

Rand's Theory of Rational Egoism as a Specimen of Myth-Making

Kamila N. Mirasova*

Kazan Federal University, Russia

Olga B. Karasik

Kazan Federal University, Russia

Andrey A. Astvatsaturov

Saint Petersburg Federal University, Russia

Abstract

The Russian-born American writer Ayn Rand (1905-1982) became famous as the founder of the objectivism philosophy. The quintessence of her philosophy is the ethical ideas of rational egoism. Rand justifies the kind of egoism which is not aimed at defying other people's rights and therefore does not result in conflict of interests. The article tackles the conception of rational egoism underlying Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged* in terms of myths of mass consciousness. In the context of popular literature, the notion "myth" is defined as "representations of truth", "supposed truth". The article is based on the proposition that popular literature depicts reality in accordance with myths circulating in mass consciousness and creates myths itself. The first thing that qualifies Rand's idea of rational egoism as a myth is its being presented as something undoubtedly "good" – thus the popular mythological opposition of "good versus evil" is shaped in Rand's novel. Another thing that contributes to the perception of the idea of rational egoism as a myth in the novel is its extremely positive and extremely negative characters, whose interaction creates the two-dimensional flat world of the novel. The analysis of these, as well as some other characteristics, allows to identify Ayn Rand's novels as a specimen of mass literature.

Keywords: Popular literature; Myth; Mass consciousness; Making.

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1. Introduction

The Russian-born American writer Ayn Rand (1905 – 1982) is the author of three novels, two of which, "The Fountainhead" (1943) and "Atlas Shrugged" (1957), got into the top-list of bestsellers in accordance with surveys conducted by The New York Times and The Library of Congress. Her first novel "We the Living" (1936) inspired by her own life experience in Soviet Russia before her emigration to the USA in 1926 has also sustained several reissues. The popularity of Rand's novels has spread over the borders of the USA – they have been translated into many languages, since the 1990-s Russian among them. In the last few decades Rand's novels have gained excessive popularity in her country of birth due to the topicality of their socio-economic themes in the years of economic depression in Russia. The themes and ideas of Rand's novels are traced back to her own philosophy, which she called objectivism and which she expounded on in a number of books on philosophy. As is noted in researches on Rand, her philosophy finds its fullest expression in her last novel, her magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). The core of Rand's philosophy is the ethical conception of rational egoism, which in its economic and political expression results in ardent advocacy of unfettered capitalism. The goal of this article is to correlate "Atlas Shrugged", a world bestseller, with popular literature by means of eliciting in Rand's ethical egoism the traits of a myth of popular literature.

2. Methods

The methodological basis of the research are academic works by ([Apenko, 2003](#); [Cawelty \(1976\)](#); [Cherchesov, 1991](#); [Zverev, 1991a](#)).

The research is done on the basis of the historical-literary approach in combination with the elements of the biographical and sociological methods.

3. Results and Discussion

Popular literature is known to have two images, one of which consists in modeling reality according to myths of mass consciousness while the other – in creating myths on its own; or, in other words, "it is both creature and creator of popular taste". In [Zverev \(1991a\)](#) researches the notion "myth" is used in the meaning which in a dictionary definition appears as "representations of truth", not being truth itself; or, as [Zverev \(1991b\)](#) himself puts it, as "what is supposed to be truth". The researcher continues characterizing myths in popular literature as "mystifications of the laws of reality", "fundamental beliefs and fantasies". Thus, the main criterion of identification of myth in popular literature appears to be the truthfulness of an artistic depiction of reality. All characteristics considered, myth

presents “the whole and self-sufficient truth” for those who accept it but from the outside is perceived as remaining far from reality (Harmon and Holman, 1996).

Bearing in mind the popularity of the ideological content of Ayn Rand’s novels, out of the two qualities of popular literature – to exploit ready-made myths and make its own – the second one is of greater importance for our research. Cherchesov (1991) explains the tendency of popular culture “to construct myths and cater for them” by the necessity of creating “certain pillars”, which could offer, if only on the superficial level, a solution to the complicated problems of present-day life. Characterizing them further, he notes that the “pillars” used for substituting real ideals should be easily recognizable, which determines one of the most indicative features of popular culture – its tendency to turn its creations into stereotypes. Apenko (2003) attributes the untruthfulness of an artistic re-creation of reality by popular literature to its “strict morality”, which meets society’s need for moral justice. According to the researcher, in popular literature a balance between ethics and aesthetics, which is inherent in any work of art, is distorted in favor of ethics (Geoghegan, 2012).

