

Inclusion in the Modernist Canon: The Potential of Ayn Rand

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The modernist canon includes many influential writers who are as distinct from each other as they are from writers who reside in other canons. How then, is modernism defined and how is the modernist canon formed? In his book *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy*, Peter Gay acknowledges that “modernism is far easier to exemplify than to define” (Gay 1). Some authors—Virginia Woolf, James Joyce—are staples of any modernist explanation; others serve as good supplements—Henry James, Joseph Conrad— while others are, of course, left out. One of these latter—whom I argue nonetheless exemplifies modernism well—is Ayn Rand.

Ayn Rand is an often overlooked literary figure. Her polemical style and overtly political themes often relegate her to the cult followers of her philosophy. While there are many devout followers of her doctrines, the study of her as a literary figure is lacking. Although this essay acknowledges the drawbacks of her inflammatory style and her relevance to other fields under which her work falls, it argues that her writing contains more than ideological promotion. Rand’s novels are products of the modernist period and illustrate modernist tenets very well.

When investigating canon formation, one must keep in mind motivation, theme, and form. Modernism’s motivation stems from the eponymous advent of the “modern.” Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane call modernism “the art consequent of Heisenberg’s ‘Uncertainty principle,’ of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity”

(Bradbury & McFarlane 27). The beginning of the twentieth century boasted change in everything from industry to philosophy. Literature was not far behind. Modernism is simply a reaction to the modern.

This reaction was often a violent one. Such an exponential rate of change was disorienting, prompting people to question even the nature of reality. “The shock, the violation of expected continuities, the element of de-creation and crisis, is a crucial element of the [Modernist] style” (Bradbury & McFarlane 24). A strong influence, one that caused especially violent reactions, was Marxism. Peter Gay calls Marx a key component in the atmosphere of the early twentieth century (Gay 5). Marx and the subsequent communist trend was the specific modern element to which Ayn Rand reacts—and very vehemently against—in the four books she wrote between 1936 and 1957.

There is some debate about the dates between which the modernist “period” falls. The modernist motivation, after all, cannot be determined to have ever come to an end. Modern industry, technology, and philosophy continue to change and writers continue to react to it. There is, however, some agreement as to modernism’s apex. Most agree on the early 1920s, with some specifying the high point at 1922 with the publication of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Elliot’s “The Waste Land” (Matz 12). How long this period of dominance continued, however, is contentious. Jesse Matz (*The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction*) asserts that “the twenty years or so that followed [1922] saw the ascendancy of the modern novel” (Matz 12). Some think it waned in the early 1930s but

rebounded in the 40s and lasted until the 60s. “It bounced back into vigorous life in 1945 once again, to make it new. Then in the 1960s, it died, as historical periods will” (Gay 30). While Rand’s novels fall after the peak of modernist activity, her first works—short stories and plays— were written in the 1920s and her themes never wavered.

Rand’s motivation is a vendetta against communism and collectivism everywhere. Her work embodies a strong reaction against the modern phenomenon that was Soviet Russia. Rand was born in St. Petersburg in 1905— just three weeks after Czar Nicholas II’s army opened fire on thirty thousand factory workers in the act of protesting poor working conditions and the czar’s government. This facilitated the rise of the Bolsheviks and their eventual October Revolution when Rand was twelve (Heller 2). While biographical information is sometimes sidelined in the interpretation of an author’s work, Rand’s unique experience of “the modern” is inextricably linked to her writing. By the time she relocated to America when she was twenty, she hated Russia’s modern socialism and idolized the possibilities of America’s modern capitalism.

If all modernist novels are responding to the modern, they will tend to share similar themes. Most modern novels share a “search for essential meaning” that could replace the old customs and beliefs that modernity dampened or destroyed (Matz 32). As stated before, modernity was a disorienting experience. Modernist literature strove to explore that confusion—the destruction of tradition and the familiar—and find out with what they were

left. “The idea of the modern is bound up with consciousness of disorder, despair, and anarchy” (Bradbury & McFarlane 41). Ayn Rand certainly channels this sense of doom with her dystopic novels, *Anthem* and *Atlas Shrugged*.

