific concerns of their own historical moments. Yet what may have made *The Shawshank Redemption* so satisfying to mass audiences is its ahistorical quality. “One of the cool things about life—or drama, if not life,” said Darabont in a discussion of this film, “is that a forceful and righteous individual can really effect a lot of change” (Bauer 6). It might seem curious, then, that this film, whose action from 1947 to 1967 encompasses most of the civil rights era, could so scrupulously avoid any reference to the dramatic changes that really were being effected then by righteous individuals on the outside. In King’s text, the passage of history on the outside is marked by frequent reference to historical events, including the sequence of presidents, World War II, and even the civil rights movement. Although every scene in the screenplay is identified with a date, the only diegetic reference to a world outside the prison comes in the form of two references to 1966 (the year Andy hangs up the Racquel Welch poster and then escapes) and one to “the year Kennedy was shot” (the year Andy starts the library and the warden initiates his “Inside-Out” program). A few other references in the screenplay never made it into the film, such as Red’s frightened complaint after his release about “young punks protesting the war” and a scene of hippies and Beatles music during the “summer of love” (Darabont 111-2).

48 Time, as it is most often understood, typically serves to unite disparate elements of a large modern society, creating the dual experiences of simultaneity and continuity. Time zones, television and public transportation schedules, and even public clocks all reassure us that we do indeed share the same world. However, in Darabont’s film, even more so than in the screenplay and much more so than in King’s novella, time as an element of incarceration becomes another form of isolation from the world. “Prison time is slow time,” on a geological scale (King 54, Darabont 78). Darabont develops this sense of geological time, not only visually with an emphasis on the stone walls of the prison, but in Red’s narration: “When they put you in that cell, ... [your] old life [is] blown away in the blink of an eye ...nothing left but all the time in the world to think about it” (13). As Magistrale points out, it is “a kind of symbolic burial in stone,” while it is Andy’s understanding of and appreciation for geology that gives him the psychological stamina to keep living and ultimately even to escape (127). For the film’s unincarcerated audience, the inmates’ isolation from the active outside world allows the Red-Andy relationship to be idealized and dehistoricized, like Jim and Huck safely on the raft in the middle of the river.

- 49 *The Shawshank Redemption* urges us to let go not only of time, but of memory. Andy and Red are both haunted by the treachery of memory: not only by its weight on their consciences (“not a day goes by I don’t feel regret”), but by the power of institutional memory to deny them any authentic being or hope of freedom. Andy’s false conviction in the first place is due in part to the faulty memory of a convenience-store clerk, who Andy supposes has been coerced into providing whatever testimony was required for a conviction: “Memory can be a pretty subjective thing, ... such a goddam subjective thing” (King 22-3). When memory seems to offer some hope of redemption, as in Tommy’s memory of the man who committed the crime for which Andy is incarcerated, that hope is crushed as Warden Norton demonstrates the institution’s Orwellian power to erase the past (by sending Andy to solitary and, in the novella, transferring Tommy to a new institution, or, in the film, having him killed in a staged escape).
- 50 Although the film omits Andy’s reflections on the subjectivity of memory, its erasure of history is more complete than that of the novel, an erasure that critics have identified as central to the film’s structure. Noting Andy’s acknowledgement of his own inability to remember certain details about the night his wife was killed, Frank Kermode interprets the “transcience of memory as an allegory of forgiveness” (14). Magistrale makes a similar point, arguing that “Dufresne realistically comprehends the need to move on beyond his wife’s memory and loss, and especially his own culpability. This is ultimately why his escape takes him to ... a place where there is ‘no memory’” (134).
- 51 Ultimately, the only solution offered in *The Shawshank Redemption* is escape — not an escape from the stop-time of the prison back into the time-flow of the real world, but out of time, memory, and ultimately history altogether. Indeed the history of biracial escape narratives beginning with *Huckleberry Finn* has been a history of attempted escapes from history itself — paradoxically so, insofar as each reflects the psychosocial needs of audiences at its own moment in time. It is indeed interesting that *The Shawshank Redemption*, arguably the most successful film of this genre, was not written as a biracial escape narrative at all, but became one only through the fortuitous casting of one of the principals. Some might view its success in spite of this deviation from the script as evidence for the irrelevance of race in casting or in contemporary American society; I would argue that this seemingly small deviation made the film successful in part by offering its white viewers evidence of racial harmony not readily found on the streets or in the headlines. Paradoxically, then, in this age of denial, it is the film’s de facto refusal to acknowledge itself as being “a parable about races getting along” that has made it so successful as an account of the way white Americans like to *believe* that races get along in their presumably color-blind world.
- 52 1. Mark Browning notes that the guards feature “less heavily on-screen” than they do in the novella (155).

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