

Books

**How Not to Guide Students to
Ayn Rand's Fiction**

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CliffsNotes to Rand's Anthem, 87 pp., index
CliffsNotes to Rand's The Fountainhead, 132 pp., index
CliffsNotes to Rand's Atlas Shrugged, 133 pp., index
Andrew Bernstein
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It is with little pleasure that I review the CliffsNotes to Rand's fictional works *Anthem*, *The Fountainhead*, and *Atlas Shrugged*, all of them authored by Andrew Bernstein. Anyone thinking that the inclusion of Rand in this popular study guide series was an event to be welcomed will be disappointed. Except for some valid background information and some useful essay questions, they offer little of value to serious students of Rand's fiction.

Part of the reason for this has to do with the whole conception behind the CliffsNotes. Even though the guides are meant to aid a student reading the original work, it is a well-known fact that many students use them as substitutes for the original, bypassing the need to read the original first. Also, students are often deluded into the belief that they will find all they need to know about a given work in these notes. If this is unfortunate in regard to any literary work of some merit, it is most emphatically so in regard to Rand's works, which really require firsthand study to be properly understood and evaluated. Added to this comes the fact that, unlike most other works included in the CliffsNotes, Rand's works have not been the object of much critical analysis—qua literary works. Bernstein therefore has very little to draw on in the form of established

professional criticism. What little there is, he ignores, in addition to having very little to offer on his own.

In all fairness, it must be admitted that it is difficult to come up with anything of substance within the standard format of the CliffsNotes, which requires the inclusion of such trivial things as lengthy plot summaries and schematic lists and maps of characters. In all three cases, there is consequently an excessive focus on details of plot and character, with some commentary on themes and philosophical content but hardly anything on style or structure. The result is a rather superficial rehash of the original works, marred by a lot of unnecessary repetition.

I do believe, however, that the result is a bit worse than it need be. One problem is that Rand's highly romantic plots, when narrated in this reader's digest manner, read like a lot of trashy hack-writing, just about as bad as her detractors like to think they are. One recalls Rand's advice to Henry Blanke, producer of *The Fountainhead* movie, not to "humanize" her script on the grounds that "from the sublime to the ridiculous is but one step" (Rand 1995, 246). The appropriateness of this advice is demonstrated by Bernstein's inept rendering of the summaries, which to an embarrassing degree manages to turn the Randian sublime into the pompously naive. Sometimes, for example, he chooses to paraphrase rather than summarize, rewriting original passages in ways that give them a slant they do not have in the original. One example may be observed in his attempt to rewrite a brief paragraph in the opening pages of *The Fountainhead*. In the original, we have:

People turned to look at Howard Roark as he passed. Some remained staring after him with sudden resentment. They could give no reason for it: it was an instinct his presence awakened in most people. Howard Roark saw no one. For him, the streets were empty. He could have walked there naked without concern. (Rand 1943, 16-17)

In Bernstein's rendering, this becomes:

People notice Howard Roark when he walks on the streets; he notices no one. In fact, he often arouses resentment in strangers, who somehow cannot explain what they feel when they see Roark. But Roark could walk the streets naked without concern; he has no regard for the evaluation of others. (25)

In Rand's version, we get a description of how people respond to Roark during a particular walk, the characterization being subordinated to the narration of event. In Bernstein's version, we get a generalized description of how Roark affects people when he walks on the streets, the characterization now replacing the narration of event. The result is that Roark's indifference to people comes across in a much less appealing manner, more likely to put off the readers.

