

ENGLISH

Authority – Does it Matter Any More?

AUTHORITY, BOTH JUST AND CORRUPT, IS ENFORCED UPON SOCIETY CONSTANTLY, Pervasively, AND IN A VARIETY OF CONTEXTS AND MEANS. HOWEVER, WITHOUT AUTHORITY, HOW WOULD SOCIETY ENSURE THAT THE POSITIVE KIND PREVAILED; THAT PEOPLE WERE PROTECTED? *[student name withheld]* EXPLORES THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHORITY.

Ponder the authority that exists in your own life, your society, your world. Now, remove it and imagine that same life, that same society, and that same world without it. What have you already discovered?

It's true, so distressingly true, that a formidable amount of the authority that exists in the world is evidently corrupt... Or maybe not. Perhaps it's just the corrupt authority that is acknowledged, while the positive authority, the authority that is exercised selflessly to serve the people, is simply unnoticed. Isn't it expected to be treated with respect and dignity; for people in positions of authority to conduct themselves in such a manner? Therefore only the extremely dramatic of authoritative situations are particularly attended to, and more often than not, these situations are ones of negativity.

To investigate the importance of authority further, I have explored the portrayal of the concept in three digital mediums: *Shawshank Redemption* (directed by Frank Darabont), *Den of Geek* (an episode of *Ashes to Ashes*, directed by Jamie Payne), and *Stop and Search* (the above image by graffiti artist Banksy).

This movie, this television show, and this artwork all depict a facet of negative authority; however they also demonstrate the adverse consequences that can arise from this type of conduct. Thus all three suggest the definite importance of authority in preventing these antagonists from continuing their corruption and to ensure the defenceless are protected.

Opposing the Antagonists

Even when faced with the corrupt and abusive form of authority, which is ever present in this society of ours, so abundant in greed, the protagonists – or “good guys” – often prevail in the end, reinstating the importance of authority in ensuring a society functions with justice and ethics.

Den of Geek explores the authority that is derivative when a section of society unites with a common goal; the concept that a majority, angered with a similar purpose, develop a level of power and control simply because, like safety, there is support in numbers. In this case, their goal is to escape from prison. There is no reason to believe that the inmates have been mistreated; instead, through their depiction as vulgar, malicious men, it is better to assume that their want to escape is purely for ill-intended purposes. Thus, they are considered to be the antagonists.

During the first of the police's attempted intervention, as they falter towards the prison in their riot gear, a low (and also long) shot encapsulates the vast number of prisoners as they stand on the gaol roof and forcibly throw fiery debris in the direction of the police force. A shot-reverse-shot then depicts those same police in a high shot, juxtaposing the authority, dominance and strength of the prisoners to the inferiority and powerlessness of the police.

However, as the television show continues, it begins to also examine the efficacy that ensues when authority is correctly implemented and exercised. Confronted with a number of impediments during the course of the plot, the penal system is effectively enforced in the final scene, removing the prisoners from their temporary nefarious control.

When two policemen, Carling and Skelton, are taken hostage and intrinsically attached to an electric fence, the subsequent montage illustrates the race between Keats and his riot police, intent on defeating the prisoners, and Hunt and Drake, intent on rescuing their friends.

The increasingly rapid paced music emphasises the suspense and action of the scene, and as a close-up frames the riot squad's leader counting down from three, the jeering and excited voices of the prisoners echo almost eerily, the violins begin to screech in panic and the drums beat hastily.

The music crescendos just as Hunt throws a large rock at the control panel, the sparks that fly from it emphasised in a close-up. The scene cuts to black, symbolising the success of Hunt's plan and the survival of Carling and Skelton.

Both the rescue of Carling and Skelton, and conquer of the prisoners contribute in demonstrating the pivotal role that authority has in the maintenance of the law; without it, two men desperately trying to uphold the law would now be deceased, and the rioting criminals would have escaped the gaol, inflicting pain onto innocent members of society.

Den of Geek reflects the significance in ensuring that certain types of authority do not continue in their damaging and violent ways, proving that positive authority should be enforced to guarantee that behaviour complies with the law.

Where the penal system of Den of Geek is just, and conducts itself in a fair and honest manner, Shawshank Redemption contrasts in that its penal system, a system whose aim is meant to be the rehabilitation of its prisoners, is formidably more interested in the violation of these men for their own profit.

The antagonists of the film are Warden Norton and Captain Hadley, both of whom rule the prison corruptly, selfishly and lazily. They exploit their authority, obtained through the hierarchy of the penal system, in an array of different means. Not only evident is Norton's use of Andy's financial expertise for his personal gain, but the guards also subject the prisoners to physical cruelty (obviously under the firm instruction of the two men) and ostensible pleasure they experience when violence is inflicted between the prisoners, themselves.

On his first night at the prison, one man deteriorates into panicked shrieks, the noise alerting the guards. This outburst results in his violent beating in the dark, sinister lighting that constantly engulfs the prison. His shrieks turn into desperate sobs as the viewer watches the brutality, feeling sympathetic towards the man, while also beginning to understand the true nature of Shawshank State Prison.

