

**AYN RAND:
A ROMANTIC IDEALIST IN ART AND POLITICS**

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The Life of Ayn Rand

The woman who took the pen name of Ayn Rand was born February 2, 1905 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Her name at birth was Alicia (Alice) Zinovievna Rosenbaum. Her family was Jewish but there is not much evidence she received religious instruction. In fact, she developed a distaste for all religions and in her early teens determined she was an atheist. One of her biographers, Anne Heller, relates several occurrences that may have led, or at least contributed, to this determination: first, Ayn and a cousin decided to pray for a little kitten belonging to their grandmother and despite the prayers, the kitten died. Ayn half-heartedly still believed in God, but related she hadn't believed the prayer would work; and, then in the war years she must have often heard the Russian Orthodox view of God's will and the necessity of following Christ's example of suffering, a view she rejected, opting to trust her own observations and sense of justice rather than an unjust alien deity.

Barbara Branden, in her biography describes Ayn as "a short, stocky woman...with short, dark hair—the hair style of the twenties, straight, and bobbed and severe—with a full, sensuous mouth set firmly in a squarish face. She was not a conventionally attractive woman, but compelling in the remarkable combination of perceptiveness and sensuality...that she projected."

Speculation on the origin of her pen name is intriguing. It has been suggested that the name "Rand" is an abbreviation of her Russian surname [Rosenbaum], but Nathaniel Branden in his biography states that Ayn told him that she took "Rand" from her Remington-Rand typewriter. Her first name she says, was taken from a Finnish author she enjoyed.

Prior to the revolution, the Rosenbaums were affluent and able to afford extended vacations. When Ayn was nine (9), she was vacationing in the Crimea and saw a long-legged, fair-haired girl playing tennis. She never forgot this girl who became her model for heroines and was later personified as Dagny Taggart, in *Atlas Shrugged*, imbued with a decisive, “take-charge” attitude. At about the same time, she was influenced by descriptions and drawings of Cyrus, a hero in Maurice Champagne’s *The Mysterious Valley*, who became her model for Howard Roark in *The Fountainhead* and John Galt in *Atlas Shrugged*. Interestingly, Frank O’Connor, her husband of over fifty (50) years also bore a remarkable resemblance to these illustrations of Cyrus.

She recalls herself to be an outstanding student and was taught by her Mother to read and write in French—all before her formal schooling in the gymnasium. At some point in this period she acquired a passion for Victor Hugo and his novels: *The Man Who Laughs*, *Les Miserables*, and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Later, she was to describe him as “the greatest novelist in world literature.” She loved his insights into revolution (something she was to experience first-hand) as well as his intricate plots and themes. His development of strong heroes was equally important to her and provided building blocks for her writing.

At the time the Bolsheviks came to power after overthrowing the Provisional Government of Alexander Kerensky, St. Petersburg, then known as Petrograd, was in turmoil in the early stages of the revolution. Lenin was waging class warfare against the middle class in an effort to pacify the poor. The Red Terror was under way and many of the city’s shops, banks, factories and offices were raided and closed. Ayn was present when Bolshevik soldiers entered with guns and

closed his pharmacy. She never forgot this incident and utilized aspects of it in *Atlas Shrugged* with Hank Reardon and his confrontation with the bureaucratic “looters and moochers.”

These events were too much for the Rosenbaums and they left Petrograd in late Summer of 1918 with their belongings, fully expecting to return in six months after the Bolshevik collapse. They went to the Crimea, which was then held by White Russians who were still resisting the Bolsheviks. While in the Crimea, Ayn grew closer to her father who stayed at home while her mother worked. They shared a mutual disgust for the Communist slogan “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” This disgust and contempt grew more pronounced as it became evident to Ayn that “need” was simply a euphemism for the changing demands of government. By Spring of 1921 the Bolshevik victory was largely complete. New rubles were issued, rendering the old rubles held by the Rosenbaums worthless. With no reason to remain in the Crimea, they returned to Petrograd. Once back, the Rosenbaums settled into a single room of their former apartment which was now inhabited by a sign painter and his family. There was no electricity or hot water. Since food was distributed via ration cards issued by the government in work places and schools, there was no food for those who didn’t work or study.

