

**Specimen Paper – Exemplar Answer and Notes**

**Question and diagram  
Notes for a plan for 1a)  
Exemplar of 1a)  
Exemplar of 1b)  
Exemplar of 1c)**

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**1. Media Content in Context**

**How audiences respond to media content can depend on the extent to which genre conventions have been used to construct it.**

**Analyse how this could apply to media content you have studied. In your response you must cover:**

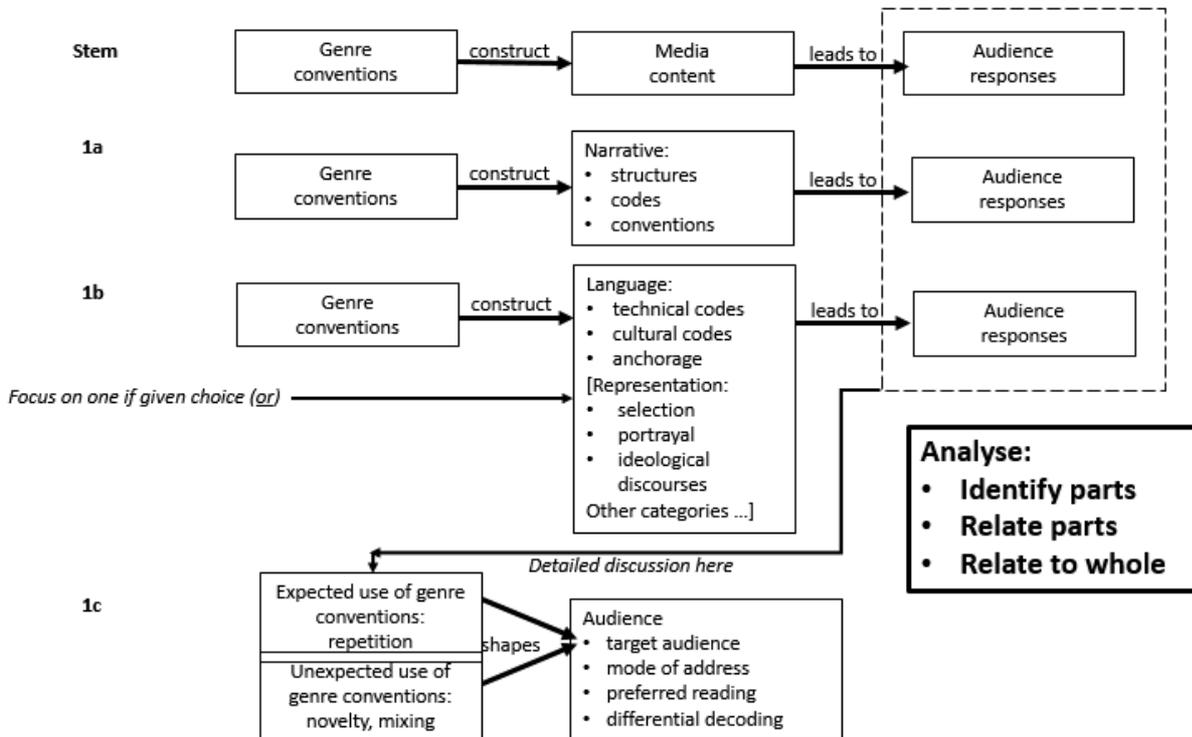
**a) the ways in which genre conventions have been used in the construction of narrative structures, codes and/or conventions. 10**

**(b) the ways in which genre conventions have been used in the construction of language and/or representation and/or other categories. 10**

**(c) the ways in which different audiences might respond to the expected and/or unexpected uses of genre conventions in the media content you have referenced. 10**

1. Make sure you understand the question.
2. Underline the key aspects that the task wants you to analyse.
3. Make some notes or a mind map or whatever you like to help you start a plan.
4. This is like writing an essay for English in that you must be familiar with this information but shape it to address the task you are given.
5. You will not be expected or able to write this much in an exam situation.

