Thursday, October 18, 2007

That Winston Tunnel Scene in Full

As part of our "Atlas Shrugged" 50th Anniversary discussions, we present one of the most controversial passages from Ayn Rand's bestseller. Here the doomed Comet train, part of the decaying infrastructure in slow motion collapse due to concomitant political, social and economic collapse, heads towards disaster in the eight-mile Winston tunnel:

"As the tunnel came closer, they saw, at the edge of the sky far to the south, in a void of space and rock, a spot of living fire twisting in the wind. They did not know what it was and did not care to learn.

It is said that catastrophes are a matter of pure chance, and there were those who would have said that the passengers of the Comet were not guilty or responsible for the thing that happened to them.

The man in Bedroom A, Car No. 1, was a professor of sociology who taught that individual ability is of no consequence, that individual effort is futile, that an individual conscience is a useless luxury, that there is no individual mind or character or achievement, that everything is achieved collectively, and that it's masses that count, not men.

The man in Roomette 7, Car No. 2, was a journalist who wrote that it is proper and moral to use compulsion 'for a good cause' who believed that he had the right to unleash physical force upon others - to wreck lives, throttle ambitions, strangle desires, violate convictions, to imprison, to despoil, to murder - for the sake of whatever he chose to consider as his own idea of 'a good cause', which did not even have to be an idea, since he had never defined what he regarded as the good, but had merely stated that he went by 'a feeling' -a feeling unrestrained by any knowledge, since he considered emotion superior to knowledge and relied soley on his own 'good intentions' and on the power of a gun.

The woman in Roomette 10, Car No.3, was an elderly schoolteacher who had spent her life turning class after class of helpless children into miserable cowards, by teaching them that the will of the majority is the only standard of good and evil, and that a majority may do anything it pleases, that they must not assert their own personalities, but must do as others were doing.

The man in Drawing Room B, Car No. 4, was a newspaper publisher who believed that mend are evil by nature and unfit for freedom, that their basic interests, if left unchecked, are to lie, to rob and murder one another - and, therefore, men must be ruled by means of lies, robbery and murder, which must be made the exclusive privilege of the rules, for the purpose of forcing men to work, teaching them to be moral and keeping them within the bounds of order and justice.

The man in Bedroom H, Car No. 5, was a businessman who had acquired his business, an ore mine, with the help of a government loan, under the Equalization of Opportunity Bill.

The man in Drawing Room A, Car No 6, was a financier who had made a fortune by buying 'frozen' railway bonds and getting his friends in Washington to 'defreeze' them.

The man in Seat 5, Car No.7, was a worker who believed that he had "a right" to a job, whether his employer wanted him or not.

Are You A Rand Cultist, Or Just A Fan? Take This Simple Test To Find Out.

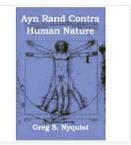
 http://aynrandcontrahumannature.blogspot. com/2009/04/are-you-rand-cultist-take-oursimple.html

what they"re saying about the ARCHNblog:

"This wonderful blog chronicles exactly why and to what extent Ayn Rand was horribly incorrect on a number of issues. This is for the fence-sitting and fanatic but otherwise intelligent Objectivist alike. If the latter even exists. Highly recommended, but come prepared with your Rand collection..." - Commerican at Stumbleupon

"ARCHN is the work of a despicable mind"- R
Bramwell

About the book



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The woman in Roomette 6, Car no. 8, was a lecturer who believed that, as a consumer, she had "a right" to transportation, whether the railroad people wished to provide it or not.

The man in Roomette 2, Car No. 9, was a professor of economics who advocated the abolition of private property, explaining that intelligence plays no part in industrial production, that man's mind is conditioned by material tools, that anybody can run a factory or a railroad and it's only a matter of seizing the machinery.

The woman in Bedroom D, Car No. 10, was a mother who had put her two children to sleep in the berth above her, carefully tucking them in, protecting them from drafts and jolts; a mother whose husband held a government job enforcing directives, which she defended by saying, 'I don't care, it's only the rich that they hurt. After all, I must think of my children.'

The man in Roomette 3, Car No. 11, was a sniveling little neurotic who wrote cheap little plays into which, as a social message, he inserted cowardly little obscenities to the effect that all businessmen were scoundrels.

The woman in Roomette 9, Car No. 12, was a housewife who believed that she had the right to elect politicians, of whom she knew nothing, to control giant industries, of which she had no knowledge.

The man in Bedroom F, Car No.13, was a lawyer who had said, 'Me? I'll find a way to get along under any political system.'

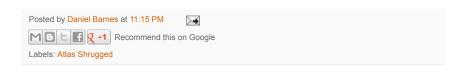
The man in Bedroom A, Car No.14, was a professor of philosophy who taught that there is no mind - how do you know that the tunnel is dangerous? - no reality - how can you prove that the tunnel exists? - no logic - why do you claim that trains cannot move without motive power? - no principles - why should you be bound by the laws of cause and effect? - no rights - why shouldn't you attach men to their jobs by force? - no morality - what's moral about running a railroad? - no absolutes - what difference does it make to you whether you live or die anyway?. He taught that we know nothing - why oppose the orders of your superiors? - that we can never be certain of anything - how do you know you're right? - that we must act on the expediency of the moment - you don't want to risk your job do you?

The man in Drawing Room B, Car No.15, was an heir who had inherited his fortune, and who had kept repeating, 'Why should Rearden be the only one permitted to manufacture Rearden Metal?'