She attended Petrograd University and graduated in 1924 with “highest honors,” she says, something biographer Anne Heller believes impossible in a school system converted to “pass,” “fail,” and “retake.” Ayn decided to become a writer at an early age and she never wavered from this goal, despite being brilliant in mathematics and encouraged by her Father to study engineering. In her first novel, *We The Living*, Ayn’s heroine is Kira Argunova whose passion is to become an architect who designs skyscrapers and bridges. Kira has many of Ayn’s characteristics and suffers many of the same privations experienced by Ayn’s family in the

revolutionary times of 1917 and years following. Kira resents slogans of the times: “live for the state” and “live for others,” just as later heroes Howard Roark and John Galt do. Ayn believed people have the right to live for themselves and would often say later that “Whoever tells you to exist for the State, is or wants to be, the State.”

While a student at Petrograd University, she met Lev Bekkerman, a handsome boy with whom she fell in love (madly and passionately, she says), but this love was not reciprocated. He had a sharp, intelligent appearing face, and a slender, graceful body coupled with a quality of arrogance that appealed to Ayn. He became Leo in *We The Living*, and contracted tuberculosis and traveled to the Crimea for treatment as did Kira’s Leo. Ayn stated in her later years that had her love been reciprocated she would have stayed and died in Russia, so great was her affection for him. It is said that Lev was executed during the Stalinist purge in 1937.

She extended her education after her graduation from Petrograd University by enrolling in the State Technicum for Screen Arts, a training camp for aspiring actors and cinematographers. She hoped to learn techniques of screen writing and to emigrate to America to work in the movie industry, as a prelude to writing plays and novels. To achieve this goal Ayn needed to learn English and in preparation, her mother arranged for English lessons. Eventually, she was able to obtain her Russian passport, as well as a student visa to travel to the United States. Although this visa indicated she would return to Russia, Ayn had no intention of returning. She traveled first to Chicago to stay with relatives who had emigrated in the late 1890's. Eventually she made her way to Hollywood and it is reported that by chance encounter she met Cecil B. DeMille on a street corner who offered her a ride and eventually employment as a junior screen writer. On the set of

Kings of Kings as an extra, she was attracted to a tall handsome, hero-like figure, Frank O' Connor, who eventually became her husband in 1929.

During her various jobs with Hollywood studios: RKO, Universal and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, she wrote after hours. These continuing efforts, not published until after her death, reflect her growing confidence with language and style. Several early works and plays were published, among them, *Night of January 16th*, and *Red Pawn*. *Night of January 16th*, a play with alternate endings, opened on Broadway to a packed house—and was moderately successful, with a run of six months.

While her husband Frank looked the part of a “hero” in Ayn’s eyes, he was not her intellectual equal and did not share her interest in issues of philosophy, although he patiently listened to her reading of partial manuscripts and made suggestions. Frank and Ayn had left their California ranch home in October, 1951 for New York City primarily because Ayn wanted the stimulation of a big city. In the midst of working on *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn responded to a letter from Nathaniel Branden and agreed to meet with him and his fiancé Barbara, both fans of *The Fountainhead*. Over the course of this and other meetings, they became very good friends, despite being separated in age by more than twenty-five (25) years. Ayn shared early chapters with Barbara and Nathaniel. Gradually the group grew to include other individuals all of whom Ayn termed “the collective.” These individuals met socially to read and discuss Ayn’s philosophy as well as to read parts of the unfinished manuscript of *Atlas Shrugged*. Members of this collective included Alan Greenspan, an economic consultant and adviser to several Presidents and Leonard Peikoff, who was later to be the executor of Ayn’s estate. Gatherings of the collective continued even after the completion of *Atlas Shrugged*.

Nathaniel and Barbara married in 1953 with Frank as his best man and Ayn as matron of honor. However, Nathaniel and Ayn were on the same philosophical wave-length and the joy experienced by Ayn in the philosophical give and take with Nathaniel continued until it was obvious to Barbara that Ayn and her husband were in love with each other. This was in the Fall of 1954 and the affair continued for the next fourteen (14) years, but not before Nathaniel and Ayn met with Frank and Barbara and outlined the “terms” of the affair, explaining that their love in no way threatened the love Nathaniel had for Barbara or that Ayn had for Frank. Frank and Barbara may not have accepted Ayn’s assessment, but gave grudging acquiescence to the relationship.