**Question analysis:**



Q1a) wants us to make it clear how the following details which define the different genres are used in TSR to make up the story and the way it is told.

**Firstly, identify the genre conventions.**

#### Prison Genre

- Location
- Characters
- Props
- The narrative will involve oppression and escape

#### Buddy Movie

- Characters (usually men) who are very unlike each other are thrown together.
- Initially there is mistrust.
- There is usually humour involved.
- The narrative is that the friendship builds and becomes stronger till it is the most important relationship for each of them.
- They may have female partners but they usually have secondary roles

#### Caper Movie

- A complicated con (confidence trick) is carried out.
- It is usually unbelievable but satisfying as the plan works out

#### Melodrama

- Good versus evil.
- Good wins.

**Secondly, remind yourself about Narrative structures.** Certainly mention Todorov

#### Todorov's Narrative structure (Classic Movie Narrative)

Equilibrium/disruption/recognition of disruption/attempt to remove it/new equilibrium.

#### Thompson's Turning Points (From her analysis of Hollywood Films)

They have a four part structure with turning points making the transition between the parts.

**Lastly, check over Barthes Codes**

Action Code The things that go on regularly are typical of prison life: routine, meal times, exercise. Work, violence, parole hearings and escape

Enigmatic Code Questions for the audience: is Andy guilty? Will he be proved innocent or get out? Will Red get parole?

Semic code (signs) consider the connotations of the prison ('one part prison, two parts castle of Frankenstein'. It also looks a bit like a gothic cathedral) Connotations of religion and horror.

Referential Code (note that these are also cultural codes) it refers to: the use of film star posters to indicate the passage of time, biblical references and music of the period.

Symbolic Code (Binary) Freedom v imprisonment, humanity v brutality, hope v despair.

**1a) How genre conventions have been used in the construction of narrative structure and codes.**

'The Shawshank Redemption' (1994), was directed by Frank Darabont. (I will shorten to the film's title to TSR.) As with most films, TSR uses the conventions of several genres to create a film that continues to appeal to a very wide audience. I will be considering the Prison Movie and the Buddy movie genres, though there are elements of the caper movie and melodrama present also.

PRISON FILM

The narrative of the prison film will always centre round ideas of the individual being oppressed and seeking to escape – either through the legal system or by running. The prison movie was at its most popular during the 1930s – 40s and this film is set in that period (starting in 1947). TSR can be analysed in terms of the Classic Movie (**Todorov's**) Narrative Structure, opening with the equilibrium of the world of the main character, Andy Dufresne, (a rich, intelligent banker with an affluent lifestyle) being disrupted when he is accused of murdering his wife and her lover. Andy battles through great adversity and finally a new equilibrium is achieved with Andy being free, rich and 'living the dream' with his friend Red.

The narrative can also be analysed in terms of **Thompson's Turning Points**. After the set up, when Andy is imprisoned, brutalised and alone, comes the first turning point: Andy cleverly gives the guards financial advice and achieves some standing and therefore protection as a result. This is shown through a scene bathed in golden light when Andy insists that the main guard, Hadley, gets beers for his friends. This leads to a complicating action as Andy becomes institutionalised, working within the prison system, setting up a library and helping the prisoners with education. The second turning point is when Andy defies the Warden and guards by locking himself in the Warden's office and playing some sublime Mozart over the loudspeaker system – he has declared his independence but is punished for it. The next development is that Tommy, a young prisoner, can prove Andy innocent. Turning point three is when the warden kills Tommy which leads to the climax of Andy escaping, the warden shooting himself and Andy and Red on a beach in Mexico.

Clearly, this story relies on stock **characters** from the prison genre, such as the hypocritical, 'Christian', murderous Warden, the brutal guards in Nazi-like uniforms, and The Sisters – a gang of rapists who target Andy. Andy is the main character, an innocent in hell, but the story is actually Red's, told in film noir style voiceovers. Red is the experienced prisoner who shows Andy 'the ropes'. These are our 'good guys' whom we follow and wish well. The expected **props** of 'shivs' (makeshift knives), guns and cigarettes-as-currency are all used. The **location**, Shawshank Penitentiary is almost a character in itself as its presence is overwhelming. This impression is emphasised by our first view of it, which is an aerial shot with the camera swooping over the huge wall with barbed wire evident and armed guards in towers. The camera then shows us the Gothic cathedral/prison exterior of the building giving the audience connotations of horror and religion – both aspects of the movie.