All that can be traced in “Atlas Shrugged”. The novel is partly fantastic and only some details – geographical names, realities of a certain time – enable the reader to correlate its events with the USA of the XX century. The plot of the novel dwells on the key event – the most successful entrepreneurs, representatives of various professional fields – industry, finance, science, culture – indignant at the state’s encroachment on the results of their work, go secretly on strike and one after another disappear from the country, which involves complete destruction of its economy. Thus raising a serious problem – the fate of an efficient businessman depends on state officials, who decide how much of his earnings should be taken as taxes – A. Rand identifies a situation of moral injustice and offers her own theory of ethical egoism for its solution. The first thing that qualifies Rand’s idea of rational egoism, which determines her characters’ way of thinking and behaving, as a myth is its being presented as something undoubtedly “good” – thus the popular mythological opposition of “good versus evil” is shaped in Rand’s novel. Egoism is claimed moral unfoundedly, as something certain, without admitting the relevant nature of “good” and “evil”, which proves to be a vivid manifestation of the superficiality of the “pillars” (Cherchesov, 1991) speaks of. It is evident that Rand’s theory is a product of her own “sense of life” and “metaphysics”, using her own terminology. A. Rand asserts it herself describing the ideology of her novel with the phrase “This is life as I see it”. This approach of hers suits the above-mentioned characteristic of myth – to its adherent it seems to be the truth itself.

Another factor that contributes to the perception of the theory of rational egoism in “Atlas Shrugged” as only “allegedly true” is its excessively, to the degree of grotesque, positive and negative characters, whose interaction, in turn, creates a two-dimensional flat world of the novel. All the positive heroes are impeccable egoists who devote their lives to superlatively efficient work and rightfully anticipate enjoying its results. Their inventions and creations promote mankind’s progress, but their only concern is their own profit and they sweep aside their opponents’ talks about every citizen’s moral duty to work for the benefit of society as senseless. The negative characters comprise three groups of altruism adherents: state officials who parasitize on capitalists, rich heirs infected by altruism and the poor who rightfully from the position of the existing moral live at the expense of rich citizens. A. Rand dethrones this position by artistically depicting its probable catastrophic consequences. Thus the polar qualities of the polar characters are determined by egoism – the least convincing criterion of morality, declared however as such a priory.

Healthy egoism, superlative mind, adherence to the highest work ethics are the indisputable assets of such heroes as Dagny Taggart, Vice-President in Charge of Operation of the country’s largest railroad company “Taggart Transcontinental”; Francisco d’Ankonia, the owner of the country’s copper mines; Hank Rearden, the inventor of super-tough steel; and on top of them all, John Galt, the inventor of a miraculous motor and the initiator of the strike, who set about the task to stop the motor of the world. The observation of the portrayal of just one of them, Dagny, throws light on the way these heroes are presented. Since early childhood Dagny has been striving for the best within us, and if her playmate, and later a colleague and an assistant in business, Eddie Willers understands the best as Not just business and earning a living, for Dagny the best is just this. At the end of the novel, observing the destructive aftermath of the domineering moral, Eddie Willers recalls his little friend’s unchildlike shrewdness in that episode. Thus Rand depicts the cast-iron nature of her heroine – even committing errors (the greatest of which consists in her continuing to work while all the others like her quit long ago) she never deviates from the route set in her childhood.

It is noteworthy that the readers’ positive perception of such obviously untruthful heroes is achieved, to a great extent, by the author’s masterful use of artistic means. For instance, to create Dagny’s image Rand resorts to repetition of the notion straight, which accompanies the character throughout the whole novel. Thus, the way to her goal Dagny associates with the straight railroad track running to the horizon. Dagny’s speech is always simple and straight and in her presence the world for Eddie becomes clear, simple, and easy to face. Her life in adolescence is consciously stripped down to the bright simplicity of a geometrical drawing: a few straight lines – to and from. At the wheel of a plane she rushes into the sky in the straight line to a purpose...and the line, unbroken, goes on into space in the simple, natural act of rising. Her eyes always grasp the straight lines in the surrounding world as the embodiment of the only possible form of life – the straight shafts of the trees that stood against the great, sudden, shining spread of space beyond (Halizev, 2004).

The notion “sun” is used as much frequently. For example, for Eddie Dagny’s words were glowing like sunlight; to meet her friend Francisco Dagny ran down a green hillside in the blazing sun; when Francisco embraced her, she felt the warmth of the sun in the skin of his legs. Thus, Rand renders her heroes’ benevolent sense of life. Rand (1971) emphasizes her heroes’ capacity for joy, opposing them to the world of aimless people dragging the load of some unknown guilt, which is inevitable, in Rand’s assertion, for altruism adherents. The negative characters are repulsive to the same degree. For instance, Wesley Mouch, the Head of the Bureau of Economic Planning and National Resources – the position, which in itself sounds most disparaging with Rand, who is known to

be an advocate of unfettered capitalism. Under the conditions of state-controlled economy he is all-mighty not because of his talents but owing to lack of free market – he distributes oil among manufacturers. A mere enumeration of his previous jobs – he advertised in turn a bogus corn-cure, a hair-restorer, a patented brassiere quite successfully, but failed an advertising campaign for an automobile concern – is sufficient to make him a caricature (Mayhew, 2009).

