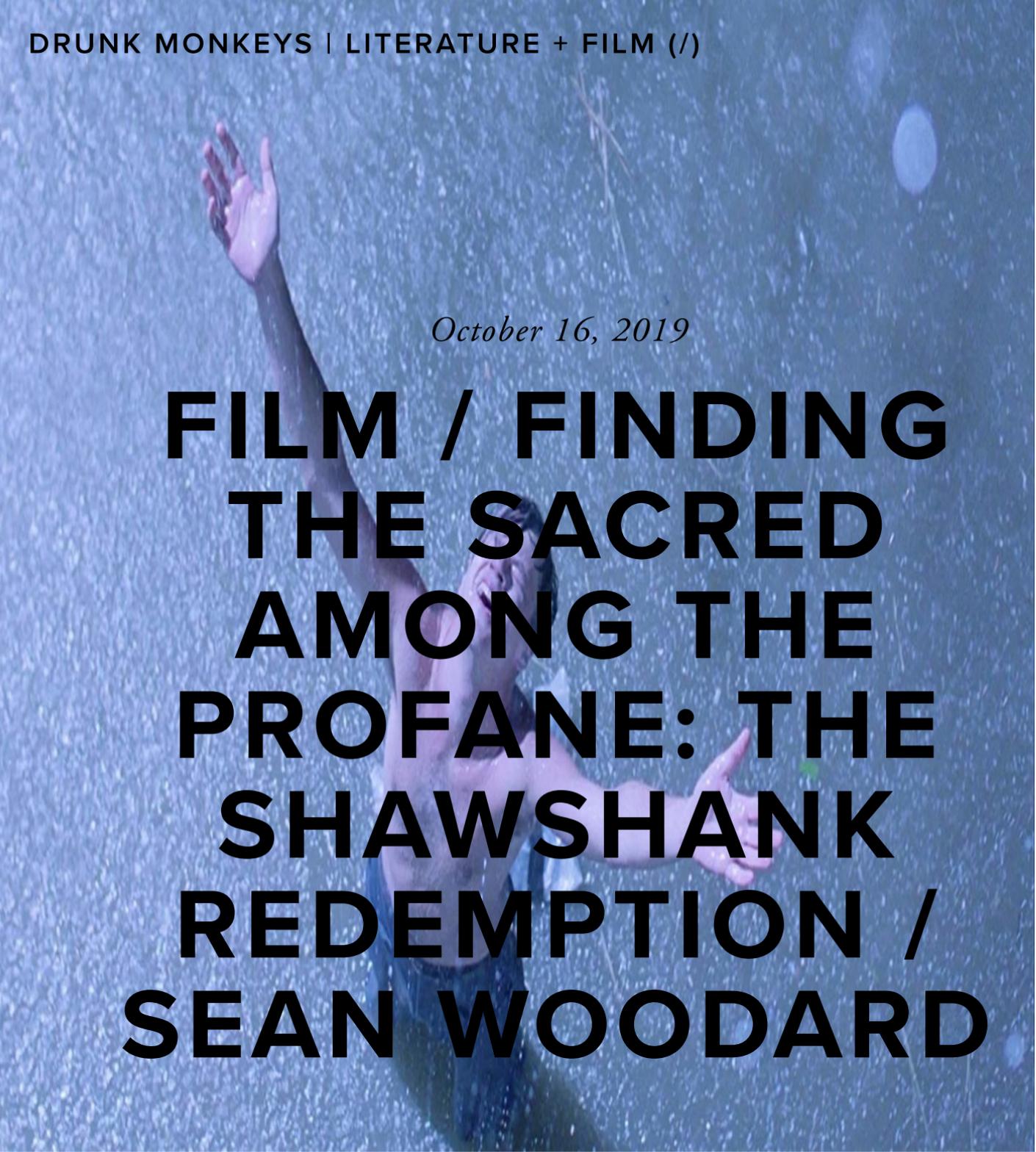


DRUNK MONKEYS | LITERATURE + FILM (/)