After Equality 7-2521, the main character of *Anthem*, presents his discovery (a light bulb) to the Council, he is told: “What is not thought by all men must not be true...What is not done collectively cannot be good... And if this should lighten the toil of men... then it is a great evil, for men have no cause to exist save in toiling for other men” (*Anthem* 73-74). These lines embody what Rand feared in the modern period: the decline of individuality.

Near the end of *Atlas Shrugged*, John Galt is captured and at the mercy of government racketeers who wish him to fix their socialist-trending system for them. “Think!” his captors demand. He replies: “No... you don’t want me to think. When you force a man to act against his own choice and judgment, it’s his thinking that you want to suspend. You want him to become a robot” (*Atlas* 1010). Fear of totalitarian control, made sharper by the technologies of the twentieth century, was another common fear in modern writing.

As society modernized, it organized into institutions and bureaucracies. This sparked a suspicion of large organization, a fear to lose the individual within the mass—“a sense of the hidden massiveness of institutions opposed to an extreme particularization of individuals” (Bogan 99). This fear of losing the self was prevalent in many modern works and is ubiquitous in Ayn Rand’s novels.

The insecurity bred during the modern period opened the discussion for a solution, or an explanation, within society and within humanity. Peter Gay goes so far as to call modernism “the hunt for the secrets of human nature” (Gay 5). While Virginia Woolf may have found the answer to be in a room of one’s own, Rand finds this secret in rationality. She strives to prove that the epitome of a person’s essence is found in logic and rational thinking. She wants to provide an illustration of what the secrets of human nature are. In her essay *To the Readers of The Fountainhead* she says: “I had in my mind a blinding picture of people as they could be” (Heller 185). This is why her main characters are rarely characters at all, but ideals.

Howard Roark of *The Fountainhead* and John Galt of *Atlas Shrugged* break almost every rule of characterization. They aren’t sympathetic, the reader cannot identify with them, and they are never shown in moments of weakness, doubt, or mistake. Yet, these characters are appealing. The reader wants to *be* them and reveres them as the other characters in the books do. This lack of a relatable main character is a dangerous and novel strategy. However, the traits Rand assigns to these men—from their appearance to their actions—coaxes the reader to a position of worship. John Galt is often described as having “a face that bore no mark of pain or fear or guilt” (*Atlas* 643). In fact when Dagny sees Galt’s face for the first time, “she knew that in all the years behind her, *this* was what she would have given her life to see” (*Atlas* 643). Both Galt and Roark are supremely confident and supremely rational,

something to which the reader may not be able to relate, but Rand counts on their desperately wanting to.

Other modernists also put strong emphasis on rationality. The early 1900s saw new developments in philosophy, science, and psychology, which encouraged a methodical approach to thought.

The continuing success of a method of inquiry that placed its faith firmly in precise and detailed observation, in the painstaking collection and collation of data, in the rational basis of causality, and in the reduction of the particular and the various to some form of comprehensive generality also had an irresistible appeal for those enquiring into the nature of social and individual behavior (McFarlane 73).

Though Rand is best known for her vendetta against communism, she felt that: “the basic issue in all her writing... was not so much individualism versus collectivism as reason versus mysticism” (Heller 221). She thought that readers with sufficient intellect would find her logic intriguing, arousing, and beautiful. This echoes Auguste Comte, who for McFarlane (*The Mind of Modernism*) was the forerunner of modernist thought. “For [Comte] real elegance and beauty could only manifest themselves where economy and reason were supreme” (McFarlane 74). This affinity for the rational connects to the “redemptive hope” of the “the quintessentially modern novel” (Matz 9). Though some artists and writers were extolling irrationality and nonsense, others were not only trying to manifest the confusion of the early twentieth century, they were also trying to resolve it—for Rand, this was done through reason.

D.H. Lawrence once said, “At its best, the novel, and the novel supremely, can help you. It can help you not be the dead man in life” (Matz 10). This quote could have easily belonged to Rand. To her, to be a “dead man” in life would be to embrace the irrational and the collective. As stated above, Rand’s work was a reaction to communism.