### **TSR and the prison genre can be looked at in terms of Barthes Codes**

**Semic Code** – notice the connotations of the prison building mentioned above.

**Action Code** – the routine life of the prison is made real: meal times, exercise, work, violence, parole hearings and escape.

**Enigmatic Code** Questions for the audience: is Andy guilty? Will he be proved innocent or get out? Will Red get parole?

**Symbolic Code** - (Binary codes) Freedom v imprisonment, humanity v brutality, hope v despair. Andy is redeemed by his struggles. He represents the positive element of each of these binary oppositions. He tells Red, "Fear can hold you prisoner, hope can set you free."

### **BUDDY MOVIE**

One of the main reasons for the appeal of TSR is the relationship that develops between Andy and Red. The typical conventions of the buddy movie are:

- Characters (usually men) who are very unlike each other are thrown together.
- Initially there is mistrust.
- There is usually humour involved.
- The narrative is that the friendship builds and becomes stronger till it is the most important relationship for each of them (though it is not sexual).
- The men may have female partners but they usually have secondary roles.

Andy is a white, educated, affluent banker whereas Red is a black convict. Darabont has not made race an issue in the film. Initially, Red refers to Andy as a 'long drink of water with a silver spoon up his ass'. However, they become friends because Andy goes to Red for an ice pick to shape stones with and it develops from there. Red unwittingly provides Andy with the tools of his escape: the icepick and the posters of glamorous actresses with which he covers his escape tunnel. On the other hand, Andy provides Red with his salvation at the end. Like the old con, Brookes, Red could

have died in despair but Andy gave him a reason to go on. The audience all but cheers when they meet again at the end.

Barthes Codes, The Buddy Movie and TSR

**Symbolic Code** - hope v despair. Andy is redeemed by his struggles.

He tells Red, "Fear can hold you prisoner, hope can set you free." Even when he is 'free' Red still behaves as if he is in prison – asking permission to go to the toilet at work, for example. It is Andy's messages and encouragement that truly free him and allow him to start afresh.

**Enigmatic Code** Questions for the audience: is Andy guilty? Will he be proved innocent or get out? Will Red get parole? Can they really find each other again and if not how will they survive?

***(b) the ways in which genre conventions have been used in the construction of language and/or representation and/or other categories. 10***

## Genre

Language (technical codes, cultural codes and anchorage)

Representation - the way in which a group or issue is presented to an audience. It is a selective version of reality and not necessarily accurate or complete.

Categories – medium, purpose, form, genre, style and tone.

- ***Notice the 'and/or'. In an exam situation this could be crucial. It means that if you know a lot about representation, for example, you could base your answer on that.***
- ***It seems to me that you would be discussing elements of categories without necessarily targeting it, these aspects would come up naturally, I think.***

Frank Darabont was keen to make this movie serve the story, not to make a movie in which the style is the memorable aspect. To this end he used a classic narrative style with unobtrusive editing - each scene is linked to the next by **dialogue or voiceover** by Morgan Freeman or by the sense of the story (causal linkage). He tends to begin scenes with establishing shot (sometimes omitted) shot/reverse shot. For example, just before we 'meet' Red there is a point of view shot as we see what Red sees as he enters the office where the Parole Board are sitting in a row behind a long table, be-suited and silhouetted bleakly against the windows. Immediately there is a reverse shot and we see what the Board sees – Red entering, cap in hand hopeful and fearful. This style works well with the prison genre, reflecting back to the heyday of the prison movie – the 1930-40s when most films were made quickly and (by today's standards) cheaply and the story and the star were all important. Darabont also sets the film in this period by establishing a

nostalgic **tone** at the start of the film with the **cultural code** of the Inkspots crooning 'If I Didn't Care' over the Art Deco font credits.