The man in Bedroom A, Car no. 16, was a humanitarian who had said, 'The men of ability? I do not care what or if they are made to suffer. They must be penalized in order to support the incompetent. Frankly, I do not care whether this is just or not. I take pride in not caring to grant any justice to the able, where mercy to the needy is concerned.'

These passengers were awake; there was not a man aboard the train who did not share one or more of their ideas. As the train went into the tunnel, the flame of Wyatt's Torch was the last thing they saw on earth."

- Ayn Rand, "Atlas Shrugged", p566-568



57 comments:

Kelly said...

"These passengers were awake; there was not a man aboard the train who did not share one or more of their ideas. "

Except for maybe the 2 children in Car No.10 . But if the woman is guilty for being married to a man who works for the government, maybe the kids are guilty too. Thank god Rand brought moral clarity to world.

commented on An Objectivist Answers Burkowski commented on An Objectivist ● On 29 june 2013, at 15:48, Samson Corwell commented on Now We Know on An Objectivist Answers ⊕ On 29 june 2013, at 11:08, Jzero commented on Open Thread ♣ On 29 june 2013, at 10:55, Lloyd Flack commented on Now We Know commented on An Objectivist Answers ⊕ On 29 june 2013, at 07:48, Xtra Laj commented on Open Thread commented on Open Thread ⊕ On 29 june 2013, at 06:43, Xtra Laj commented on Open Thread commented on Open Thread commented on Open Thread On 01 july 2013, at 01:55, David commented on Ayn Rand & Epistemology 35 On 30 june 2013, at 12:51, Daniel Barnes commented on An Objectivist Answers commented on An Objectivist Answers ■ On 30 june 2013, at 09:24, Melab commented on An Objectivist Answers ♣ On 30 june 2013, at 07:38, Gordon Burkowski commented on An Objectivist

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10/19/2007 03:33:00 PM



Mark Plus said...

You have to wonder how much passenger business Dagny would do if she could screen out all the philosophically undesirable people like the ones in the tunnel accident. Even her freight business delivered the goods these people consumed, so in a way she enabled the growth of the population which threatened to overwhelm Earth's Objectivist carrying capacity.

10/19/2007 05:09:00 PM

Guru Banana said...

Well, it's clearly a piece of vicarious revenge-taking against those she feels are her enemies, and doubtless some of them represent people who have genuinely slighted her in the past. It's very immature, but I suspect we've all indulged in these fantasies from time to time, and probably still do (well I do anyway!).

The question is whether Rand really believed that people like these deserved to die, and I have the horrible suspicion that she did: this is not a tolerant or forgiving creed.

I have to confess that I am somewhat prejudiced against Objectivism and Objectivists - being described as an insect on a MySpace group was something of a rude introduction to the philosophy - but I feel there **is** something of value in it. Whether there is **enough** of value to maintain the interest of a left-wing European libertarian is something that remains to be discovered, but I suspect the answer is 'no'. I'll keep reading for a while and see.

In the (likely) event of this being my last post here, I wish you all the best.

10/19/2007 05:21:00 PM

gregnyquist said...

guru banana: "Well, it's clearly a piece of vicarious revenge-taking against those she feels are her enemies"

I think this is right. In any case, it explains the tone of contempt throughout AS. The point of the book is not to convert people to Rand's view (how could it be?—you don't convert anyone by first insulting them), but simply to work off feelings of frustration against those who refuse to agree with Rand. AS, then, is best seen as a revenge fantasy. Is this a good thing or bad thing? It would be a good thing if it helped Rand and her followers work off steam and get all those bad emotions out of their system. It would be a bad thing if it simply worked up those emotions and intensified them.

10/20/2007 04:48:00 PM

Jay said...

I have a different opinion on the matter.

When I read Atlas Shrugged I don't come away feeling bitter and looking for people to take revenge on. I usually feel inspired. I like reading about how Rearden or Francisco overcame some obstacle greater than whatever I'm facing. It helps me think "It might suck right now, but I can overcome it" rather than "Oh well, fuck it."

I always say Atlas as the literary antidote to the passive "Oh well, whaddaya gonna do?" logic that chokes the world. I think mature readers of Atlas conclude something similar.

10/21/2007 10:28:00 AM

Daniel Barnes said...

Jay

>When I read Atlas Shrugged I don't come away feeling bitter and looking for people to take revenge on. I usually feel inspired.

Well, you are probably using Rand correctly, in my opinion. Sheer inspiration is usually a good thing. Taking her actual doctrines more seriously, however - for example, her absolutism, or her psychological theories - is where the real problems emerge.

10/21/2007 12:21:00 PM

Olivia Pierson said...

Oh dear, so much for intelligent comment.

- **2008** (122)
- **2007** (134)
 - December (20)
 - November (19)
 - ▼ October (16)

The Cognitive Revolution & Objectivism, Part 1

The Passion of "Ayn Rand Contra Human Nature"'s Cr...

Rand on Compromise

Saturday Nite Whim-Worshipping

Naturalist Theory of Emotions

Dear Dr Leonard

Rand's Theory of Emotions Examined

That Winston Tunnel Scene in Full

"From Romantic Fallacy to Holocaustic Imagination"...

Honesty in Objectivism

"To a gas chamber - go!"

Atlas Debunked

Alas, "Atlas"

Understanding Objectivist Jargon Pt 13: "Sacrifice...