Many people view modernism as a primarily leftist and liberal movement. This is not necessarily true. Peter Gay finds this assumption quite false, using the example of Paul Durand-Ruel, the first art dealer who advocated modernism. “It is worth noting that in the midst of his aesthetic radicalism, Durand-Ruel was a consistent reactionary in matters of religion and politics, a good Catholic and loyal monarchist—yet another refutation of the legend that modernists are unswervingly on the left” (Gay 91). Modernism, as an avant-garde movement, did pride itself on being “at odds with dominant, ‘official’ styles of thought and practice” (Gay 45). While it may seem as though the dominant mindset of the period shied away from communism, the Hollywood and New York elite to whom Ayn Rand was exposed were certainly biased towards the extreme left. Rand’s violent reaction against communism was at odds with her view of the era’s dominant trend and was, therefore, in line with modernism. So while Rand’s hyper-conservative stance on many issues seems to be counter-modernist one must remember that “political ideologies, though inviting, cannot serve to define modernism, since it is compatible with virtually every creed, including conservatism, indeed fascism, and with virtually every dogma from atheism to Catholicism” (Gay 4).

While some modernist novels prided themselves on diverging from the standard formulas of plot, form, and meaning, not all modernists rejected having a message in their novels. “Strange new forms did not necessarily mean ‘worship of the meaningless’” (Matz 78). Many modern writers such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Joseph Conrad used their novels to advance a political idea. “For the new forms of the modern novel were of course provoked by real-world social and political problems and events” (Matz 78).

Joseph Conrad wrote *Heart of Darkness* after he had been to the Congo and wanted to illuminate what he had discovered there. *Heart of Darkness* is a novel designed to expose the truth about imperialism to the public. Ayn Rand’s first novel, *We the Living*, the most autobiographical of her works, is written about a teenaged girl in the Soviet Union. This work serves a purpose similar to that of Conrad’s book, to expose the truth about socialism to the public.

While Conrad’s book was published before the peak of modernism, critics agree that most modernist political novels were published after the 1920s. As noted earlier, modernism bounced back into life in the late 1930s, though it was a little altered. Aldous Huxley commented: “a reaction had begun to set in— away from the easy-going philosophy of general meaninglessness towards the hard, ferocious ideologies of nationalistic and revolutionary idolatry” (Matz 90). This trend served Rand well; never willing to compromise, she served her opinions undiluted and unapologetically. “Modernists were on the whole less enthusiastic about the political or doctrinal middle of the road than the extremes” (Gay 2).

Rand's works are also similar to a post-1930s novel, George Orwell's *1984*. Orwell thought that extreme sentiments were prone to sounding overly demanding or precious. He wanted to find a "creative means to argue political points" (Matz 92). So was dystopia born, "the ideal brainchild of the conflicting political and aesthetic demands of the day" (Matz 92). *1984* is set in a future where extreme totalitarian rule has banned every individual freedom, including privacy. *Atlas Shrugged* is set in a future where government conspirators try to control the economy for their own gain resulting in a error ridden system that eventually causes the city of New York to shut down entirely.

Rand's shortest, but most dystopic novel, is also similar to *1984*, though it preceded it by thirteen years. *Anthem* shows a world where the word "I" has been eliminated and every citizen works, eats, and sleeps for the community, never allowed to be alone. The hero, Equality 7-2521, sneaks off by himself and finds a cave full of artifacts from the past, including a light bulb, something nonexistent in his time. Equality is then consumed by a desire to uncover what the past was like, before the all-consuming community. "*Anthem* has most often been compared to *1984*, in which the hero, Winston Smith, also attempts to rediscover the lost world of the pre-totalitarian past" (Heller 103). Something that distinguishes Orwell's and Rand's novels is the presence of hope. *1984* ends with the hero failing, succumbing to Big Brother, indicating that the totalitarian system will succeed. *Anthem* ends with Equality escaping with another worker and discovering the existence, meaning, and importance of the word "I." *Atlas Shrugged* ends with New York City falling into darkness, yes, but

with the hope that, though the entrepreneurs, inventors, and other capitalist businesspeople have sequestered themselves, they will return one day to set the world right once again. Orwell shows totalitarianism as a system that works where “Rand concluded—long before most others—that totalitarianism *doesn’t* work” (Heller 104).

