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Freedom Within the Void: Confinement and Existential Resistance in *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

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Audrey is a senior at the Country Day School in King City, Ontario with a deep interest in how people confront chaos, contradiction, and change. Her writing explores themes like absurdism, identity, emotional repression, and the performance of meaning in modern life—often through the lens of comedy, cinema, and philosophical texts.

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative philosophical analysis of *The Shawshank Redemption* (dir. Frank Darabont, 1994), a prison drama based on the Stephen King novella titled *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (dir. Daniel Kwan & Daniel Scheinert, 2022), an experimental sci-fi action-comedy-drama. Though vastly different in genre and tone, both films engage a shared philosophical question: how can individuals construct meaning in a world that appears indifferent or absurd? Drawing from existentialist thinkers such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Viktor Frankl, this paper argues that both protagonists—Andy Dufresne in *The Shawshank Redemption* and Evelyn Wang in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*—encounter a form of confinement that forces them to confront meaninglessness. Andy, imprisoned in a rigid, unjust system, responds through long-term, purposeful action. Evelyn, overwhelmed by multiversal chaos, eventually turns to presence and care as her mode of resistance. Both characters ultimately demonstrate existential freedom: the capacity to respond to absurd conditions with deliberate, self-authored meaning. Rather than framing freedom as escape, the paper shows how each film presents it as the act of shaping one's life from within constraint. By situating these films within a philosophical framework, this study explores how contemporary cinema continues to wrestle with the enduring human need for meaning—even in the face of absurdity.

Keywords: *Existentialism; Absurdism; Camusian revolt; Will to meaning; Existential resistance; Meaning-making; The Shawshank Redemption; Everything Everywhere All at Once; Jean-Paul Sartre; Viktor Frankl; Freedom and confinement; Human agency*

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INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be free in a world that offers no clear meaning? Both *The Shawshank Redemption* (1994) and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022) grapple with this question, though they do so in wildly different narrative and aesthetic registers. While one tells the quiet story of a wrongfully imprisoned man in a mid-20th-century American penitentiary, the other explodes across the multiverse in a chaotic swirl of sci-fi action, family drama, and philosophical absurdism. Yet despite their tonal and formal differences, both films explore a shared existential dilemma: how to live meaningfully when one is confined—physically, psychologically, or metaphysically—within systems that deny inherent order or justice.

Frank Darabont's *The Shawshank Redemption* follows Andy Dufresne, a banker sentenced to life in prison for a murder he did not commit. Set within the brutal and surveilled world of Shawshank State Penitentiary, the film centers on Andy's quiet, persistent resistance to despair over the course of two decades. Through education, friendship, and subtle acts of defiance, he preserves his sense of self and ultimately engineers his escape—not only from prison walls, but from institutional dehumanization.

In contrast, Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's *Everything Everywhere All at Once* centers on Evelyn Wang, a weary Chinese American laundromat owner navigating a failing marriage, generational trauma, and the looming threat of an IRS audit. Her relationship with her daughter Joy is strained, her husband Waymond is preparing to serve her divorce papers, and she is drowning in paperwork while trying to please everyone—from her disapproving father to a suspicious tax auditor. Suddenly, Evelyn is pulled into a multiverse, where she must confront not only alternate versions of herself but also the overwhelming collapse of stable meaning. Each possible version of her life leads to more confusion, and her daughter, in the form of the omnipotent and nihilistic Jobu Tupaki, becomes a manifestation of total despair. Yet rather than abandon her, Evelyn slowly learns to reject the pull of nihilism and instead reclaims her life through presence, love, and intentional care.

This paper examines how *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* portray confinement not just as a narrative backdrop, but as a philosophical condition that confronts characters with the absurd—the search for meaning in a world that offers none. In both films, the protagonists are trapped in closed systems—one institutional, the other metaphysical—that strip life of inherent order and prompt existential crisis. The analysis first explores how each film uses confinement to symbolize absurd entrapment. It then examines how Andy and Evelyn resist this condition: Andy through sustained, purposeful action over time, and Evelyn through relational presence and emotional immediacy. Finally, it argues that both films reach the same philosophical insight: that freedom is not the absence of constraint, but the active creation of meaning within it.