Ayn Rand Quote of the Week - 4/10/07

Anon: "As for your point about the rationalization...

- ► September (11)
- ► August (5)
- ▶ July (16)
- ▶ June (5)
- May (12)
- ► April (4)
- March (6)
- February (16)January (4)
- **2006** (43)

The Shorter ARCHN: A brief summary (under construction)

- - Introduction
- Theory Of Human Nature
- · Theory Of History

THE ARCHN FILES:

Just Some of the topics we cover:

- Aesthetics
- Altruism
- ARCHN Quotes Of The Week
- Atlas Shrugged
- Ayn Rand Institute
- Ayn Rand Quotes Of The Week
- Cognitive Science
- Criticism of ARCHN
- Critics Who Refuse To Actually Read ARCHN
- DIM Hypothesis

Well, it's clearly a piece of vicarious revenge-taking against those she feels are her enemies, and doubtless some of them represent people who have genuinely slighted her in the past. It's very immature, but I suspect we've all indulged in these fantasies from time to time, and probably still do (well I do anyway!).

GB... have you ever heard of the concept of projection and the tendency human beings have toward it? Because you may have revenge fantasies does not mean that's what Rand is indulging here. Spare the cheap psychologizing please.

And this -

Nyquist: I think this is right. In any case, it explains the tone of contempt throughout AS. The point of the book is not to convert people to Rand's view (how could it be?—you don't convert anyone by first insulting them), but simply to work off feelings of frustration against those who refuse to agree with Rand. AS, then, is best seen as a revenge fantasy.

You keep going on about the contempt in Atlas - you're really stuck on it, huh.

What about the passion, the intelligence, the greatness of the heroes, the SEX, the villains, the sense of grandeur and the amazingly intricate plot?!

You take, in my opinion, a very shallow view when you say that it is a "revenge fantasy." Sure revenge is part of the picture (I'm thinking of the avenging angel Ragnar Danneskjold), but Atlas is a "you can't have your cake and eat it too" story.

This tunnel scene is exactly that. You can't advocate nor contribute to the mindless abdication of responsibility or truth AND have that society provide you with safe transport on demand. Something's gotta give.

Remember the novel is fictitious - New York is a winter away from starvation. Rand has painted a picture of extremes for the purpose of her story.

Thoughts, words and deeds are pulled into sharp focus with little time delay between them, in order to illustrate the human capability/desire for the ideal.

10/21/2007 09:13:00 PM



Olivia Pierson said...

Mark Plus -

You have to wonder how much passenger business Dagny would do if she could screen out all the philosophically undesirable people like the ones in the tunnel accident. Even her freight business delivered the goods these people consumed, so in a way she enabled the growth of the population which threatened to overwhelm Earth's Objectivist carrying capacity.

Um Mark... this is why Galt declares war on her and pledges to destroy her railroad.

(See... Rand thought of it before you did!) ;-)

10/21/2007 09:15:00 PM

Jay said...

I actually DO find myself referring to Atlas Shrugged in real life situations.

For example, a girl I like told me tonight that her boyfriend went into a jealous rage because she makes more money than he does. His twisted logic was that since he's 5 years older and has more work experience he automatically deserves more money than she does.

To counteract that I told her that earning a lot of money through hard work is an amazing achievement to be proud of. I even sent her a link to Francisco's money speech. Is that a little cheesy? Probably. But my point is that I DO take her theories seriously and that's not always a bad thing.

10/21/2007 09:53:00 PM



Paul said...

My response would be that her boyfriend is too attached to things that are not his true self: he is not his job or his salary. In other words he should get over it and realize that his ultimate worth does not come from how much he is paid.

I'm not trying to say whose counter-argument is superior, but that different philosophies can overlap in their conclusions.

- Economics
- Emotions
- Essentialism
- Ethics/Morality
- · Fallacies of Objectivist Epistemology
- Founders College
- Human Nature
- Intellectual Development
- Journal Of Ayn Rand Studies
- Objectivist Oddities
- Objectivist Standards of Argument
- Passion of Ayn Rand's Critics
- Politics
- Pseudoscience
- Schisms
- Theory of History
- Understanding Objectivist Jargon

Selected Objectivist Reference Links

- The Objectivist Reference Centre
- The Ayn Rand Institute
- The Atlas Society

Some Criticisms of Objectivism

- · Chris Wolf's 'What's Really Wrong With Objectivism
- Critiques of Libertarianism: Ayn Rand
- Gary Merrill on the ITOE
- Greg Nyquist on Rand's Centenary
- Meg's Marginalia
- · Michael Prescott's essays on Ayn Rand
- · Objectivism Criticism
- Scott Ryan's technical critique of Rand
- The Randzapper

Recommended

- Professor Jennifer Burns, author of 'Goddess of the Market: Ayn Rand and the American Right"
- Objectiblog
- Catallaxy
- The Rathouse

10/21/2007 10:03:00 PM

Jay:

Daniel Barnes said...

>For example, a girl I like told me tonight that her boyfriend went into a jealous rage because she makes more money than he does. His twisted logic was that since he's 5 years older and has more work experience he automatically deserves more money than she does.

Your advice is of course admirable, but there is nothing distinctively Randian about the idea that people should be rewarded according to their merits, as opposed to merely age, years on the job, gender or race! This idea is commonplace, occuring in literally thousands of books other than "Atlas Shrugged." Hence we're more interested in examining the differentia of Rand's books - for example, Winston Tunnel - than the more generic features.