Another pervasive theme in modernist work is overt sexuality and eroticism. Modern works prided themselves on a real and gritty depiction of daily physical life. Sex becomes an act not to be glossed over as in previous periods, but to be explored and described in real terms instead of romantic terms. “The new effort to ground fiction in the details of physical life made it better able to deal with the new sexuality that had become so controversial and essential a feature of modern life” (Matz 79).

Modernists wanted to push past sexual mores. Rand does this through her fascination with sexual domination. One of the most shocking scenes of her books is *The Fountainhead’s* sex scene between Dominique Francon and Howard Roark. Their encounter is one of many strange and erotic scenes that occur throughout the book. “Sex permeates *The Fountainhead*... And sadomasochism permeates the sex” (Heller 112). Dominique had met Roark once before, when he fixed part of her marble fireplace. When she saw him again he was walking home from his job at the quarry and she slapped him with her riding switch. That night he comes to her house and forces himself upon her in an act of strange consensual rape. “The most celebrated scene in the novel is the so-called rape scene... As she [Dominique] fights, she thinks that if

he were less detached, less cruel, she would not want him” (Heller 113). Rand depicts a woman who enjoys violence, sex and the combination of the two. “She fought like an animal. But she made no sound. She did not call for help” (*Fountainhead* 216). Dominique calls their act one of “defilement,” yet when he leaves she refrains from bathing, wanting to keep “the traces of his body on hers” (*Fountainhead* 217-218).

This extremity in sex is used to symbolize the hatred they both feel towards the current trend in society and Dominique’s desire to find an intellectual and philosophical equal. While their sex scenes are often bathed in violence, their hatred is not channeled towards each other, but rather the parts of society they cannot control. Dominique’s affinity for being dominated does not indicate a weakness; rather the desire to find a man physically stronger than her symbolizes the desire to find a man as mentally strong as her. In Joyce Wexler’s analysis of extremity in modernist portrayals of sex, she says that extremity allows sex to go beyond what is obvious or empirical and become a symbol (Wexler 167). Rand makes good use of this symbol throughout her books. Francisco d’Anconia of *Atlas Shrugged* “explains that sexual desire in a rational man is an expression of his highest values” (Heller 192). Sex becomes a way for the heroes of her novels to find each other and to express their rage with society, or express their desire to find an equal, or express their power over their own fate. These unconventional sex scenes make it easy for readers to recognize the scene as representing more than just sex.

Michael Trask's essay on class and sex in American fiction asserts that after the turn of the century, the novel lost interest in depicting sex as something that "had to be normalized and rectified through the marriage plot" (Trask 73). Rather, that novel began to focus on "sexual competition...unchecked by moral stays or cultural mandates" (Trask 73). Rand's depiction of sex is evocative of a competition of sorts. Her characters are brutal in their love-making. And none of them are married. Trask emphasizes that the modern novel focused on showing the instability of sex and relationships. Instead of making love a stalwart figure of morality as it had been during the previous century, modern authors focused on the transience of love and sex. Trask give the example of the characters in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* as representing the drifting nature of sex. The characters in *The Sun Also Rises* not only roam from destination to destination, but also from sexual partner to sexual partner (Trask 80). This emphasis on the ephemeral nature of sex and love was a large change between the literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Rand's characters exemplify transience in love and sex. Dagny Taggart of *Atlas Shrugged* begins a relationship with a married man, carries on a flirtation with a lover from her youth, and eventually leaves both of them for her ideal man, John Galt.

Sex in modernist novels also served more than a symbolic function. Jesse Matz, when speaking of *Lolita*, explains, "the theme of shocking sexuality enhanced the vitality and viability of modern fiction" (Matz 120). A book that may otherwise seem tedious and whose storyline is dull benefits from this

sexual iconoclasm. If Rand's books seemed unexciting and repetitious, her sex scenes certainly added a strong element of the unexpected. Rand liked to portray her female characters as powerful and almost masculine. Their deepest sexual desire is to be with a man who, as their intellectual and moral equals, can dominate them. These "power-driven sex scenes" were extremely shocking in their sensual-violent content (Heller 192). Rand was very aware of what she was doing and the sexual element in her books was very important to her. In 1948 she listed the main elements of her novels as: "metaphysics, morality, politics, economics and sex" (Heller 219). No doubt this emphasis on sex attracted some readership.

