



## **Between Rational Egoism and an Irrational Altruism: Deconstructive Interpretation in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged***

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### **Abstract**

Deconstruction comprises the close reading of texts in order to establish that any text has contradictory meanings, rather than being unified, logical whole. Binary opposition is one of aspect of deconstruction. It is an idea that is predicated on stable oppositions such as good and evil or up and down. It is perceived in post-structuralist analysis as an inadequate approach to areas of difference. While signs mean by their difference from other signs, the binary opposition is the most extreme form of difference possible sun/moon; man/woman; white/black. Such oppositions, each of which represents a binary system, are very common in cultural construction of reality. Ayn Rand was a novelist, playwright, screenwriter and philosopher. She is known for her philosophy called Objectivism. Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* deviates from the typical novel and its purpose is not so much to tell a story as to exhibit Objectivism and also sets up a battle between egoism and altruism in the novel that drags out a widespread system of binary opposites. This paper examines Derrida's deconstruction interrelated to binary opposition in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*.

**Keywords:** *Deconstruction, Objectivism, Egoism, Altruism.*

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## **1. Introduction**

Ayn Rand, a Russian born American writer, is famous for her philosophy of Objectivism. She is described as the most original, uncompromising and controversial author of twentieth century. At age six, she taught herself to read and two years later she introduced her first fictional hero in French magazine for children, thus apprehending the heroic vision which continued her throughout her life. At the age of nine, she decided to make fiction-writing as her career. Victor Hugo, the writer she most admired. Rand has achieved literary fame for her novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957).

Ayn Rand called her philosophy "Objectivism" and labelled it as a philosophy for living on earth. It holds reason and independence as primary virtues. Objectivism is an assimilated system of thought that defines the abstract principles by which a man must think and act if he is to live the life proper to man. Ayn Rand first presented her philosophy in the image of heroes and heroines in her novels, *The*

*Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Later, she expressed her philosophy in non-fiction too. Rand's heroes and heroines that we met in her novels do not fit into the image of selfishness. They are inspiring individuals of integrity, intelligent artists, philosophers, industrialists and businessmen. Both men and women guide their lives by reason and take pride in them, in their work, and in their capacity to live. Her theory states that an individual has a right to his own life to pursuit of his happiness, which denies the view that man should sacrifice himself to God or society.

## 2. Deconstruction and Binary Opposition

Jacques Derrida's first major contribution to the international academic community came with the paper *Structure, sign and play in the Discourse of the human sciences*. This paper was occasioned when he was invited to lecture at John Hopkins University in 1966 virtually he inaugurated critical theory called deconstruction. Deconstruction was both created and has been profoundly influenced by the Derrida. He argues that in western culture, people tend to think and express their thoughts in terms of binary opposition. Binary opposition is one of the major aspects used in deconstruction. It refers to pair of mutually-exclusive signifiers in a paradigm set representing categories which are logically opposed and which together define a complete universe of discourse, e.g black/white, good/bad, civilised/primitive, black/white. In such oppositions each term manifestly implies it's conflicting and there is no middle term. This sees such distinction as fundamental to all language and thought. Binary opposition suggests these oppositions are hierarchies in miniature, containing negative or inferior, even if only slightly so.

The concern with binary opposition was first established by the French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, who held that signs have meaning not by a simple reference to real objects, but by their opposition to other signs. The theory of phonology established by Roman Jakobson uses the thought of "binary features", which are possessions either present or absent in any phoneme. This concept has been prolonged to anthropology by Claude Levis-Strauss. Through deconstruction, Derrida's aims to remove the borderline between binary oppositions and to do so in such a way that the hierarchy implied by the oppositions thrown into question. Deconstruction aims is to show the conflict of any text. This conflict is a product of language itself.

## 3. Rational egoism and an Irrational Altruism in Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*

Ayn Rand rejects altruism and her philosophy of Objectivism supports rational egoism. Altruism declares that any action taken for the benefit of others is good, and any action taken for one's own benefit is bad.

"The basic principle of altruism is that man has no right to exist for his own sake, that service to others is the only justification of his existence, and that self-sacrifice is his highest moral duty, virtue and value.

Do not confuse altruism with kindness, good will or respect for the rights of others. These are not primaries, but consequences, which, in fact, altruism makes impossible. The irreducible primary of altruism, the basic absolute, is self-sacrifice—which means; self-immolation, self-abnegation, self-denial, self-destruction—which means: the self as a standard of evil, the selfless as a standard of the good." (The Virtue of selfishness 30).

*Atlas Shrugged* is the fourth and last novel of Ayn Rand, written in purpose of exhibiting her philosophical ideals. The main theme of the novel is the power of the mind which is strongly advocated in her philosophy called Objectivism. The novel illustrated that a human being is destined to absolute failure if he did not follow reason. *Atlas Shrugged* shows that rational thinking is mankind's existence device, just as the ability to fly is the survival device for birds. The ability to think rationally and to apply the rational thoughts makes men's happiness and success in life. It is the rational mind that is responsible for the inventions and the flourishing civilization.

In all her major works, Ayn Rand presents her heroes and heroine who are dazzling thinkers opposed to either society's pressure to conform or a tyrannical government's commands to obey. Ayn Rand's purpose is to explicit rationality as the primary virtue and moral requirement. It requires honesty, independence, justice and pride. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand presents the binaries between rational and irrational thinkers. Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden are the creators, who support and follow rational egoism.