10/22/2007 01:24:00 AM

gregnyquist said...

Jay: "To counteract that I told her that earning a lot of money through hard work is an amazing achievement to be proud of. I even sent her a link to Francisco's money speech. Is that a little cheesy? Probably."

Well, if it works, it's all for the best. But you need to proceed very carefully about recommending AS to any women you might feel attracted to. I have received over the years several emails from women who have read AS on the recommendation of their boyfriends and have not liked what they have read. Indeed, they have begun to wonder whether they wanted to continue the relationship with their AS-admiring boyfriends. It's not just the books ideas that some of us find disturbing: more so, it's the temperment of the piece. AS may glory in heroic productivity and the like, but it is either hostile or indifferent to the softer virtues of family, empathy, and charity — virtues which, among some people, particularly women, count for a great deal.

10/22/2007 11:08:00 AM

Daniel Barnes said...

Incidentally Jay, can I just say...her boyfriend sounds like an idiot...;-)

10/22/2007 12:52:00 PM

Jay said...

My response would be that her boyfriend is too attached to things that are not his true self: he is not his job or his salary. In other words he should get over it and realize that his ultimate worth does not come from how much he is paid.

Agreed 100%.

10/22/2007 09:34:00 PM

Jay said...

Incidentally Jay, can I just say...her boyfriend sounds like an idiot...;-)

He is. I've found that getting girls to leave mean abusive boyfriends tough. Human inertia is a tough river to dam.

10/23/2007 07:48:00 PM

Eric said...

<< gregnyquist said: I have received over the years several emails from women who... begun to wonder whether they wanted to continue the relationship with their AS-admiring boyfriends. >>

If my girlfriend recommended a book with that many references to the stoic endurance of torture - mostly mental, but occasionally physical - I'd have second thoughts too. :-) I can only imagine how a woman might react to the "rape" in *The Fountainhead*. The inside of Rand's head was clearly not an all-ages ride.

2/12/2008 05:13:00 PM

Jay said...

I can see your guys' points. The girl I recommended Atlas to suffers from very low self-esteem

and passive acceptance of abuse from those around her. I figured it'd be a good read and an inspiration to start making some positive changes - especially since the main character is a female.

However, I don't believe Atlas is about endurance of torture. That is part of it, to be sure, but it's more about intransigently upholding a sense of your own value in all that you do.

Greg - what do some of those e-mails say? Are they confidential, or can you paraphrase them?

2/12/2008 05:39:00 PM

gregnyquist said...

Jay: "Greg - what do some of those e-mails say? Are they confidential, or can you paraphrase them?"

The emails were in response to a review I wrote about *Atlas* some years ago warning people that unless they agreed with Rand they might feel antagonized by the book. I received some emails agreeing with my review, and a couple woman expressed some concern about why their boyfriends had recommended to them the book. As I remember it, the emails somewhat playful and ironic, so I don't know how serious they were about the issue. Some women often will speak sardonically about their boyfriends to other people. So it may have simply been something along the lines of, "Well, I knew he wasn't perfect: this bizarre *Atlas* infatuation is just one more thing I'll have to live with." If, however, she was already thinking that she wanted out of the relationship, it could've been the proverbial straw.

2/13/2008 10:57:00 AM

Anonymous said...

The woman in Roomette 9, Car No. 12, was a housewife who believed that she had the right to elect politicians, of whom she knew nothing, to control giant industries, of which she had no knowledge.

Am I the only one who got a really sexist vibe off this part? I mean, it could easily be argued that Rand was arguing against ill-informed people voting, but her emphasis on housewife seems to suggest a contempt for a) housewives, b) "little" people, or c) women in general.

On another note, being ill-informed about certain certain things should not bar people from being part of the electoral process (though it certainly helps). I may not know much about the power industry, but that doesn't mean I won't vote to keep them from dumping their waste in my community's water supply.

However, I don't believe Atlas is about endurance of torture.

I dunno, I know a lot of non-Randroids who'd argue that reading Atlas Shrugged is torture.

6/12/2009 10:57:00 AM

Anon69 said...

YOU equate being a housewife with being "little" and then accuse RAND of being sexist? Take a good look in the mirror, Anonymous.

6/12/2009 12:03:00 PM

Cavewight said...

As a group, American women are the most privileged females on earth: they control the wealth of the United States—through inheritance from fathers and husbands who work themselves into an early grave, struggling to provide every comfort and luxury for the bridge-playing, cocktail-party-chasing cohorts, who give them very little in return. Women's Lib proclaims that they should give still less, and exhorts its members to refuse to cook their husbands' meals—with its placards commanding: "Starve a rat today!" (Where would the cat's food come from, after the rat is starved? Blank out.)

The notion that a woman's place is in the home—the Kinder-Kuche-Kirche axis—is an ancient, primitive evil, supported and perpetuated by women as much as, or more than, by men. The aggressive, embittered, self-righteous and envious housewife is the greatest enemy of the career woman.

Ayn Rand, The Age of Envy

6/12/2009 05:29:00 PM

Costa Rica Cheap Land for Sale said...

This comment has been removed by a blog administrator.

5/31/2010 01:15:00 PM

EriktheRed said...

AS may glory in heroic productivity and the like, but it is either hostile or indifferent to the softer virtues of family, empathy, and charity — virtues which, among some people, particularly women, count for a great deal.

A certain other group of people which we fought in the not-too-distant past had that same attitude.