Another oddity in Bernstein's manner of summarizing Rand is that he sometimes tries to give his renderings a semblance of literary quality. In his summary of the chapter in *Atlas Shrugged* entitled "The Top and the Bottom," for example, he recounts the concluding part on Eddie Willers dining with an anonymous worker (John Galt) in the Taggart underground cafeteria in the following way: "Dagny's assistant, Eddie Willers, often eats his meal with a railroad worker in the employees' cafeteria of the Taggart Terminal. He doesn't know the worker's name or job, but because of his rough, grease-stained clothes, Eddie assumes that the job is menial. However, the worker has a deep interest in the railroad, and Eddie feels comfortable speaking to him" (38). As in the novel, Bernstein does not reveal that the worker is John Galt but hides his identity from the readers. Apparently, he wishes to preserve a little of the novel's mystery and suspense. But this seems rather pointless, since a summary like this is not supposed to serve as a substitute for the actual narrative. What is worse, it causes him to omit from his commentary the thematic point that Galt's status as a common laborer illustrates Rand's idea that in a collectivist society, those at the top of society will be the worst, while the best will be relegated to the bottom—an idea subtly indicated by the chapter title (which Bernstein ignores). This is the kind of information that would be useful for a student turning to the

notes in order to get some help in grasping the meaning of the novel, but not quite up to the task of drawing the appropriate inferences for himself. Instead, all he gets is a watered down version of the actual novel, with the story not only stripped of all literary merit but also, since deprived of Rand's many pointers to thematic significance, much of its depth and subtlety.

A major reason for lapses of this kind is that Bernstein's approach to Rand's fiction is that of a philosopher rather than that of a literary scholar. It is symptomatic that the one book by Rand he fails to mention, in what, after all, are supposed to be literary and not philosophical study guides, is the transcribed version of her taped fiction-writing course, *The Art of Fiction*, a treasure house of information for anyone interested in Rand's own thoughts about her craft. But this is only part of a more general failure to include points of special relevance to a student's literary appreciation of Rand's fiction, such as her characterization of herself as a "Romantic Realist," her opposition to Naturalism, her emphasis on the importance of plot, and her belief that characters should be stylized and not presented journalistically.

The most serious lack caused by Bernstein's failure to approach Rand's fiction in literary terms is his poor treatment of Rand's style. Here, Bernstein's work is clearly inferior to what one can find in some other CliffsNotes, where the authors pay much more attention to literary devices. What little Bernstein does have to say about artistic matters is quite shallow, even inaccurate. In a brief essay devoted to Rand's writing style in *The Fountainhead*, for example, he begins by describing, quite correctly, Rand's habit of presenting a character's emotional state by showing rather than telling, selecting details of speech and action that will enable the reader to infer for himself what the character feels instead of simply being told by the narrator. But then he starts blundering. First, he erroneously indicates that this is Rand's *only* method, as if she never chooses to tell what a character feels, which she does quite often, combining showing with explicit telling. She even does this in Bernstein's own example, a description of Roark's struggle to remain calm when he is shown the altered sketch for the Manhattan Bank Building that

begins like this: "Roark got up. He had to stand. He concentrated on the effort of standing. It made the rest easier" (Rand 1943, 196). Contrary to Bernstein's comment (117), this description does not convey "only the sensory information available to the men in the room" but gives clear indicators about what goes on in Roark's mind in his effort to control his emotion. Nor is it true, as Bernstein goes on to suggest, that Rand's style is so innovative and unique that many readers fail to detect her subtle manner of revealing a character's emotion, experiencing her writing as unemotional. As he writes: "Most novelists name the emotions their characters experience, providing the reader with the conclusion of the thought process. But Ayn Rand's method necessitates that the reader make the inference himself. A casual reader may miss the point" (119). But this is a gross exaggeration of the originality of Rand's style of showing. The truth is that the style is quite common, constituting a ruling literary doctrine in the early half of the twentieth century. It is, for example, a style that Hemingway used with even greater rigor than Rand. What one can say about Rand, however, is that she exploited this method with exceptional skill and inventiveness, refining it and giving it a flavor distinctively her own. But this does not mean that she invented it, as one might be led to think by Bernstein's inflated statement, or that she is almost alone in using it. If readers fail to detect emotion in Rand's characters, the explanation probably lies elsewhere, for example in the fact that she does sometimes exalt emotional repression, especially in her heroes.