*October 16, 2019*



**FILM / FINDING  
THE SACRED  
AMONG THE  
PROFANE: THE  
SHAWSHANK  
REDEMPTION /  
SEAN WOODARD**



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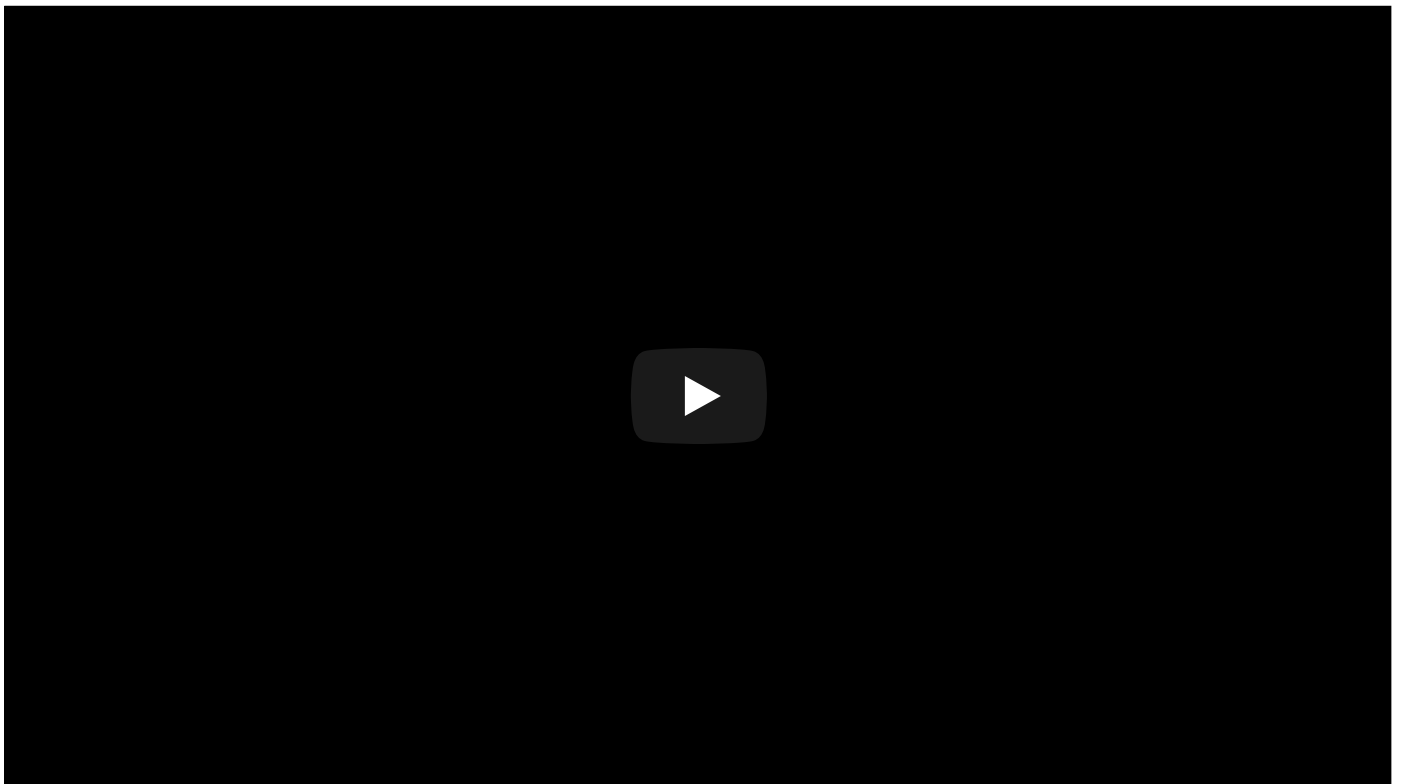
Last month, I had the opportunity to attend a Fathom Events screening of Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption* in celebration of its 25th anniversary. I hadn't seen the film in years, despite first buying it on DVD and then upgrading to a Blu-Ray edition with a beautiful steelbook case I found at an FYE store. Although *Shawshank* appears on numerous "Best of" lists—including coming in at #1 on IMDB's Top 250—I was curious to see how the film held up. For the record, its story still manages to be poignant. Sure, there were sections that could have used tighter editing or been occasionally melodramatic; but, overall, the superb cast of actors carried the weight of the narrative to its conclusion, while reminding me the universality of its core themes.