CONFINEMENT AS SYMBOLIC ABSURDITY IN AN INDIFFERENT WORLD

Both *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* portray confinement—literal or metaphysical—as an expression of the absurd, confronting characters with a world that fails to provide

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inherent meaning. In his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus —French-Algerian philosopher, novelist, and key figure in 20th-century existentialism and absurdism —defines absurdity as the collision between “man’s appetite for the absolute” (1942, p.34) and the “unreasonable silence of the world” (p.20). This conflict leaves people stuck in a strange and painful state, where they crave meaning or justice, but the world offers none—only randomness, silence, and suffering without clear purpose.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, confinement is literal but symbolic. Andy Dufresne, wrongfully convicted and sentenced to life in prison, lives in a world stripped of rational moral order. His unjust punishment, and the brutality shown to new inmates by prison wardens (Darabont, 1994, 18:40-19:20), reflects the irrationality at the core of Camusian absurdity. The warden quotes Scripture while acting tyrannically, declaring, “Your ass belongs to me” (14:08-14:21)—a hypocritical assertion of authority in a universe devoid of divine justice. In addition, as Story argues, “full, concrete personhood is structurally undermined in prolonged solitary confinement” (2014, p.359). The isolating architecture of Shawshank, especially in scenes of solitary confinement like Andy’s time in “the hole” (1:38:47-1:38:59), enacts more than punishment—it performs a kind of existential violence, breaking down the subject in a system where meaning, justice, and selfhood are all rendered unstable. The prison itself becomes a manifestation of Camus’s image of the rock and the hill (Camus, 1942, p.75–77)—a closed system of repetition and despair.

In contrast, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* represents confinement through the chaos of infinite choice. Evelyn Wang’s life is fractured across endless realities, each absurdly disconnected from meaning. Her daughter Joy—transformed into Jobu Tupaki—summarizes the collapse of all meaning in the “everything bagel”: “When you really put everything on a bagel, it becomes this... the truth” (Scheinert & Kwan, 2022, 1:00:46-1:01:07). That “truth” is annihilation. Johnston writes that the film uses the multiverse as “a symbol of life’s vanity, its absurdity” (2025, p.129) and that “the multiverse calls everything into question” (p.138). Circular motifs—washing machine drums, rotating universes—mirror Sisyphus’s unending cycle. Evelyn’s shifting forms (piñata, rock, chef) illustrate a loss of stable identity in an absurd multiverse.

Thus, confinement in both films enacts the absurd: an ontological deadlock where meaning is sought but denied. Whether within prison walls or an infinite void, the characters confront a universe that offers no answers—only the silence Camus warns of, and the human yearning that never ceases.

EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM: CREATING PURPOSE THROUGH TIME, PRESENCE, AND CARE

Building on the previous analysis of confinement as a manifestation of absurd entrapment, this section turns to the question of how individuals respond to such absurdity. Faced with conditions that strip life of inherent meaning, both Andy Dufresne and Evelyn Wang exemplify what existentialist thinkers describe as a form of resistance: the active and self-conscious construction of meaning in a meaningless world.

In existentialist philosophy, this mode of resistance is often referred to as “revolt.” Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, defines the absurd as the confrontation between the human desire for meaning and the

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universe's silence. Once one fully acknowledges this lack of meaning, Camus argues, suicide becomes a tempting—but incorrect—response. Instead, one must choose revolt: a defiant affirmation of life *despite* its meaninglessness. In his essay *The Rebel*, Camus writes, "I rebel—therefore we exist" (1951, p. 28), implying that the act of rebellion against absurdity generates shared human dignity. Similarly, Viktor Frankl—a Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist, and founder of logotherapy (a form of existential therapy focused on finding meaning in life)—drawing from his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, coined the concept of the "will to meaning" in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946, p. 45). Unlike Freud or Nietzsche, Frankl argued that the primary human motivation is not pleasure or power, but purpose. Even in suffering, one can find meaning through love, moral action, or creative work. Both Camus and Frankl suggest that freedom lies not in escaping suffering but in choosing one's stance toward it.