There are some other common themes to modernism with which Ayn Rand's works fit, but not in an expected way. Modern industrialization produced consumers who viewed their purchases as the product of a machine. Resources, labor, and human ingenuity were undermined by the novelty of mass production. "They [consumers] may well most typically see objects, to the exclusion of the human processes that went into them" (Godden 188). Many modern writers strained against this perception. Hemingway, for example, emphasized the good feelings—the "old feeling"—that come from the outdoors, open spaces, and bullrings (Godden 184). Rand opposed the perceived mechanization of production as well. However, instead of reminding her readers of the pleasures of nature, she reminded them of the ingenuity of humans. Her books praise production and consumption with the stipulation that

the genius of man is exalted. By putting the human back into production, Rand is accomplishing the same goal that Hemingway sought by trout fishing.

Another example of Rand's twist on a modernist theme is her depiction of the city. Many modernist works put an emphasis on the city, a new and dominant part of modern life. Most modernist works view the city as superficial, threatening, and dehumanizing. Rand also puts a large emphasis on the city in her books; however, she views the city as the epitome of human achievement and idolizes it. She recalled that when she first saw New York City, one skyscraper stood out "ablaze like the finger of God, and seemed to me the greatest example of free men" (Schleier 312). Though this interpretation of the city is different from many modernists, it is still a reaction to the modern. While some modernists thought that the stimuli of the city were overwhelming and would deaden the human senses, Rand thought that the stimuli of the city were inspiring and could push humanity to become more inventive and productive. The typical modernist view was that "the city-dweller becomes 'blasé,' and so it also became fiction's job to keep the city-dweller from hardening into defensive lifelessness" (Matz 68). Rand would say that it was fiction's job to encourage the city-dweller to look in awe upon this great human achievement and strive to do even better. While these are opposing views, they are reacting to the same phenomenon.

Rand did allow that some modern achievements could be terrifying. This acknowledgment of the dual nature of the modern was common to modernists. "They turn on ambiguous images: the city as a new possibility and an unreal

fragmentation; the machine, a novel vortex of energy, and a destructive implement..." (Bradbury & McFarlane 49). While Rand idolized many machines, she does show a healthy fear of their capacity for destructiveness. Dr. Robert Stadler of *Atlas Shrugged* helps to invent a machine that is effectively a death ray. After Stadler realizes this machine is in the wrong hands, an argument and struggle ensues and it is accidentally activated, killing himself, everyone else in the building, and possibly people within a one hundred mile radius (*Atlas* 1037). While that machine was being used for destruction, *Atlas Shrugged* also contains John Galt's engine, a machine that can convert static electricity into a usable power source— clean energy before it became vogue (*Atlas* 656). Though Rand tends to look upon the city and the machine in a more optimistic light than other modernists, she incorporates both sides of modern technology— the destructive and the creative.

Another common theme from which Ayn Rand differs somewhat, is that of heroism in her main characters. Modernists wanted to show the deep reality of people, something sometimes gritty and shameful. "Characters in modern novels are not heroes: they are rarely singled out for their superior traits" (Matz 45). Modernist main characters were often anti-heroes, for example Leopold Bloom of *Ulysses* is preoccupied with the physical aspects of life, and the reader is with him through all the mundane and foul parts of his day. Modernists were rebelling against the past, romantic interpretations of what a main character should be. "To be a hero in the old sense, a character not only has to represent his or her culture's best powers and features. He or she must

live in a world in which individuals belong, in which the individual's needs can match up with society at large" (Matz 47). These new, anti-heroes, opposed society; their creators wanted them to show the dark underbelly of society, not a rose-colored creation of what one was "supposed" to be. Like modernist anti-heroes, Rand's main characters did not fit in with society.

While Rand always painted her heroes as just that—heroes—they are not romantic heroes. They do not match up with the public at large. They are certainly ideals, what Rand thought people could—at their best—be, but they are not suited to the rest of society. In each of her books, the main character is an outcast, not what a romantic hero would be. But instead of being outcast for their flaws—as most modernist characters would have been—they are outcast for their virtues.