If you're wondering why I'm writing about a prison drama for my column usually focused on representations of spirituality and faith in the horror genre, bear with me. Not only have I written on *The Passion of the Christ* this past Easter season—a religious drama whose presentation of violent material I equated on par with the torture porn subgenre—but if you examine *Shawshank*, you'll find it contains many horrific and spiritual elements under its surface. While it does not belong to Stephen King's horror output, *Shawshank* arguably delves deeper into the horror present in every person's heart, how that horror is abated by hope, and how someone's will may be broken and their soul shattered after repeated duress.

For those unfamiliar with the story, *The Shawshank Redemption* details the friendship between inmates Ellis "Red" Redding (Morgan Freeman) and Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), who has been newly been incarcerated at Shawshank prison for being wrongly accused in murdering his wife and

her lover. Over the course of the film, Andy faces a series of trials that work to break down his will; despite this, he tries to improve conditions for his fellow inmates while also planning his escape.

Upon arrival, Andy deals with a group of men who sexually assault and beat him, guards who patronize him, and others who give him the cold shoulder. This begins to change when, during an afternoon of tarring one of the prison's roofs, he successfully negotiates for his co-workers to be awarded beer for their hard work, in exchange for assisting Captain Hadley with financial documents. The move raises the morale of his companions and he gains their trust. In addition, Andy secures funding to expand the prison's library after writing endless letters to government officials, assists the guards with their tax forms, and helps inmate study to pass their high school equivalency exams.



But the prison is run with an iron fist by Warden Samuel Norton, a self-righteous man with his own definition of justice. Upon greeting new arrivals to Shawshank, Warden Norton says, "I believe in two things: discipline and the Bible. Here you'll receive both. Put your trust in the Lord; your ass belongs to me. Welcome to Shawshank."

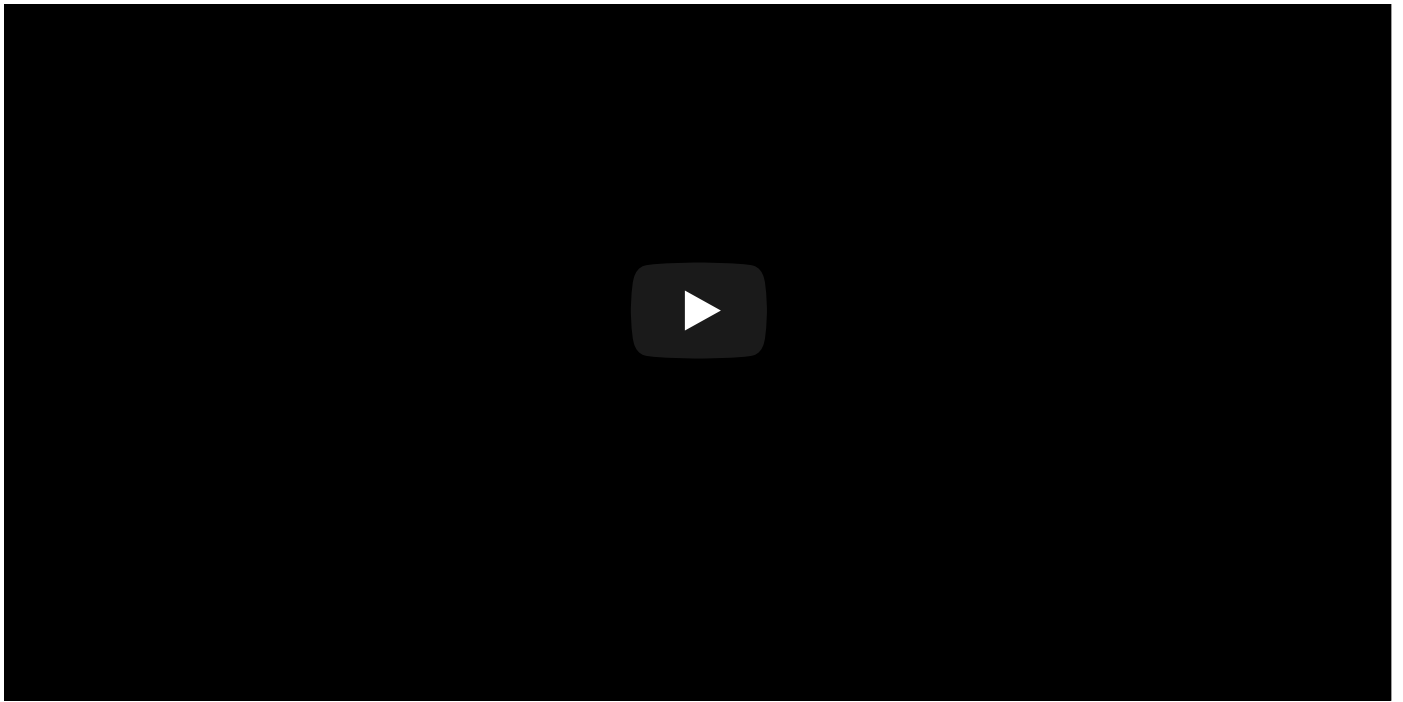
During an inspection of Andy's cell, the warden notices that Andy is reading the Bible. They spar with their favorite Bible verses. Andy quotes Mark 13:15 ("Watch, therefore, for ye know now when the master of the house cometh.") and the Warden counters with John 18:12 ("I am the light of the world. He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life."). Handing the Bible back, the warden concludes with "Salvation lies within." Here, Stephen King inserts a subtle hint at foreshadowing. Not only does Andy's verse wittily address the warden's unexpected turning over of his cell, but also alludes to the conclusion where Norton, the master of