Andy Dufresne embodies this principle through a long, steady resistance to despair. His response to the injustice of his imprisonment is neither violent nor passive. Instead, Andy channels his energy into purposeful acts that reaffirm his humanity. One of his earliest symbolic gestures is arranging beers for his fellow inmates during a roofing job. He risks punishment not for personal gain but to restore a fleeting sense of dignity to others (Darabont, 1994, 36:56-37:55). This is followed by larger commitments: he builds a library, tutors inmates, and expands educational programs. Perhaps most powerfully, Andy plays a Mozart aria over the prison loudspeakers, earning two weeks in solitary confinement. Yet he emerges from "the hole" unbroken, saying he "had Mr. Mozart to keep me company" while he was there—a metaphor for internal freedom (1:08:27-1:11:37). As Camus might argue, Andy does not deny absurdity; he affirms life in spite of it, creating value where there is none imposed.

Evelyn Wang's journey is more chaotic but equally grounded in existential transformation. Initially overwhelmed by the absurdity of infinite versions of herself, Evelyn approaches nihilism: if all choices exist, none matter. Jobu Tupaki articulates this despair explicitly. Yet Evelyn's turning point comes through Waymond, her husband, whose ethic of radical kindness reframes the problem. In one universe, he pleads, "Be kind, especially when we don't know what's going on" (Scheinert & Kwan, 2022, 1:46:01-1:54:56). Evelyn internalizes this, deciding to "fight like [Waymond]"—not with violence but with care. Her multiversal battles become acts of healing, not harm. In the climactic scene, she saves Joy not by denying absurdity but by embracing the absurd and choosing love anyway. She says, "Maybe there is something out there, some new discovery that...explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what, I still want to be here with you" (2:06:13-2:06:40). This moment echoes Camus' demand to affirm life even in its senselessness, and Frankl's insistence that meaning can be forged even in chaos.

Thus, both characters exemplify existential resistance: Andy through disciplined purpose and Evelyn through radical presence. While Andy reflects Frankl's "will to meaning" in the form of long-term moral labor, Evelyn embodies Camusian revolt by transforming absurdity into an opportunity for relational meaning. Neither character escapes absurdity, but both reject nihilism. Their resistance is not an escape from reality but a reinvestment in it—a moral and philosophical choice to assert human agency where systems deny it. As such,

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they become what Sartre calls "authors of their own existence," affirming that while existence may lack predetermined essence, individuals can write their own meaning through action.

FREEDOM AS THE ACT OF MEANING-MAKING WITHIN CONSTRAINT

Following their existential resistance, both *The Shawshank Redemption* and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* arrive at a profound philosophical insight: freedom is not defined by the absence of constraint, but by the capacity to construct meaning and assert agency within it. This marks the culmination of Camusian revolt and Franklian will-to-meaning—where characters transcend the absurd not by escaping it, but by engaging it with deliberate, value-driven action.

This concept resonates with Jean-Paul Sartre—French philosopher, playwright, and leading figure in 20th-century existentialism—whose existentialist assertion that humans are “condemned to be free” reflects the idea that freedom implies total responsibility for one’s actions, even within restrictive circumstances (Sartre, 1943, p. 129). Sartre insisted that “existence precedes essence”, meaning there is no fixed human nature: we become who we are through our choices (p. 630). Likewise, Viktor Frankl emphasizes that in all situations, “everything can be taken from a man but one thing... to choose one’s own way” (Frankl, 1946, p. 33). Both thinkers converge on the notion that authentic freedom involves an internal commitment to meaning-making, especially under duress.