After completion of *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn’s attention turned to non-fiction, and public speaking appearances at colleges and universities. She appeared at the University of Michigan during my first year in law school, although I don’t recall her being there. Had I known about being assigned this paper, however, I would have been more alert to her appearance.

In addition to her being at the University of Michigan, she also appeared for television interviews with Mike Wallace, Johnny Carson (three times), Edwin R. Newman, Louis Rukeyser and others. The speech she gave at West Point in March, 1974 was very well received with a standing ovation. The topic was “Philosophy, Who Needs It,” a discussion of the practical importance of abstract philosophical concepts.

Atlas Shrugged was never made into a movie during her lifetime, although there were discussions which led to an oral agreement with Albert Ruddy, producer of *The Godfather*, but no contract was signed. Ayn had hoped that Racquel Welch could play the part of Dagny Taggart, but that was not to be. She did sign a contract for a television miniseries and completed a script for the series to be aired by NBC, but production never began and the project was ultimately cancelled.

Recently, however, *portions of Atlas Shrugged* have been filmed and released in 2011 and 2013. Part III is scheduled for release in July, 2014.

In the several years prior to the West Point speech she had been experiencing fatigue and lack of energy, despite her efforts to push herself to work long hours. Finally, she sought medical attention only to learn that she had lung cancer. Ayn had smoked two packs of cigarettes daily since her late twenties and had resisted the advice of her doctor to stop smoking. Statistics, she said, were not proof of the dangers of smoking. She insisted on a *rational* explanation. “Why should I stop smoking,” she had often said. With X-Ray in hand, her internist was able to show her the malignancy in one lung as a fact and the reason for his many warnings. She quit smoking on the spot and scheduled surgery, but not before making arrangements for care of her husband Frank who was suffering from heart problems and senility. Five years older than Ayn, Frank died November 9, 1979.

Ayn recovered from her surgery but never regained full physical health. Projects requiring her attention languished and then were discontinued. She stopped publication of the “Ayn Rand Letter” in 1976 and delivered her last lecture “The Sanction of the Victims” in New Orleans in November, 1981. She died in New York City March 6, 1982.

The Philosophy of Ayn Rand

Ayn Rand relied on reason and was guided by facts to determine her courses of action. Her best-known fiction pieces, *The Fountainhead*, *Atlas Shrugged*, and to some extent *Anthem*, contain this philosophy as expressed by her characters. Mimi Goldstein in *The New Ayn Rand Companion* states:

Rand's protagonists share many traits. They are all romantic rebels against restrictive and mundane societies. In their rebellion, they act alone and on principle....They are intellectually gifted and have unusual talents.

Her first novel, *We The Living*, was published in England in 1936, but was poorly received initially because it was critical of the Soviet Union. Themes are: the individual against the state; the supreme value of a human life and the evil of the totalitarian state that claims the right to sacrifice life. It takes place during the early Soviet era and contains material that appears to be autobiographical.

Anthem was published in England in 1938. Its theme is the meaning of man's ego and projects a society of the future which has accepted total collectivism with all its ultimate consequences: men have lapsed into primitive savagery and stagnation. The word "I" has disappeared from the language and there are no singular pronouns, and a man refers to himself as "we" and another man as "they." Protagonist Equality 7-2521 discovers a library in the Uncharted Forest, rediscovers the word "I" and starts to rebuild society.

The Fountainhead was published in 1943 with a theme of individualism versus collectivism, not in politics, but in man's soul. The story concerns the career of Howard Roark, an architect and innovator who recognizes no authority but his own rational judgment in his struggle against conventional social opposition. Publicity for the book was uninspired and sales started slowly, gradually increasing due to word of mouth. Ayn also wrote the screen play for *The Fountainhead* and was pleased with the casting of Gary Cooper as Howard Roark and Patricia Neal as Dominique. This book established Ayn Rand as a serious and important novelist.

