

## Ayn Rand, Novelist

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*The Literary Art of Ayn Rand*

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Twenty years ago, Stephen Cox (1986, 19) rightly complained that Ayn Rand's friends and foes alike paid attention only to her ideas, so that "the quality of her imaginative writing is almost completely ignored."

No longer. The last decade has witnessed an outpouring of essays and books on Ayn Rand as novelist. Whereas scholar Mimi Reisel Gladstein searched in vain for "analyses of [Rand's] plot structures, major themes, character development, and use of symbolism" when she began teaching Rand's novels in 1973 (Thomas 2005, 58), today the interested reader faces the opposite problem: determining which critical work is most worthy of attention. Thankfully, an impressive sampling of that work can be found in *The Literary Art of Ayn Rand*. Here I provide a condensed integration of the essays therein, as well as some pointers to future work.

As Rand herself emphasized in her own inductive approach to literature (Rand 1975, 46–47), the raw material of a novel is just words. We recognize special patterns in those words because they represent the familiar aspects of a story: descriptions of people and events, narration, dialogue, monologue. These aspects, artfully arranged, build up characters and plot lines that interest the reader. But the artful arrangement itself is of interest too; we call it style.

In two thorough essays, Kirsti Minsaas finds the key to Rand's style in slanted realism: a "mediated type of showing" that "represents a covert or oblique form of telling" and results in "a special

quality of heightened stylization” (Thomas 2005, 149), so that the reader becomes an active observer or witness to the scene (148). Minsaas uncovers numerous variations on this theme, including Rand’s use of interior monologue (207, 220), filtration of a scene or protagonist through the eyes of one of the characters (208, 215), and the sheer visual power of Rand’s descriptive style (150ff.). Nathaniel Branden mentioned this phenomenon of “purposeful stylization” as long ago as 1962 (83), as did Rand herself in her 1958 lectures on fiction writing (149), but it is Minsaas who has provided the definitive treatment of the dual nature of Rand’s style as simultaneously slanted and objective.

Rand’s slanted realism has a higher purpose, which is to direct the reader’s attention where she thinks it ought to be directed: up at her heroes. Branden, quoting Rand, notes that the author consciously set about “inventing people” she could look up to, who conformed to the “blinding picture” she had in her mind of “people as they could be” (75). In particular, people as they could be not physically or emotionally, but ethically; numerous authors in this anthology repeat Rand’s refrain of the moral nature and purpose of her novels (20, 76, 79, 81, 170). As Branden so piquantly puts it, Rand approached human nature with “the chisel of a sculptor” (81), with the result that she “unite[d] the artist and the moralist” (77) by attempting to project what people should be like.

Putting aside the question of whether any art form or literary genre other than philosophical fiction has such an ethical purpose, there are literary challenges involved in presenting characters who are what Minsaas calls “image[s] of moral perfection” (20). Rand typically paints her heroes “in stark moral colors, to give them a semi-divine . . . cast” (187). Yet the very godlike nature of, say, John Galt in Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (Rand 1957) can make him seem distant, unattainable, and merely symbolic (Thomas 2005, 35, 84–85, 186), like God in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (141–42). As Susan McCloskey points out, the struggles and growth of someone like Hank Rearden result in a character who is closer to earth and thus “more satisfying emotionally and aesthetically” (138). Both Branden (86) and Cox (50) wonder aloud if sometimes it is more productive to view Rand’s characters as allegorical or symbolic than as realistic, but they provide little guidance to the perplexed (often young) reader in sorting out this crucially

important matter.

One practice that can help prevent an overly simplistic reading is careful attention to the order of presentation in Rand's novels. As both Minsaas and Branden point out, Rand's plots are carefully constructed. Indeed, Minsaas explains that Rand applied her own epistemology in writing her stories (23, 33, 34). Rand integrates similar events and characters, such as the strikers and the scabs in *Atlas Shrugged* or characters as seemingly dissimilar as the aristocratic Dominique Francon and the blue-collar Mike Donnigan in *The Fountainhead* (Rand 1943). She also carefully differentiates dissimilar events and characters from each other, such as the train passengers in the Winston Tunnel disaster vs. the inhabitants of Galt's Gulch, or Roark in opposition to Keating, Toohey, and Wynand along various dimensions.

Plot is about action; but what does a morally perfect character do in life? Here Minsaas again makes a crucial integration when she observes that Rand's plots are teleological since they are driven by the goals of her heroes. Howard Roark's goal in *The Fountainhead* is to change the shape of things on this earth by building the structures he wants to create (49). John Galt's goal in *Atlas Shrugged* is to stop the motor of the world or, as McCloskey more positively if religiously states it, to achieve the redemption of the world (Thomas 2005, 140). The fact that Rand's plots are teleological is a key connecting point between her characters and her themes.