Shawshank, receives his comeuppance from Andy (and arguably God, the true master of the house). Norton's verse of choice also reveals his hypocritical nature; he openly preaches salvation in the Gospel, but commits atrocious acts, either on his own or by proxy through his guards. The list of his sins includes tax evasion, murder of a young man whose testimony can acquit Andy of his criminal sentence, extortion, and torture (placing Andy in solitary confinement for the longest period any inmate has experienced at Shawshank).



In addition to the treatment Andy receives from the warden, he also deals with his own demons. Red notices how the warden has broken the wills of many people. Some, like the former prison librarian Brooks, take their own lives from the abuse and the inability to conform to society again after being paroled. Red notices how Andy is abused by the warden but also worries also how his mind will hold up in solitary confinement. But somehow Andy manages to retain hope, despite the circumstances.

On the night of his escape, Andy travels through three football field lengths of sewage pipes to emerge into a stream. In the film's most iconic scene, Andy stands in the rain shower that drenches him. The rain washes his body clean of the human refuse he crawled through, but also represents a lifting of burdens from his shoulders. This baptism by water also appears to thematically cleanse Andy not only of his past existence at Shawshank, but every personal demon that had been trying to gnaw away at his audacity to hope. While I won't go as far to say that Andy perhaps represents a suffering Christ-like figure in the film, I'm sure another person can make an argument for that case.



In the morning, the warden discovers that Andy has framed him, exposing his wrongdoings to the IRS and the federal government. Andy has written a note, repeating the Norton’s phrase, “Salvation lies within.” A great irony appears when the Warden and Captain Hadley search Andy’s cell for any clues pertaining to his escape: they find the Bible where Andy hid the rock hammer he used to chip away at his cell wall, the page appropriately turned to the Book of Exodus.