Atlas Shrugged was published in 1957 and its theme is the role of the mind in man's existence as well as the morality of rational self-interest and begins with the question: "Who is

John Galt?” Men with creative ability go “on strike” and leave a society increasingly burdened with oppressive directives and pronouncements of a bureaucracy gone mad with its efforts to stifle competition and creativity. John Galt is successful in eventually stopping “the motor of the world” and is instrumental in bringing about an ultimate rebuilding of society. This synopsis is a very terse overview and fails to capture the magnificent character development and philosophical overtones of the novel she began in 1946.

Ayn was convinced that ideas ruled the world and, consciously or unconsciously, ruled the life of every individual. Sometimes when meeting a new person Ayn would say “tell me your premises,” a remark which might be a little off-putting to some people. Clearly, ideas mattered to her and were foremost in her social interactions. The philosophy Ayn developed through her characters and later termed “Objectivism,” she states as:

My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.

Nathaniel Branden wanted to carry the philosophy beyond her novels and suggested to Ayn a lecture project to explain this philosophy. Beginning with his first lecture “Basic Principles of Objectivism,” Nathaniel added other lectures in order to develop a course curriculum in Objectivism. These lectures were highly successful and were eventually broadened by Ayn and Nathaniel to form the Nathaniel Branden Institute (NBI) which offered a variety of courses including psychology, economics and esthetics. The Institute thrived until its close in 1968 after the ending of Ayn’s affair with Nathaniel. Formal publications discussing Objectivism began in 1962 with *The Objectivist Newsletter*, which was replaced in 1966 by *The Objectivist*, a monthly magazine. In turn, this magazine was replaced in 1971 by a less formal newsletter known as *The*

Ayn Rand Letter, published biweekly until 1976. Then, from 1980 to 1987 *The Objectivist Forum*, a bi-monthly journal, continued to publish Objectivist ideas.

While a discussion of the whole of Ayn's philosophy is beyond the scope of this paper, it is useful to explore the content of some of her essays to understand this philosophy more fully. In *The Virtue of Selfishness*, she states that life is the standard of value in Objectivist ethics (how one judges what is good); therefore, one's own life is his ethical purpose. Since reason is man's basic means of survival, that which is proper to the life of a rational being is the good and that which negates or destroys it is the evil. Reason, Purpose and Self-Esteem are cardinal values in Objectivism. Maintenance of life and pursuit of happiness are two parts of the same whole.

On the issue of **Man's Rights**, she says that the indispensable foundation to a free society is the principle of individual rights and capitalism is the only system to uphold and protect these rights. Individual rights are protected through our Constitution as a negative document which states what the government *cannot do* with respect to individuals. She declares that the only moral purpose of government is the protection of individual rights and individual property. The Declaration of Independence provides the justification for government, which is to protect man from criminals, while the Constitution with its Bill of Rights, is to protect man from the government

She states that if some men are entitled to the products of the work of others, it means that those others are deprived of rights and condemned to slave labor. The Founding Fathers spoke of the right to the *pursuit* of happiness, not the *right* to happiness. In other words, man has the right to support his life by his own work, but that does not mean others must make him happy. The right to free speech means a man has the right to express his ideas without fear of reprisal or

interference by the government, but does not mean that others must provide him with a lecture hall, radio station or printing press through which to express his ideas.

She observes that the term “individual rights” is a redundancy as there are no rights other than those of the individual and no one else to possess them. In conclusion, she says that the only advocates of man’s rights are those who advocate laissez-faire capitalism.

On **The Nature of Government**, she says that government is the means of placing the retaliatory use of physical force under objectively defined laws, that is, to protect from criminals. A private individual may do anything not legally forbidden; and, a government official should do nothing unless legally permitted. In other words, ours is a “government of laws, not men.” The source of the government’s authority is “the consent of the governed” which means that the government is not the *ruler*, but the servant or *agent*, of the citizens. She states that the Constitution is a limitation on the government, not on private individuals. It is not a charter *for* government power, but a charter of the citizens’ protection *against* the government.

To the question of “**What will be done about the poor or handicapped in a free society,**” Ayn states that the question avoids or evades the basic premises of Objectivist ethics. The first question the Objectivist poses is: “Should anything be done? To answer the former question without answering the latter, she says, is to accept the premise implicit in the first question, that is, “What will be done?” Only individual men have the right to decide when or whether to help others—society as an organized political system has no moral right to force support of the so-called downtrodden. Those Americans who believe in providing for the poor should do so voluntarily and privately, not through taxes and government.