It is Dufresne who recognises the unethical nature of Shawshank Prison; but, even more than that, he silently vows to abolish the corrupt authority that controls the system. Throughout the film, in his own calm and persistently patient way, Dufresne uses his individual authority over the authorities to introduce seemingly trivial methods in which the prison experience can be better endured by his fellow inmates. This is all, of course, in the process towards his final overthrow of the reprobated institution.

One such event occurs when, although entirely aware of the consequences, Dufresne plays a classical song over the PA. The crescendo of the music is accompanied by a dramatic change in lighting; from the miserable, dark shadows that swallow the prison on a daily basis to a stunningly bright light, reflecting the temporary hope that is thrust into each of the prisoners – "It was like some beautiful bird had flapped its way into our cage."

It is simple acts such as this one that can make the most significant of differences in a life devoid of pleasure. Dufresne's stoic acceptance of the punishment demonstrates his defiance of the authorities – the reward outweighs the punishment.

Protecting Those Who Can't Protect Themselves

There exists, in society, many plausible reasons for why someone would not possess the capability to protect themselves – ranging from age to disability, from being uneducated to just not being in a position of authority, and so on. There also exists those types of people who would exploit that lack of empowerment for their own benefit.

However, without any form of authority it would be impossible to prevent that abuse from ever occurring. The world needs authority that is exercised in an equitable and righteous manner to repress and restrain this corruption of power.

Stop and Search visually and sardonically represents the paranoia of modern society. The viewer's own imagination and social beliefs are necessary, to some extent, to complete the suggestive and arguably disturbing scene of Stop and Search. As in, the deleterious nature of the penal system is visibly represented; the audience now has the moral responsibility to identify the necessity of authority in protecting the little girl who, obviously, cannot protect herself. Basically, the image trusts that its viewer will have a keen sense of justice.

The mise-èn-scene of the image plays a fundamental role in developing the two characters and their roles.

The man is dressed in average police uniform to ensure he can be easily identified as an authoritative figure; while props are apparent in the handcuffs and truncheon that hang from his belt, emphasising his power and potential to cause harm. In contrast, the young girl is wearing a plain dress to show her simplistic, black and white view of life, with her backpack and teddy lying sweetly next to her in a further demonstration of this innocence.

Colour is also pivotal, evident only in the pink of the girl's dress and other belongings. Used to emphasise her youth and suggest a raw sense of purity, it contrasts strongly with the bleak black and grey of the rest of the image. These two tones surround the little girl in a visual and symbolic representation of the immoral and wicked circumstance she now finds herself involved in.

Finally, Banksy has positioned the two characters in a very specific way to reflect their dramatically incommensurable situations. The girl has been pushed against the wall, her hands above her head, in a state of vulnerability and inferiority, whilst the much larger policeman bends over her with his hands somewhat suggestively on her waist to illustrate his authority. His face is obscured through the way it's angled, resulting in a faceless man; someone who is unidentifiable. This merely adds to his authority as it suggests a lack of consequences for his actions.

Stop and Search illustrates the exploitation of an authoritative figure's power and, in doing so, implies the need for the little girl to be protected. For how else can people who misuse their authority, just like the menacing policeman, be monitored if not for the virtuous and honest authority that does exist within our society?

Shawshank Redemption, on the other hand, not only demonstrates the unethical penal system that is Shawshank State Prison, but also Dufresne's overthrow of this authority, protecting the inmates who cannot protect themselves as they are at the base of the hierarchy; a position completely lacking authority.

As the film concludes, disclosing Dufresne's ingenious plan to escape and reveal the wrongs of Shawshank State Prison, Norton angrily slams a newspaper onto his desk, a close-up emphasising the headline, "Corruption, Murder at Shawshank", which is boldly sprawled across the front page. The scene then continues on to depict the arrest of Captain Hadley – "I heard Byron Hadley started sobbing like a little girl when they took him away." – and the suicide of Warden Norton who can, obviously, recognise his defeat.

Dufresne, in all his intelligence and wisdom, realises that the ultimate way he can protect his fellow inmates is to correct the penal system which has become horrendously corrupt under the influence of Warden Norton and Captain Hadley. For almost two decades, Dufresne organises and implements his elaborate escape plan, knowing that he must unveil the corrupt authoritarianism of Shawshank Prison to the indignant public. In doing so, he is protecting the prisoners by ensuring that the gaol acts as the rehabilitation institution it is designed to be, and not the violent, abusive system it once was.

Authority Matters

Without authority the antagonists would prevail – the Nortons, Hadleys, faceless men and rioting prisoners of the world; without authority, our most vulnerable would suffer – the little girls and genuinely remorseful; without authority, the world would be one corrupt, uncontrollable, and violent place.

Ponder the authority that exists in your own life, your society, your world. Now, remove it and imagine that same life, that same society, and that same world without it. Now do you realise?