**Cultural Codes** - If the **narrative** of the prison genre is about the individual being suppressed, suffering oppression and seeking to escape then we might consider the **cultural code** of dress through which we can chart Andy's journey. At the start of the film Andy is wearing an expensive suit – dishevelled, as he is drunk, but he is clearly a wealthy man as he is also sitting in a car which would have been top of the range at the time. In the court he is shown to be impeccably dressed. However, one of the first things that happens to the prisoners in the jail is that they are stripped naked, hosed down, doused in a stinging powder and made to carry their uniforms as they walk naked through the corridors of the prison while the other prisoners jeer. There could not be a clearer symbol of loss of status. We get little idea of the social background of the men – they are simply prisoners, whether naked or dressed in ragged uniforms. Meanwhile, the guards wear black, NAZI-like uniforms, reflecting their faceless aggressive abuse of power. The Warden wears a smart suit and has Andy polish his shoes to a bright shine: showing his power over him. When Andy turns the tables on the Warden (the biter bit!) he steals his suit (one of the Warden's signs of status) wraps it in polythene, drags it through the tunnel of sewage with him to emerge and become cleansed in the 'baptismal' waters of a river. He is next seen wearing the suit and withdrawing huge amounts of money from a bank before he sets himself up by buying a hotel in Mexico. Our last view of Andy is as a sunburned man, wearing comfortable clothes, working on an old boat in the sun. He is 'living the dream' – specifically, The American Dream (see representation).

**Anchorage** – Morgan Freeman's memorable voiceover moves the story on and explains what Andy and he are feeling. He has a very rich, emotive voice and it makes this device, which can be annoying if badly handled, work seamlessly. It is another technique which was used often in Film Noir genre films. It is most memorable in the turning point scenes, for example when the men are drinking beer on the roof and the camera pans round almost like a point of view shot of what Red sees, showing each of the men's pleasure and relaxation as Red speaks of how the situation makes them feel like ordinary men who might be working on one of their own roofs. The camera settles on Andy's enigmatic smile and Red tells us what he thinks Andy is feeling.

### Representation

1) In TSR, Andy could be said to embody 'The American Dream'. That is, the ideology that anyone with talent who works hard enough can succeed. This is the preferred reading of the film - Darabond has said that he believes you make your own luck by determination and effort; you must believe in yourself no matter how bleak things seem. Andy embodies hope. He tells Red, "Fear can hold you prisoner, hope can set you free." He does not give in to the deadening routine of prison life but uses his skills as a financier to earn a place for himself and some power in the prison by doing the guards' tax returns. He spreads hope to the other prisoners by rebelling and playing Mozart over the loudspeaker. Finally, he alone escapes and is spoken of by the other men as a legend. He is an outstanding individual who succeeds through his own intelligence and effort.

2) In terms of representation, another interesting area is gender. Because most of the action takes place in the prison location, women are largely absent from TSR. Women are represented, firstly, by Andy's wife. She is adulterous: we only ever see her at the start of the movie as she and her lover are embracing passionately while Andy drunkenly sits in his car listening to the Inkspots song, watching their cabin from the road. This scene uses red/orange colours and close ups of her face and the back of the lover's head to emphasise the passionate nature of the encounter. She has been with her lover secretly for some time, as we discover from Andy's testimony, and is therefore portrayed as treacherous – her behaviour might be said to cause Andy's downfall. The only other women are the film goddesses in the posters which Andy uses to cover the tunnel he makes. They are objects of desire: Rita Hayworth (who is also in a clip of 'Gilda' which is shown to the excited prisoners), Marilyn Monroe and Raquel Welch. The posters are also a clever cultural code to show the passing of time. There is a 'feminised' man among the new intake of prisoners with Andy, who is stout and therefore has obvious breasts. He is bullied, called 'Fat Ass' and is the first prisoner to break and to be killed through the brutality of the guards. The 'sisters' are a group of rapists referred to in this way because of the homosexual nature of their attacks. The Guard calls the prisoners 'ladies' in a way that he perhaps considers affectionate. To be female is not a positive thing unless it is of the unattainable 'goddess' sort. This perhaps reflects the time in which the movie is set rather than a statement on the role of women by Darabont. Some might consider this representation to be a cliché?