In *The Shawshank Redemption*, this freedom emerges not only at Andy’s literal escape, but much earlier. His sustained acts of purpose—helping build the prison library, tutoring inmates, and resisting institutional despair—demonstrate an inner liberation long before physical release. After twenty years of serving his sentence, Andy helps a young new inmate, Tommy, pass his GED—a selfless act that affirms the value of dignity and self-betterment (Darabont, 1994, 1:27:09-1:27:50). As Rajkhowa observes, “Andy Dufresne represents resistance and subversion within the prison system,” and “maintains a sense of dignity and autonomy by subverting the disciplinary mechanisms of Shawshank State Penitentiary” (2024, p. 30). These moments exemplify Sartre’s concept of existential agency—the idea that individuals are not defined by their circumstances but by how they choose to respond to them. Andy’s patient authorship of meaning transforms Shawshank from a place of despair into a workshop of self-creation.

Similarly, in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Evelyn’s turn to presence, love, and attentiveness amidst multiversal chaos is her liberation. Her refusal to let Joy retreat into the emptiness of the bagel and the void represented by Jobu Tupaki marks a climactic embrace of existential freedom. Evelyn no longer seeks cosmic certainty but instead chooses to affirm what matters to her. In doing so, she shifts from searching for external meaning to actively creating it. The film suggests, in Sartrean terms, that even without a divine blueprint, one can define essence through conscious choice. Evelyn’s final attitude—facing the absurd with kindness and clarity—also echoes Camus’s ideal of revolt: lucid awareness without resignation.

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Indeed, both characters create meaning within confinement. Andy turns his limitations—prison walls, strict routines, even sewage pipes—into tools for building hope and purpose. Evelyn, overwhelmed by the chaos of her life, learns to approach her constraints—family pressure, a failing business, and fractured relationships—with new intentionality. Neither character escapes absurdity, but both respond to it freely and actively, choosing to shape their lives rather than surrender to meaninglessness.

In both films, then, freedom is existential authorship. Andy and Evelyn do not escape into fantasy or delusion; they engage with life more deeply. They affirm, in their own ways, what Frankl called “the last of the human freedoms”—the power to choose meaning. In doing so, they transform confinement into liberation. As Evelyn says in a moment of clarity to her daughter after a chaotic, violent, and hurtful confrontation: “I will always, always want to be here with you” (2:06:40-2:06:50). This is freedom—not as chaos or license, but as love, as fidelity to meaning. Andy echoes the same when he writes to Red: “Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies” (2:15:48-2:15:58). Hope, in both narratives, is not a fantasy—it is the defiant human act of choosing to live meaningfully in the face of absurdity.

CONCLUSION

The Shawshank Redemption and *Everything Everywhere All at Once* arrive at a common philosophical insight through vastly different forms. Despite their differences in tone and setting, both films use confinement to dramatize the struggle to live meaningfully in the face of absurdity. Rather than depicting freedom as the removal of constraint, they frame it as the deliberate act of meaning-making within systems that seem hostile to clarity, justice, or coherence.

Andy and Evelyn respond to their conditions with different temperaments—one through quiet perseverance, the other through emotional transformation—but both resist the collapse into despair. Their choices affirm the existentialist claim that identity is authored through action. Camus called this revolt; Frankl called it the will to meaning. Whether through building a prison library or choosing kindness amid chaos, both protagonists assert value where none is given.

This insight carries real-world relevance. In a time defined by uncertainty, institutional distrust, and philosophical unease, these films encourage a deeper kind of freedom: one grounded in responsibility, presence, and care. They suggest that meaning is not a discovery waiting outside of us but a construction we must engage in—deliberately, ethically, and often in the company of others. The existential question remains unresolved, but the answer, as both films show, begins with the courage to respond.

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