7/31/2010 06:16:00 PM

Anonymous said...

I tried reading AS on three distinctly different occasions. Once n HS, once as a young father and once in my 40's. I have yet to be able to finish this god awful book.

The characters are shallow and completely lacking in depth. I found the story line heavily contrived. As with the Winston Tunnel scene, it's 3 full pages of pettiness.

When I read about this book now, I don't see a work of fiction, I see Ad Space intended for those who appreciate authoritarianism.

This woman's ideas deserve to be buried along with her.

8/01/2010 04:30:00 AM

Anonymous said...

"This woman's ideas deserve to be buried along with her."

Don't worry they were.

Steven Johnston

8/01/2010 05:48:00 AM

Anonymous said...

"I think mature readers of Atlas conclude something similar."

There are no mature readers of Atlas Shrugged.

8/02/2010 10:04:00 AM

Schroon Lake said...

She shows great moral clarity and humanity. I guess all the worthy people, then as now, were driving their SUVS instead of riding out of date subsidized rail.

8/24/2010 05:12:00 PM

Anonymous said...

Officer Barbrady sums up the book nicely: "Yes, at first I was happy to be learning how to read. It seemed exciting and magical, but then I read this: Atlas Shrugged by Ayn Rand. I read every last word, and because of this shit, I am never reading again."

11/23/2010 05:57:00 PM

Melody said...

Olivia: You CAN have your cake and eat it too, (what would be the point of having a cake if you didn't eat it?) What you cannot do is: Eat your cake, THEN have it too.

I am reading this 'wonderful' book this month, and I am only 1/4 through. So far I gotta say, someone should slap the editor of this book! If this was submitted to print today, it would be summarily rejected. Did Rand even bother with a second draft? She should have cut half the book. Too much repeating and obvious agenda propaganda. Tell the story and let the reader draw the conclusions. If the author does the job well, the theme will present itself naturally. You don't need to bludgeon the reader, finesse is to be admired over force.

12/06/2010 01:26:00 PM

Anonymous said...

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anders_Behring_Breivik

Objectivists have been slow to either praise on condemn this evil man...but surely in the context of the Winston tunnel scene they should surely praise his actions? After all his victims were looters

Steven Johnston

UK

8/12/2011 02:11:00 PM

Anonymous said...

In this section, Ayn Rand is not saying that her opponents should die, she's saying that people will die due to the failures of a planned economy. The power of individualistic capitalism (represent by Wyatt's Torch, something which the passengers did not want to know about) would have saved their lives. Dagny Taggart, in the novel, had wanted to rerail the track in the Winston Tunnel but was overruled by the government. It is that philosophy, which the passengers lived by, which killed them.

Glenn, UK.

5/16/2013 12:24:00 PM



Daniel Barnes said...

Hi Glenn.

Your last sentence entirely undermines your claim in the first sentence.

Daniel

5/16/2013 01:32:00 PM

Anonymous said...

Hi Daniel,

I'm not sure how my last sentence undermines my first. The passengers on the train lived by a philosophy of collectivism or were entirely apathetic to politics. It was a world of collectivism (within the novel) which prevented the track from being rerailed and thus caused the disaster. The wider issue considered in this section is the importance of people being involved in the political process in order to look after their own self-interest. Ayn herself said "I am interest in politics so that one day I will not need to be interested in politics". The philosophy of collectivism, by which the passengers lived, enabled the Winston Tunnel disaster to take place. The greatest example of this, in the real world, which I'm aware of is the massstarvation which took place in North Korea between 1994 and 1998, due to the inability of a planned economy to adequately distribute food. The story of the Winston Tunnel disaster merely illustrates the point that anyone of us could fall victim to a failure of the government if we don't look after our self-interest within a democratic political system (as the passengers had failed to do), and, thereby, allow a government to make such major mistakes.

Glenn.

5/18/2013 03:50:00 PM

Echo Chamber Escapee said...

Glenn, get your Atlas-facts right. The Winston Tunnel scene had very little to do with the rails and a lot to do with inhaling coal smoke. You left out the part where Kip Chalmers demands a nonexistent engine and a whole bunch of Taggart employees lack the nerve to explain to him what will happen if they take a coal-burner into the tunnel ... and a drunk engineer is dumb enough to think he can make it through. The disaster results from the choices the employees make.

Rand tries to blame those deadly choices on Directive 10-289 and a more generalized fear of Washington. She wants the disaster to be clearly a product of collectivism, not individual choice, so each employee's rotten decisions are, in turn, carefully chalked up to the corrosive effects of the system they're living under; we're supposed to sympathize with them (except of course for Locey and perhaps Mitchum).

Not so the passengers (who, except for Chalmers, aren't given any choice). Rand clearly thinks they all got what they deserved. Notice how she prefaces her recitation of their "crimes" with "there were those who would have said that the passengers of the Comet were not guilty or responsible for the thing that happened to them." Nobody writes "there are those who say X" unless they intend to convey that "those who say X" are wrong.

Not to mention that the ensuing disaster is cartoonish in its malevolence. First they're asphyxiated, then they're blown to bits by the collision with the Army train, then the mountain collapses on them. What can this be besides a vengeful author: "die ... and die some more

So no, the message isn't just "government regulation makes people less safe; isn't that sad." There's a very strong element of "brother, you asked for it!"

5/19/2013 03:28:00 AM

Anonymous said...