In his speech to the world in *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt says that a condition to giving help to a man who suffers is to “do it on the ground of his virtues, of his fight to recover, of his rational accord, or of the fact he suffers unjustly.” To do otherwise says Ayn through Galt is to help him on the basis of his *need* alone and only serves to encourage his behavior of demanding from others.

Romantic Literature is literature based on the idea that man has volition, and is able to direct the course of his life and achieve his values. The role of a fiction writer, Ayn stated in an interview, is to present things not as they are, but as they might and ought to be. She considered *Atlas Shrugged* to be a Romantic novel and herself to be a Romantic Realist, in contrast to the traditional Romantics of the nineteenth century, as she was concerned with the role of human life values in her present time.

Art according to The Objectivist definition is a selective re-creation of reality according to the artist’s fundamental view of man and of existence. While literature is a conceptual art, recreating reality by words, painting is a visual art which re-creates reality by means of color on a two-dimensional surface. Sculpture is also a visual art which re-creates reality through a three-dimensional form of solid material. Music is an audible art that re-creates reality by sounds. Architecture is in a separate class because, although it is visual in one respect, it is part esthetic and part utilitarian. Additionally, there are interpretative arts: singing, dancing, and acting, among others. Judging these arts is not subject to a particular philosophy, but how well the respective artist has expressed a particular view through the means of his medium. What is done in judging art, concerns how well the philosophy is expressed, not the philosophy itself. The standards for

judging a painting, for example, concern whether the painting is well-executed and well-integrated. All of these standards are definable and objective.

The Legacy of Ayn Rand

Today, more than thirty (30) years after her death, interest in Ayn Rand and her work continues. Sales of her books, particularly *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*, and to a lesser extent, *We The Living* and *Anthem*, continue with surprising numbers. In total, sales of her books, fiction and non-fiction, exceed 25 million. Sales of *Atlas Shrugged* alone exceed 6 million and have exceeded 1.5 million copies since Obama's election.

Ayn Rand interest groups abound in this country as well as abroad. The **Ayn Rand Center**, hereinafter ARC, facilitates Objectivist Community Groups, groups that meet to study Ayn Rand's ideas, engage in activism or just to socialize with like-minded people. The ARC website lists groups in twenty-eight (28) states and the District of Columbia with contact information and contact persons. In addition, the website has a Tea Party page that permits downloads of print materials for distribution. There is, however, a disclaimer that states: "ARC does not provide support for clubs that engage in activities believed to harm Objectivism (e.g., supporting the Libertarian movement)."

The **Ayn Rand Institute**, hereinafter ARI, introduces high school students to Ayn Rand's novels by providing free copies to high school teachers along with teachers' guides and lesson plans. It sponsors essay contests in both high schools and colleges, having awarded more than \$1.25 million in prizes since 1986. Participants receive free copies of *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*. It also awards \$26,000 in prizes annually. ARI is also sponsoring the 31st

Objectivist Conference in Las Vegas this coming June. This six day conference, the literature says, is an excellent way to learn more about the ideas that underlie *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

Other groups worthy of note include: **The Objectivism Reference Center** which provides resources about Ayn Rand, her ideas, works and as well as places for discussion and debate. **Ayn Rand Meetup Group** boasts of members in 47 cities, and 6 countries for a total of 63 groups totaling almost 7000 members. **The Atlas Society** is active in sponsoring educational programs and conducts video courses through its Atlas University. It also sponsors an annual summit conference for the discussion of selected Ayn Rand topics. The summit this year is in Manchester, NH and the theme is “Who is John Galt?”

The Ayn Rand Society is a professional society founded in 1987. Its aim is to foster scholarly study of the philosophical thought and writings of Ayn Rand. The Society is an affiliated group with the American Philosophical Association. It meets twice a year and membership is open to members of the Association. There is an **Ayn Rand Study Group**, a student organization at the University of Minnesota which promotes the study of Objectivism with lectures, debates and discussion groups. Students and non students are welcome.

With the profusion of these groups, as well as others not mentioned, I conclude that the influence of Ayn Rand continues and is very much alive and well today. She was a remarkable woman with a remarkable philosophy whether you accept or reject her premises.

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