Modernists revered the outcast man. "Alienation became definitive; character came to be something defined in terms of opposition to society" (Matz 47). While Rand's protagonists were still portrayed as epic heroes—as in romantic writing—however, she made clear that they were the opposite of mainstream society. John Galt of *Atlas Shrugged* makes the decision to essentially betray the majority of mankind and let society slip into self-destruction. Howard Roark of *The Fountainhead* is ridiculed and even arrested for his iconoclastic architecture.

The Fountainhead offers a unique crossover into another realm of modernism: architecture. Frank Lloyd Wright is the most recognizable proponent of modernist architecture in the United States. His emphasis on

clean lines and open spaces opposed all past architectural styles— from Victorian to Greek (Gay 282). Rand was obsessed with the idea of the skyscraper and for her book *The Fountainhead* she began to research the design philosophy behind them. She read “pivotal modernist texts” by architects such as Le Corbusier and Louis Sullivan as well as architectural critics and historians including Lewis Mumford and Sheldon Cheney (Schleier 311). She also read Frank Lloyd Wright’s 1932 book, *An Autobiography*, and used parts of his style and philosophy in molding her architect, Howard Roark (Heller 114).

In *The Fountainhead*, Roark refuses to emulate past styles; he thinks that trying to force old techniques to serve new purposes is a betrayal to architecture and an insult to the architect. “Nothing can be reasonable or beautiful unless it’s made by one central idea, and the idea sets every detail,” Roark says (*Fountainhead* 24). This is also Rand’s stylistic credo. Roark maintains that the site, the purpose, the materials should determine how a building is constructed, not what others have built in the past. This echoes Wright’s opinion. Wright thought that:

his colleagues had consistently misread the promise of recently invented mechanisms as they continued to design buildings that were pale and clumsy imitations of a largely irrelevant past. “Badgered into all manner of structural gymnastics,” [Wright] noted, architects felt compelled to disguise structural steel with marble décor that added nothing to making a house a work of art. (Gay 290)

Roark says much the same thing when noting that the décor on columns was put there to hide the joints in wood, except that columns aren’t made of wood

anymore: “Why?” he asks the dean of his school (*Fountainhead* 23). Wright would agree: “[Wright’s] call for honesty was a call for simplicity... ‘certain simple forms and handling are suitable to bring out the beauty of wood and certain forms are not’” (Gay 291). Howard Roark and Frank Lloyd Wright called for forward-thinking architecture: Architecture unique to present day. “The disputes common among Victorian builders and their clients about which historical style, Greek or Venetian or Renaissance, was superior to its rivals—that is to say, more ‘honest’—struck Wright, along with other modernists, as a reactionary escape from living in the present, a betrayal of their craft” (Gay 288). Rand incorporated this modern element into her novels, along with a dystopia showing the fear and confusion of the modern period.

The last key element of the modern novel is its form. “They [modernists] thought that the experience of reading, even the very relationship among words on a page, should mimic the disorienting experience of modern living” (Matz 28). Many modern novels have a disjointed narrative, evoking a feeling of disorientation from the reader. Many used unique points of view or dialogue. The goal of modernism was to be different—not only in subject matter, but also in the very way the story is told. The novels published in the beginning of the twentieth century were conventional and, to modernists, stale and pointless. These novels “told [their] stories from on high, from the point of view of some impossible, all-knowing, godlike observer; [they] pretended to tell a seamless story from start to finish; and [they] always put a positive last spin on things, in neat and tidy endings” (Matz 8-9). This is exactly what modern novelists were

rebellious against and these were the first things they got rid of. Omniscient narrators were eschewed; chronologically progressing stories were avoided; and happy endings were sidelined.

Ayn Rand's novels are considerably more straightforward than some modern novels. However, this does not exclude her from the modernist movement. Some novels are written conventionally enough, but their subject matter makes them modern, for example Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* from the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem Renaissance writers often debated whether it was better to be politically or artistically significant (Matz 88-89). Rand's subject matter was certainly modern and her form—while more forthright—still offered new twists on characterization and structure.