The phrase: "It is said that catastrophes are a matter of pure chance, and there were those who would have said that the passengers of the Comet were not guilty or responsible for the thing that happened to them," underlines my earlier point, that the passengers on the Comet had failed to interact within a democratic political system to prevent the Winston Tunnel disaster. There is no other way in which their philosophy led to their deaths.

The decision of Kip Chalmers to have a coal-burning train is clearly that of a collectivist who believes that the government can better direct resources that the capitalist. Whether the issue is the rails or the train, the Winston Tunnel disaster occurred due to the direct interventions of a collectivist government and would not have happened if a capitalist had been allowed to rerail the track or have a modern diesel engine. Rand's point is that this disaster would not have occured because of collectivism.

In terms of this scene being "cartoonish in its malevolence"; it is of course an extreme example of what disaster can occur under government planning, but a mild example would not have made such an interesting event in a novel, nor would it have drawn our attention to Rand's point on government intervention in such a way. After all, we are still discussing it 56 years later.

Glenn.

5/19/2013 06:07:00 AM



Michael Prescott said...

Whatever the merits or faults of Objectivism, I have to say (speaking from long experience as a fiction writer) that the Winston Tunnel scene is a brilliantly executed tour-de-force. The chain of events leading to the disaster is expertly presented, and the reactions of the various minor characters (passing the buck, betting against the odds, or slipping away fearfully into the night) are thematically appropriate and, I think, quite believable.

It's a real showstopper. From a technical standpoint at least, anyone would be proud to have written it.

As far as the issue of overkill is concerned, I think it was a plot-based decision. The tunnel had to be completely sealed off so that the railroad line could no longer be used. This is what motivates Dagny to return to work - not just that a lot of people died, but that all future traffic will have to be rerouted, a job presumably only she can do.

I'm sure Rand was indulging in some revenge fantasies in populating the train with her personal enemies, but anyone who thinks this is unusual doesn't know writers! I was once pulled over by a rude local cop. He was so nasty to me that he became the villain of my next novel - an ex-cop who is a psychopathic serial killer. Harlan Ellison has said that the names of the kids who bullied him in school turn up in his stories as particularly loathsome bad guys. One of the perks of fiction-writing is that you can create your own universe in which your enemies get what they deserve!

5/19/2013 09:11:00 AM



Daniel Barnes said...

Glenn:

>I'm not sure how my last sentence undermines my first.

To recap, you wrote:

>In this section, Ayn Rand is not saying that her opponents should die, she's saying that people will die due to the failures of a planned economy.

Then ended with:

>It is that philosophy, which the passengers lived by, which killed them.

Do you think that in this scene Ayn Rand is showing that all the passengers hold "anti-life"

If so, if you adopt an "anti-life" philosophy - and note how every person on the train lives by at least one such premise - what then should be the consequence of this?

5/20/2013 02:25:00 PM

Daniel Barnes said...

Michael P

>One of the perks of fiction-writing is that you can create your own universe in which your enemies get what they deserve!

I completely agree. However, this is far more than just a revenge trip. It is supposed to be a "philosophy in action" type moment.

Fortunately, when the Comet disaster was closely inspected later, it was discovered that there wasn't a single person aboard. The train had mysteriously been packed with straw men...;-)

5/20/2013 02:33:00 PM

Anonymous said...

Daniel:

In answer to your question: yes, the passengers on the train do hold anti-life philosophies, but Rand is not showing what SHOULD be the result of such philosophy, she is what what IS the result of such philosophy. Specifically, the anti-life philosophies of collectivism and nonengagement in politics resulted in the Winston Tunnel becoming unfit for purpose and enabled the disaster to occur.

At the beginning of this passage Rand points to the passengers as being responsible for the disaster. This is true only because their philosophies held that the government should prevent to rerailing of the track and the force the trains to run with steam powered engines (the causes of the disaster). This is a very clear relationship between a particular philosophy and the disaster.

Glenn

5/20/2013 04:52:00 PM



Daniel Barnes said...

Glenn:

>In answer to your question: yes, the passengers on the train do hold anti-life philosophies, but Rand is not showing what SHOULD be the result of such philosophy, she is [showing] what IS the result of such philosophy

OK. What according to Rand, should be the consequences of holding "anti-life" philosophies then?

You also seem to include "non-engagement in politics" as a reason for the tragedy. Are you saying Rand's message is that the passengers just didn't get out and vote enough? I can hardly think this is the case. For according to Objectivism, voters surely can only vote according to their philosophical premises, so they would have voted for collectivism anyway. As Rand goes to great trouble to enter the minds of the various passengers and show us their faulty premises, and notes that every single person who dies held at least one in their minds, the message it seems we are supposed to take from this is that even having one non-Randian premise is enough to prove personally fatal. It's just as well her chief protagonists give up their non-Objectivist premises by the end of the book, or else they probably would have copped it by the end too;-)

5/20/2013 05:57:00 PM



Michael Prescott said...

"the message it seems we are supposed to take from this is that even having one non-Randian premise is enough to prove personally fatal."

I think she was simply saying that these people, and millions like them, helped create the mess the world was in by not thinking rationally (as she saw it). It's not a matter of political involvement per se; Rand always stressed that AS was about the role of the mind in society, and that the political aspects were secondary.

She sees this seemingly random assortment of passengers as culpable to some extent, because (in her view) they have all made the choice not to think, to "blank out" reality, evade responsibility, and get something for nothing. Therefore they are not fully innocent. They are

responsible, albeit not primarily responsible, for the sorry state of the world.