In terms of binary oppositions we have: Andy versus his wife – male versus female, with 'Fat Ass' we have hard versus soft and unemotional versus emotional. We are shown that Andy has entered a world in which the ideology of 'machismo' is in control, any 'feminine' qualities are seen to be weak and will be crushed. Only the most brutal survive.

AND SO ON ... You can exemplify the rest of the representations and discourses ...

*(c) the ways in which different audiences might respond to the expected and/or unexpected uses of genre conventions in the media content you have referenced.10*

In the 1995 Academy Awards, TSR was nominated in seven different categories. It was up against 'Forrest Gump', 'Pulp Fiction' and 'Speed' and it won nothing. Hardly surprising? The target audience for this prison movie, told in an old fashioned way with voiceover and classic narrative style might have been considered to be forty-something males with an interest in old movies. Yet, despite its poor box office return, the film became a huge home-viewing success. Empire magazine voted it number four in its list of 500 Greatest Movies of All Time.

Prison Movie - Darabont used the stock characters, location, props and narrative of the prison movie. The violence would be an expected part of the main character's oppression, though the explicit reference to rape gangs and the scenes of humiliation may have surprised some viewers of this mainstream feature film. Because of the director's sensitivity to the telling of the story we become

deeply involved in the enigmatic codes: as the story becomes darker we wonder if there could possibly be a happy ending and we experience enormous relief and pleasure when it is delivered. However, viewers who prefer the more experimental 'Art Movie' might have been disappointed in the classic straight style of the telling.

Buddy Movie - Perhaps the most memorable thing about the film is the relationship between Red and Andy. We might expect a 'Lethal Weapon' sort of treatment of the male relationship in a buddy movie with adventures, risk and so on but this buddy movie is more subtle and moving. Red unwittingly provides Andy with the tools of his escape: the icepick and the posters of glamorous actresses with which he covers his escape tunnel. On the other hand, Andy provides Red with hope and salvation at the end. The mode of address, Red's voice over, makes us feel that the story is being told to us in a very personal way. In terms of Audience Differential Decoding there is a possible oppositional decoding which might come from audience members who object to the characterisation of Red – a black man - as Andy's 'sidekick', a guilty convict and culturally lower in status than Andy.

Caper Film - When looked at in the sober light of day, Andy's escape and the new identity and cash that he provides himself with are just ridiculous but in the world of the film we are simply relieved and entranced that this positive ending comes after such grim events as the murder of Tommy and Andy's punishments. It also proved the vital element for a film that celebrates the American Dream – cash.

Melodrama - Along with our celebration of Andy escaping and being rich, we cannot help but feel triumphant that 'the baddies' come to a sticky end with the arrest of Hadley and the suicide of the Warden while 'the goodies' live in prosperity.

The greatest surprise may be the huge following that TSR has garnered among the Christians of the USA. What might be considered to be a 'prison movie' has become almost a sacred text to some Christian viewers who see Andy's struggle and the triumph of good over evil as a metaphor for Christ's passion and for our own daily struggles. Interesting, given that the villain uses his 'Christian' persona to fool the world into thinking he is a good man who is hard but fair.

Others might consider the preferred reading to be the expression of a dominant American ideology – the American Dream, that any special, talented person can succeed under any circumstances through their 'grit' and determination. They might have preferred to see a film with some exploration of the society that breeds such an institution.

Genre films can be repetitious and predictable. However, Darabont has used this hybrid of genres to bring Steven King's novella to life. Perhaps it has a wide appeal because most of us feel oppressed by something in our lives: marriage, work, study, and so we share some of Andy's elation when he escapes in the outrageous way that he does and we admire his cunning. Most of us would also appreciate a soul mate/buddy like Red to share it with.