In addition to leading to a deficient treatment of style, Bernstein's neglect of the literary aspects of Rand's fiction also leads to a deficient presentation of thematic points. All too often his discussion of theme takes the form of flat assertions, with little or only scant reference to the text. To the extent that he does base his statements on the texts, it is mostly by reference to the characters, seen as representatives of ideas rather than as complex human beings. Hardly ever does he make use of other literary clues to meaning, such as structure, point of view, symbol, flashbacks, imagery, tone of voice, etc., all elementary concepts of literary criticism that students should be expected to know and to use in their interpretations. Instead, he

offers small philosophical essays, sometimes based on little more than liberal speculation. In his commentary on the last chapter of *Anthem*, for example, he writes:

From studying his books, Prometheus has learned a great deal about the history of the Unmentionable Times. . . . Further, Prometheus now knows the history of collectivism's development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although he does not mention the specific historical details, his readings will have informed him of the work of the German philosophers G. W. F. Hegel and Karl Marx, whose writings proclaimed the superiority of the nation and/or the working class to the individual. (51–52)

This may be so, but it is an important point that this information is not included, or even hinted at, in the text. It is part of Rand's allegorical style of telling this story that she keeps everything highly abstract, leaving out historical particulars to convey the ideas on a generalized and fundamental level.

The problems caused by Bernstein's philosophical approach to Rand's fiction are aggravated by his rigid adherence to the doctrines of Objectivism. It is conspicuous that in a list of critical works about Rand, Bernstein mentions only works sanctioned by the Ayn Rand Institute, including Leonard Peikoff's *The Ominous Parallels*, a book that, except for a few pages, is not about Rand at all. Omitted are works that would be of obvious value to young students of Rand's fiction, such as Ronald Merrill's *The Ideas of Ayn Rand*, Douglas Den Uyl's monograph on *The Fountainhead* in the Twayne Masterwork Studies series, and Mimi Reisel Gladstein's *The Ayn Rand Companion*.

The most disturbing manifestation of Bernstein's doctrinal Objectivism, however, is his tendency to treat Rand's fictional works more as forceful propaganda than as imaginative works of art. The Introduction to the *Anthem* Cliffsnotes opens with the claim that "*Anthem* is an outstanding introduction to Ayn Rand's philosophy of human nature" (6). This claim is repeated in a slightly elaborated form in the Introduction to *The Fountainhead* Cliffsnotes, which

begins: "*The Fountainhead* serves as an excellent introduction to both Ayn Rand's writing and her philosophy of Objectivism. All of the major intellectual themes that inform Rand's fiction and her subsequent philosophy are presented clearly in this novel" (6). In the same vein, only taking the point even further, the Introduction to the *Atlas* Cliffsnotes declares: "In *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand presents for the first time and in dramatized form, her original philosophy of Objectivism. She exemplifies this philosophy in the lives of the heroes and in the action of the story" (11). Inevitably, statements like these give students an inaccurate impression that Rand was a didactic writer who wrote fiction to communicate her ideas, and that the main value of her works lies in the philosophical enlightenment that readers may gain from them. But as Rand herself strongly insisted, the primary value of an artwork springs from the specific experience it offers, not from the ideas one can learn from it, which are "merely fringe benefits" (Rand 1975; 169). Neglectful of this point, Bernstein presents Rand's works almost exclusively as vehicles for the study of Objectivism, paying little attention to the nature of the imaginative experience they provide. He does little to indicate, for example, that Rand's characters are not just illustrations of philosophical ideas but gripping character portraits that engage the readers emotionally and not just intellectually. Nor does he have very much to say about Rand's extensive and often skillful use of both tragedy and satire, or her mastery in creating suspense, or her reliance on such things as humor, paradox, and metaphor—all of which is important for a literary and not just a philosophical appraisal of Rand.

Although the CliffsNotes in themselves are seriously flawed as literary study guides, one might nevertheless have wished that the presentations of the three Rand works now included had been of a higher standard. But throughout, Bernstein disappointingly fails to give students any proper guidelines on how they can approach the texts in a literary manner, or to make clear that they lend themselves to a wide range of interpretative possibilities. Basically concerned with the works as statements of Objectivist doctrine, he tells students what to think instead of encouraging them to think for themselves. To me, this is not a very Objectivist approach to the teaching of

literature. In the case of Rand's fiction, it is self-defeating.

References

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