I think it's a powerful statement, and even though I'm not an Objectivist, I don't find it objectionable. On the contrary: Rand's aim was to dramatize her ideas as starkly as possible, and she certainly succeeds here.

5/20/2013 10:41:00 PM

Anonymous said...

Daniel:

What should be the result be of anti-life philosophy (according to Rand)?: If you ignore the virtues of rationalism, indivdualism and self-esteem, I imagine that you'll be living only for the sake of others in a second-hand life. As Ayn said, "If people don't follow my philosophy, it's their loss not mine."

I attach the issue of the characters either not being involved in politics or by representing collectivist values because it was those practices which allowed the government to make the Winston Tunnel unsafe. The people on the train could have partaken in politics to prevent the government from insisting that the track should go without being rerailed. Ayn hold the passengers responsible for this reason. The message is that "If you allow a government to act according to collectivist principles, if you allow a government to run your life, they'll make these sorts of mistakes which could kill you." I point again to the example of mass-starvation in North Korea in the 1990s as a real-life example of this.

Glenn.

5/21/2013 07:13:00 AM

Daniel Barnes said...

Michael

>They are responsible, albeit not primarily responsible, for the sorry state of the world.

The question is, however, does the punishment fit the crime?

5/21/2013 06:43:00 PM

e ungtss said...

your notion of "punishment" implies some sort of anthropomorphic punisher she didn't subscribe to. in her philosophy, reality doesn't match any "punishment" to any "crimes" in any anthropomorphic sense. Cherryl died, not as a proportional punishment for any crimes, but from her own inability to cope with her terror. willers (presumably) dies not from any proportional punishment for his crimes, but from his unwillingness to let the railroad go.

they died not because some judge measured their sin up, but because reality is causal. this notion of an anthropomorphic reality doling out proportional punishments comes from a mystical outlook she would have rejected.

5/21/2013 09:17:00 PM

Anonymous said...

Yes. I can see little Alyssa now, dancing over the corpses of her fictionalized victims, giggling and clapping her hands in a state of narcissistic euphoria. For what are her masses but mud to be ground underfoot, fuel to be burned for those who deserve it?

5/22/2013 06:59:00 AM

e ungtss said...

to the extent one 1) interprets a book in light of an *a priori* caricature, and then applies that interpretation to one's understanding of a living human being person, rather than 2)seeking to understand a person in light of books and actions, one is guaranteed to both a) be wrong, and b) find every piece of evidence confirms one's wrong opinion.

5/22/2013 07:25:00 AM

ungtss said...

there's something disturbing to me about reading that passage in light of a little girl dancing over corpses. where did this image of a girl come from? she's clearly being projected by the reader, because she's not in the book. if anything, the book reflects disinterest in the corpses, not pleasure at their demise. and while that disinterest would be a fair subject of discussion

and criticism, that's not what ends up being criticized. instead, the discussion reverts to some bizarre caricature not remotely supported by the text.

where did this girl come from in the mind of the readers who find her there? was she there in the reader's mind to begin with?

5/22/2013 07:33:00 AM

ungtss said...

it reminds me of the classic conversation:

"What do you think of me?" "I don't think of you."

Her opponents get all wrapped up in her fictional obsessive hatred of those who opposed her ideas, and her fictional wish to trample the poor masses. and they use this as some sort of rationale for hating her back.

but her views couldn't be more different:). to her, you're not nearly so important as to merit an obsessive hatred, you're not even worth trampling, because the evil depends entirely on the good for its existence. without the good to sustain the evil, there simply is nothing left to

she says as much when she explains that the good has nothing to gain from the evil.

5/22/2013 11:15:00 AM



Daniel Barnes said...

>your notion of "punishment" implies some sort of anthropomorphic punisher she didn't subscribe to

But she did in fact appeal to "anthropomorphic punishers". For example in this passage:

"Justice does exist in the world, whether people choose to practice it or not. The men of ability are being avenged. The avenger is reality. Its weapon is slow, silent, invisible, and men perceive it only by its consequences—by the gutted ruins and the moans of agony it leaves in its wake. The name of the weapon is: inflation." - Ayn Rand, Egalitarianism and Inflation.

Note the anthropomorphisation of "reality" as an "avenger" of "justice" who even has "weapons" that leave "gutted ruins" and "moans of agony". Clearly punishment is being meted out by this "avenger" for past sins. It is, after all, "avenging" something!

This is, of course, a literary device in the service of a moral message. So this is not "my notion", but rather an implication that Rand quite deliberately inserts into her writing.

I will discuss this in a little more depth later, as it's an interesting area.

5/22/2013 12:33:00 PM

Echo Chamber Escapee said...

My problem with the Winston Tunnel sequence is the inconsistency in who gets judged and for what.

Rand chooses to portray the various Taggart employees who make the decisions that lead to the disaster basically as victims, trapped by circumstances beyond their control into a hopeless situation where they have to choose between their jobs (or so they assume) and the passengers' safety. The only exceptions to this are Clifton Locey and Dave Mitchum, both of whom evade their responsibilites, setting up others as scapegoats. We aren't told about the employees' political or social convictions, assuming they have any, and how those might have contributed (or not) to their present helpless position. They're just victims of circumstance, and who can blame them, really?

The passengers, on the other hand, are portrayed by implication as the real perpetrators (much more guilty than the employees), even though nobody asked them or warned them about what was going on. They had no opportunity to take a potentially lifesaving stand (except, of course, for Kip Chalmers). But they all brought their deaths on themselves because they held some wrong (per Rand) ideas.