In one form or another, the great task of a Randian hero boils down to "the goal of reshaping the earth in the image of his values" through "productive work" (Rand 1964, 26). Characters who assist in the pursuit of such a great task are secondary; characters who attempt to thwart such a great task are villains. As McCloskey argues, even the struggle of a fundamentally unhealthy character like Dominique Francon can be understood as the "long task" of someone for whom "love is her work" (Thomas 2005, 238, 241). By contrast, for a morally perfect character like Roark, "his work is his love" (241).

This ethic of productive work is what David Kelley (following Rand) calls "the code of the creator" (253). The "highest exemplars" of this code are those who create supreme value at the top of the pyramid of ability: "a scientific genius, a brilliant artist, an innovator in any field" (251). For this kind of person, the "primary connection

is to reality, not to other people” and the “central purpose must be the creation of value in the world” (253). According to Kelley, this is the essence of “independence, egoism, and achievement” (149) and the heart of the “moral sense” (243–44) that Rand presents in her novels.

Stephen Cox points out that this vision is a “reimagining of America as a complex structure deriving its integrity from a single unifying set of principles” (43), indeed from the one “shaping ideal” of individualism (42). Here we find Rand’s own great task, for which her novels and the characters therein are means to an end: the reshaping of America and thereby the world in the image of her values. The claim may seem fantastical, but it is entirely consistent with Roark’s principle that “nothing can be reasonable or beautiful unless it is made by one central idea, and the idea sets every detail” (Rand 1943, 24). Despite America’s messy beginnings and historical tangles, Rand wanted it to be reasonable and beautiful, the shining vision of perfection she had glimpsed during her early years in Soviet Russia. She applied herself relentlessly to realizing her vision in novels that possess a “startling intensity of integration” (Thomas 2005, 50). The result is a deeply artful arrangement of literary materials, in which the one central idea sets every detail.

But Rand’s representation of America is an unknown ideal, which we must not mistake for the lived reality of American history (Saint-Andre 2004). Even at the purely literary level, Rand’s overwhelming desire to produce “a single, seamless web” (Thomas 2005, 50) introduced the kind of “contradictions, dissonances and complexities” that Gladstein encourages us to identify (70). In *The Fountainhead*, Roark spends countless hours of his precious time and attention designing Peter Keating’s buildings, even though Keating’s dependence on Roark prevents him from developing as a person. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Dagny Taggart never visits her lover Francisco d’Anconia at college or talks with him about the great friends he has made there—one of whom happens to be world-historical genius (and protagonist) John Galt. While oddities like this help Rand sustain the plots that enable her to realize her thematic goals, they distort her characters and make them less ideal than they might otherwise be.

As Cox points out, Rand’s friends and foes alike have not faced complexities such as these. So in large measure the hard questions remain. Do high achievers (or even mature adults) require the

inspiration of heroic novels to complete their great tasks, or is Rand's Objectivism less a way of life than a time of life in its appeal to young people who are choosing their values and hungering for "a wider view of human potentiality" (114)? Is Rand's focus on "the masses . . . and their rise against the unusual and higher man" (145) consistent with the American tradition of a classless society, or is it more redolent of old Europe in general and Friedrich Nietzsche in particular? Do Rand's literary theories and practices have application to literary forms she neglected (e.g., poetry) or to other art forms? Is there or could there be a Randian tradition in literature? Exactly how did Rand develop as a writer? (The essays here give almost no space to her early short stories, plays, and novels, nor do they delve into the letters and journals she wrote while composing *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.) Given that Rand seems to have been reacting positively or negatively to European and Russian writers like Hugo, Nietzsche, Rostand, Sienkiewicz, Bogdanov, Chernyshevsky, Dostoevsky, Gorky, Tolstoy, and Zamyatin rather than American writers like Thoreau, Emerson, Whitman, Twain, and Cather, in what sense can it be said that Rand is an American writer rather than a Russian writer in America? Is *Atlas Shrugged* truly "the climax of the novel form" as Nathaniel Branden claims (111–12)? What is Rand's place and standing in the literature of America and the world?

Questions of this kind are not easy to ask, and even harder to answer. Yet answer them we must if we are to objectively judge the literary art of Ayn Rand. There is much work still to be done by professional critics and reflective readers alike.

## References

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