The common denominator in all her books is the life-and-death importance, for both individuals and society, of remaining true to the mind. In *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand's system of moral philosophy is set up as a battle between good and evil that plays out across a widespread system of binary opposites. In each of these binary pairs, notably the rational and irrational opposites, one side is allied with good and the other with evil.

The binary opposition appears right at the starting of novel with the Taggart siblings. James, the president of Taggart Transcontinental Railway. James is weak and dependent on public opinion for every decision he makes. He envies Dagny's capabilities in business, so he takes every opportunity to denigrate the practical side of things. He is obsessed of a kind of cunning, however and is able to trick certain people into doing what he wants. James embodies Rand's concept of evil. His ambition in life is simply to abolish the good, making him a classic illustration of a nihilist. Because James's true nature is terrible.

He marries Cheryl Brooks in order to destroy her goodness and kindness but convinces himself he has done it for love. James Taggart was always jealous of his sister's proficiency. Where his sister stands for production, James Taggart stands for destruction. He wanted to let nothing remain best. He once said to his wife that he disliked his sister because she thought she is so good. James said,

We're only human beings-and what's a human being? A weak, ugly, sinful creature, born that way, rotten in his bones- so humility is the one virtue he ought to practice. He ought spend his life on his knees, begging to be forgiven for his dirty existence. When a man thinks he's good – when he's rotten. Pride is the worst of all sins, no matter what he's done. ( 248)

James purpose in life was to destroy such individuals as Dagny, Rearden, Francisco and John Galt.

Dagny Taggart, the narrator and the heroine of this novel lived by these ideals. she is a sister of James Taggart. She is remarkable in every way; beautiful, talented, determined and highly intelligent. Her independent spirit leads her to trust her own judgement over public opinion. Dagny is enormously successful as a woman in a man's world. Dagny's defining characteristic is a supreme self-confidence. She was the vice president of Taggart transcontinental railway. She loved her railway line. Dagny is presented as a brilliant business woman and is impressive enough to attract the attention of the looters and of John Galt. She dismissed the gender prejudice against her.

So that is your famous sister? said Balph to James, looking at Dagny while cross the room. I was not aware that my sister was famous said by James, a faint bite in his voice. But, my good man, she's an unusual phenomenon in the field of economics, so you must expect people to talk about her. your sister is a symptom of illness of our century. A decadent product of the machine age. Machines have destroyed man's humanity, taken away from

the soil, robbed him into an insensitive robot.(133)

Rand presents her this way to demonstrate that rationality and accomplishments are not gender-specific. The physically beautiful Dagny displays the precise logic and rationality that Rand advocates in Objectivism, while the dreadful James represents the epitome of maliciousness and thoughtless irrationality. The binary opposition, Ayn Rand has set up here are clear: Dagny Taggart is beautiful, rational and good, whereas James is dreadful, irrational and evil.

The same kind of binary opposition throughout the society is depicted, and it is equally unwavering in its distinction of good and evil. According to Rand's Objectivism, the purest most morally sound source of motivation for a person is rational self-interest. Characters like Dagny, Henry, Hank, Ellis Wyatt, and later in the novel, John Galt exhibit this kind of motivation, and they are described with positive attributes and praiseworthy moral description. Rand asserts of Dagny thus:

This was the great clarity of being  
beyond emotion, after the reward of  
having felt everything one could feel.(177)

These heroic individuals, representing the good in Ayn Rand's system, a labelled innovators, producers, free thinkers, creators and even the motivating force that powers all human Prosperity. Guided strictly by reason, purpose and self-esteem they deal only in objective reality and have no place for mystical ideas or social and political systems they cannot directly control. For Rand, these heroic characters make up the quick minority of mind strikers, and their wilful despatcher from society is ultimately intended to shatter the chaotic world of their desperate leeching counterparts.

Rand characterizes the novel's non-heroic actors as unflattering, disdainful. James, Wesly, Mouch, Phillip serve as figureheads for Rand's category of lesser being, known variously as looters and parasites. These terms suggest that characters they describe are dehumanised. Their physical traits, as discussed above in regard to James, are and dignified and each one's perception of reality is hampered by self-perpetuating delusions. Rand depicts them as louts who are incapable of real thought, impervious to reason and dependent on arbitrary laws. Rand exhibit the inner face of her novel's characters through their external appearance. James is dreadful and her inner face also evil. Dagny is beautiful and her inner heart also good. Man has the ability to feel something is good for him or evil depending on the standard of the value he chooses. If a man chooses irrational values, then he leads the role of a destroyer to himself. It is by his rational values, a man can attain happiness.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand builds this opposition between good and evil. Dagny Taggart stands for good and James Taggart stands for an evil. In less- than subtle terms she paints those who uphold Objectivism as essentially good in all regards, from appearance to character and all those who run counter as their categorically inferior opposites. The binaries Rand has set up here are clear Dagny is beautiful, good, hardworking and intelligent, whereas James is irrational, evil and cunning. According to Rand, individual happiness is the highest good in life. The good of the moral man is good for all those who wish to be moral. Ayn Rand's philosophy holds that reason and independence are primary virtues, and her heroes Galt, Rearden, Francisco and Dagny embody the most important human attributes. Ayn Rand advocates rational selfishness which is a required value of human survival. A rationally selfish man is a man of self-esteem, and he is only anything or anyone. It is only on the basis of rational selfishness men can be fit to live together in a rational society.

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