So we have one set of people being judged as victims by one set of standards -- external circumstances over which they have no control, never mind whether any ideas they held might have contributed to creating their dilemma -- while another set of people are judged as perpetrators by a completely different set of standards -- holding the wrong ideas, never mind that they had no control over the Taggart employees' decisions. Is that consistent, or has

Rand once again dropped consistency in favor of making a point about who deserves to die?

5/22/2013 12:35:00 PM

Daniel Barnes said...

ECE:

>My problem with the Winston Tunnel sequence is the inconsistency in who gets judged and for what.

Exactly! But I don't have time to discuss right now, will do soon.

5/22/2013 12:49:00 PM

ungtss said...

Daniel, it's true she anthropomorphizes reality as an avenger, but not in the sense of an avenger that matches punishments to individual crimes. that's what I meant when I said "in her philosophy, reality doesn't match any "punishment" to any "crimes" in any anthropomorphic sense."

Inflation is a perfect example. If my savings are destroyed by inflation, it's not a proportional punishment for any crime I committed. To the extent it's punishment at all, it's simply the result of my a) giving my sanction to a government that destroys the value of money, and b) keeping my wealth in a form where inflation can destroy it.

That doesn't mean that if your life savings are wiped out, "you had it coming." as in the case of a judge determining the appropriate punishment for murder.

it's more like the punishment for smoking. nobody's saying a smoker "deserves" lung cancer; nor does anybody dance on a smoker's grave. but still, lung cancer is (in some number of cases) the punishment meted out by reality — not an a proportional, anthropomorphic sense, but in a broader causal sense.

5/22/2013 12:55:00 PM

ungtss said...

"Rand chooses to portray the various Taggart employees who make the decisions that lead to the disaster basically as victims, trapped by circumstances beyond their control into a hopeless situation where they have to choose between their jobs (or so they assume) and the passengers' safety."

I agree that if they are characterized that way, it would be inconsistent, but I didn't read her characterization of the employees' situation that way.

her main premise in the book is that if you continue to support an immoral system, you will be punished. as people continuing to uphold an immoral system, they were punished. why were they working for a railroad whose management evaded responsibility and threw underlings under the bus? why were they supporting a company whose top level people did what those top level people did?

her fundamental premise is that they were _wrong to stay_.

how then can she have meant to say they were innocent victims of circumstance?

5/22/2013 01:00:00 PM

Daniel Barnes said...

ungtss:

>it's more like the punishment for smoking. nobody's saying a smoker "deserves" lung cancer; nor does anybody dance on a smoker's grave. but still, lung cancer is (in some number of cases) the punishment meted out by reality.

Ok, let's apply this example to Rand's anthropomorphic literary device then:

"Justice does exist in the world, whether people choose to practice it or not. The non-smoking men of good health are being avenged. The avenger is reality. Its weapon is slow, silent, invisible, and men perceive it only by its consequences—by the gutted ruins and the moans of agony it leaves in its wake. The name of the weapon is: cancer."

I'm sorry, but I'm not really seeing how this changes much. If Rand actually wanted to create a different impression, perhaps she should have chosen a different device?

5/22/2013 01:20:00 PM



ungtss said...

i'd say that simply dropping "cancer" into that quote drops a critical pieces of context -- that cancer affects only an individual, while inflation affects everyone with money. this is significant because "men of ability:society" is not analogous to "men of good health:men of bad health." The former is a relationship of part of whole, while the latter is the a relationship of one part to another.

this would be closer:

"Justice does exist in the world, whether people choose to practice it or not. The healthy, youthful body you tormented with poison is being avenged. The avenger is reality. Its weapon is slow, silent, invisible, and men perceive it only by its consequences—by the gutted ruins and the moans of agony it leaves in its wake. The name of the weapon is: cancer."

By retaining the relationship of part:whole, rather than one part:another part, the sense is being retained -- and the sense is, "you may destroy a healthy body with poison; then reality will come right back and destroy you."

that said, I think rand's grasp on purely economic matters was pretty weak. as always, as a result of her failure to comprehensively apply her own fundamental premises. in particular, her focus on gold as "real, objective value" is nonsense. money is a means of exchange between values. the _things_, not the money, are what holds objective value.

to the extent a person holds one's savings in money, rather than in assets and investments, one is risking one's objective investment on a purely subjective value of money -- which can be changed in a moment.

her obsession with the gold standard at the end is, I think, one of the most conspicuous failings of her book. I only wish i'd had 20 minutes to explain that to her before it was too late:).

5/22/2013 01:36:00 PM



Bryan M. White said...

This comment has been removed by the author.

5/23/2013 05:22:00 AM



Bryan M. White said...

Wasn't the whole point of Atlas Shrugged the idea of leaving people to deal with the consequences of their own actions and their own evasions? I guess a 1000 plus pages wasn't enough to convey that message to you guys.

According to you, if I write a story where a guy refuses to get his brakes fixed and he is unable to stop and drives off a cliff, then apparently the moral of the story is that I'm a mean spiteful writer, rather than making a point about ignoring problems. And hey! For a bonus we can all sit around and make smart remarks about the possibilty that the guy's kids were in the car. Because that would make ME the jerk, right? Not the irresponsible father in the story. No! Never!

Wow, you guys have missed the point by entire continents.

6/03/2013 01:07:00 AM

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