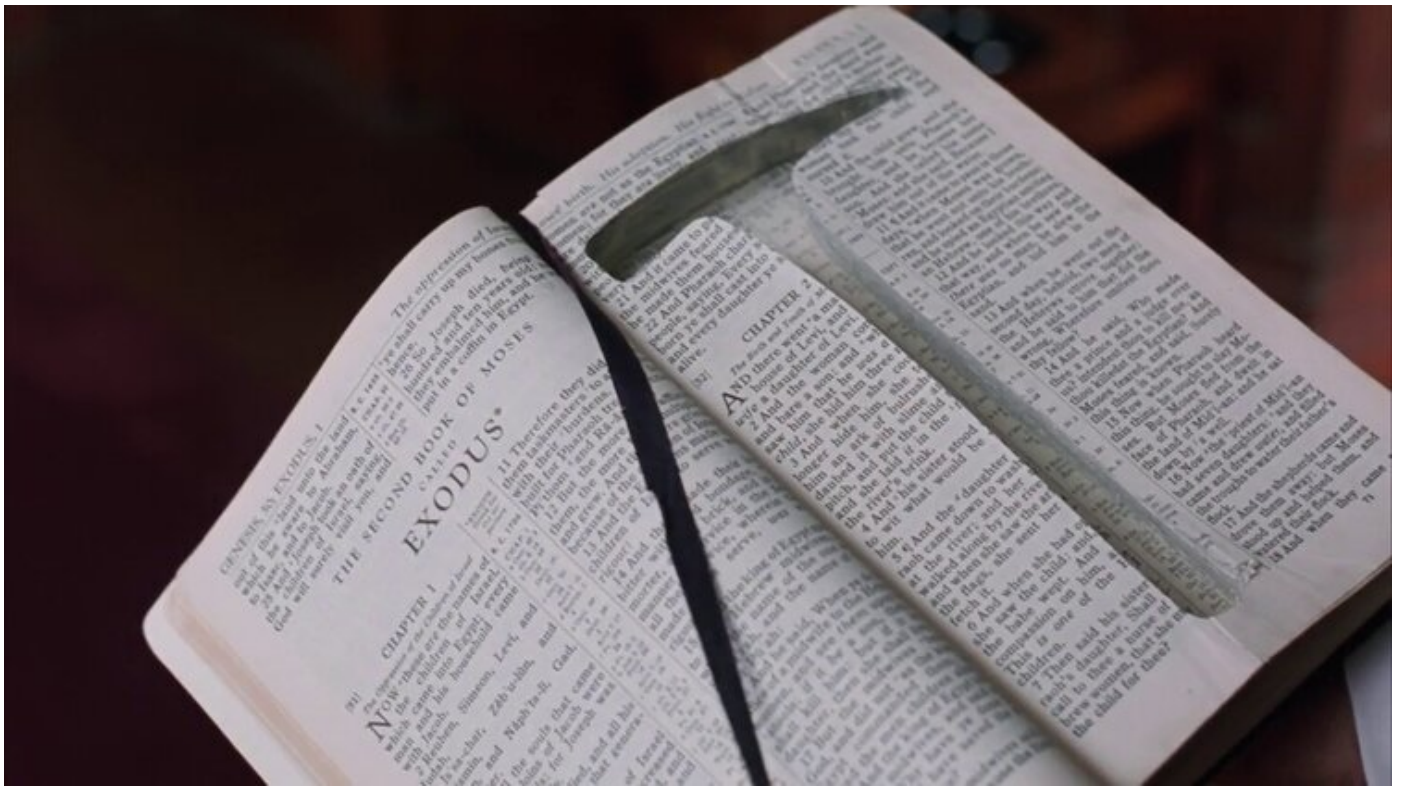


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Shortly after, the police arrive. In an act of cowardice, the warden takes his own life before he is apprehended by the authorities. This signifies not only his guilt, but the hypocrisy of his faith—he'd much rather avoid the earthly judgement awaiting him than God's judgement; thus, he condemns his soul to Hell without chance for repentance by committing suicide. We can only speculate as to why the Warden may not believe he can be forgiven by God for his earthly crimes. Perhaps he considered himself unworthy of God's grace? Or maybe his outward display of Christian belief was a ruse, a scapegoat for a soul who never believed in Gospel he professed, only to wield it to increase his power over Shawshank's population. Warden Norton's death is left to the interpretation of the film's viewers.

Perhaps the theme that Stephen King expresses best in *Shawshank*—both the original novella and expertly captured in the film by Frank Darabont—is that of hope. In a letter to Red, Andy writes, “Remember Red, hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good things ever dies.” Whether it is hope in God or a hope born of a person's spirit that carries them through all trials in life, for Andy, hope is everything that keeps him going. Through Andy's example, the other inmates soon come to believe in hope again, too. Red particularly anticipates for a life beyond the walls of Shawshank and to be reunited with his friend—a hope that will not wither or die, but rather radiate outward from within. King appears to argue that despite the horror that can dwell in a human heart there is goodness to counter it, but it is each person's choice to either accept or deny this gift. This may be the film's greatest virtue and the reason it has endured for 25 years as classic of contemporary cinema.



**Sean Woodard** is a graduate of Point Loma Nazarene University and Chapman University. Focusing on a wide variety of interests, Sean's fiction, film criticism, and other writings have been featured in *NonBinary Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Horrorbuzz*, *Cultured Vultures*, *The Cost of Paper*, and *Los Angeles Magazine*, among other publications. He serves as the Film Editor for *Drunk Monkeys* and as a co-producer of the faith and spirituality podcast, *Ordinary Grace* (<http://ordinarygrace.org/>). A native of Visalia, CA, he now resides and teaches in Orange County.

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