Modernism's stance on characterization is nicely summed up in Virginia Woolf's response to the criticism that her characters were not "real" enough. Woolf responded that modern reality itself has become a question: "He says that it is only if the characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?" (Matz 5). A common criticism of Rand's characters is that they are not "real" as well because Rand was displaying a different form of characterization.

Rand's characters are illustrated through what Rand extols throughout her novels—actions. The reader is never let in to the mind of the characters. Rarely does the reader see the words "thought" and even more rarely the word "feel." Her characters are not revealed through their feelings, but rather through

their actions. The power that actions can have is exemplified well in a passage from *Atlas Shrugged*. Dagny has met John Galt and is relishing the power she feels that she must have over him. Then suddenly she feels the tables turn:

She groped, stunned, for its cause—only to realize that he had leaned a little to one side and it had been no more than the sight of an accidental posture, of the long line running from his shoulder to the angle of his waist, to his hips, down his legs. She looked away... and she dropped all thoughts of triumph and of whose was the power. (*Atlas* 713)

This small incident illustrates how important what a person does is to Rand's books. How her characters present themselves, how they stand or look in rest is always significant. The opening scene of *The Fountainhead* sets the stage for her hero, Howard Roark, by showing him, posed naked against the sky, describing him in terms not unlike those she uses to describe her skyscrapers: "His body leaned back against the sky. It was a body of long straight lines and angles, each curve broken into planes. He stood, rigid, his hands hanging at his sides, palms out" (*Fountainhead* 15). He is the image of power and attention and throughout the book his actions and movements emphasize this and can reveal his thoughts or feelings.

Modernists, illustrating another common theme, disliked clean endings. In mimicking reality, modernists fought against closure and finality. "Plots end abruptly, with questions unanswered and expectations unfulfilled. If closure comes, it tends to come ironically, or as a total surprise" (Matz 41). Loose ends are as ubiquitous in modern novels as they are in real life. Rand's *We the Living* ends with a sort of finality, though a short and shocking one. As the main character, Kira, is attempting to illegally exit the Soviet Union, a guard thinks he

sees movement in the snowstorm. He shoots aimlessly into the drifts, dismissing the movement as a rabbit. Kira thinks, “Well, I’m shot” and staggers about for a page and in the last line, she dies (*We the Living* 462-464). This kind of chance pointlessness is common to modern novels. The “neat and tidy” endings of the nineteenth century were gone. *Atlas Shrugged* also ends without any concrete closure. The novel ends with the lights of New York City going out, symbolizing the last monument to man’s ingenuity—and to capitalism— falling. The reader sees that the system has literally reverted back to covered wagons as the last of the trains stop functioning. The last scene is of the sequestered entrepreneurs and engineers plotting their return to the world, to start over— but the reader knows that good people like Eddie Willers, Dagny’s assistant, have been left behind and are being destroyed (*Atlas* 1060-1069). While this is more closure than other modern novels give, it is far from the happy and neat endings of nineteenth and early twentieth century novels. *Atlas Shrugged* ends with the world plunging into darkness and *We the Living* ends with the main character aimlessly being shot.

Modernists also experimented with the time spent illustrating events, thoughts, and actions. “Modernist novelists dramatically reversed the customary allocation of space, devoting extensive passages to a single gesture or disposing of a protagonist in less than a sentence” (Gay 184). A rather famous segment of Ayn Rand’s books that displays this lack of regard for customary storytelling is John Galt’s speech at the end of *Atlas Shrugged*. The speech spans fifty-six pages and took Rand over two years to complete (Heller

260). While this speech illustrates the important philosophical assertions that Rand wanted her readers to take away from the book, devoting an entire chapter of fifty-six pages to one man speaking is a bold move. While Ayn Rand may not perfectly embody every aspect that modernism is determined to have, her novels closely follow modern motivation, themes, and form.

The themes of Rand's books are dystopic and illustrate a lost and confused world. The forms of her books deviate from the traditional romantic style, including outcast main characters, unique characterization, and allocating a long passage to a single soliloquy. Her motivation is a reaction to the modern phenomenon of socialism. While Ayn Rand is not currently included in the modernist canon, she satisfies these three conditions. Rand, though often overlooked because of her polemical nature, fits with the modernist canon, and deserves attention as a literary figure as well as a political and philosophical one.

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