The artistic means of portraying negative characters are also no less expressive. If Rand's favourite characters are associated with strict geometry, their antipodes are described as blurs of disaster, a fog without shapes or definitions, which Dagny does not know how to fight against due to its shapelessness. Thus, the absolute virtuousness of the positive heroes is a mirror reflection of the absolute viciousness of their negative counterparts. These two extreme groups represent opposite morals, which in her artistic description Rand reduces to antithesis death and taxes versus life and production, thus underlining the primary role of economic conditions these morals stem from. On the whole, Rand accentuates, to the degree of extremity, the unnaturalness of the situation when the inefficient and inapt like Wesley Mouch define the social moral while Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden, silently continuing to work under their rule sanction them to do it. The author's idea is worded by Francisco d'Ankonia: We produced the wealth of the world – but we let our enemies write its moral code.

Such an artistic position of Rand's, when she reduces the inherent complexity and depth of human relationships to a simplified sketch of interaction of opposites, shows the narrowness typical of popular literature. Rational egoism stuck in the minds of her heroes deprives them of experiencing feelings like anguish, embarrassment, laceration, doubt, remorse. Such feelings are meant to be perceived as drawbacks, and only the characters who have not yet risen to the accomplishments of egoism (like Hank Rearden, who feels obliged to support his family until he rejects his relatives' financial encroachments and becomes an absolute egoist) are subjected to them. Thus Rand's theory shapes itself into a convention, which can justly be described as "allegedly true". Besides, the quality of a myth in Rand's theory is reflected in the sphere of its interaction with the official state ideology. Unlike the main stream of popular literature known for its compliance with authorities and people's moods, Rand's theory seems, at first sight, to confront them: society is more used to the conception of altruism, and the state hates the ideology that declares it "looters". However, the present-day vivid rise in the right moods in society, shattered by economic problems, testifies to the fact that Rand's theory just anticipated the forthcoming changes. Here shows the tendency of popular literature to keenly catch and promptly react to imminent social needs. When Rand hailed criticism on social programs in the 1970-s, she really had very few followers. But the contemporary history of the world economy is a succession of economic crises, and every such crisis makes people "look for an alternative to the existing state of things", as Barbara Branden, an objectivism supporter, puts it. The fact that during the second term of B. Obama's presidency a considerable part of US citizens disapproved of the Medicare Program shows that social moods develop in the direction described by Rand. Besides, the fact that in the beginning she was in opposition to the mainstream moods evidences her creating a new myth, which by now has spread to the degree of stereotype. The process of stereotypization shows in the fact that inspired by her work ethic young people imitate her characters in various ways; her characters' utterances, like John Galt's motto I swear by my life and my love of it that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine, have become catch-phrases; they are alluded to in literary works and screenplays, used like slogans in protest movements like "Occupy Wall Street"; her ideas have got spread all over the world (Larionov and Filisyuk, 2018).

Finally, a convincing argument in favour of Rand's conception being a myth is the fact that it is easily refuted by reality. In the ideal world of her protagonists, in the Galt Gulch, which they arrange in accordance with their egoistic moral, there is not a single hint at illnesses, decrepitude, family issues. It is noteworthy that in none of Rand's novels heroes have children, and in "Atlas Shrugged", remarkable for its length, children are mentioned only twice. First, when Dagny and Hank in search of the inventor of the miraculous Motor get into a settlement that once used to be an industrial town, malicious children in rags fling stones at their car hiding like cowards behind the ruins of houses. In the other case Rand describes two sons of a young woman who owns a bakery in the Galt Gulch. These boys aged four and seven do not have any names and, on the whole, look more like abstract figures without individual features than artistic images. Their happiness, friendliness, openness (features mentioned only in the author's description, for the boys do not act in any way) Rand explains, in a logical, well-argued manner of an essay, by lack of fear and violence their unlucky peers from the outer world have to deal with.

Such an environment beneficial for both adults and children in the Gulch results from the rational arrangement of life on the basis of reason and capitalist relations not only in the industrial sphere but also in private life. For instance, when Dagny by accident gets into the Gulch and settles in Galt's house, she sets about household chores with an enthusiasm of a woman in love; Galt, who denies any altruism, firmly insists on paying her for her work. Love relations, as well as any others, are reduced by Rand's rational heroes to trade, which in terms of love means a mutually beneficial exchange of happiness. Rand (1999) own life frustrated her theory both in social and private spheres. At an old age, being sick, she had to apply for social medical care, which she had claimed disgraceful all her life. Besides, Rand's own love affair with one of her followers, Nathaniel Branden, which the spouses on both sides were aware of, ended with a scandal, because of the obvious conflict of interests. In the novel the fact that Dagny preferred Galt to Francisco and Hank influenced neither their emotional state nor their friendship.

4. Summary

To sum up, the fact that the author's idea of morality of egoism and immorality of altruism is a mere myth is proven by the following aspects:

- The representation of egoism as something moral and good, without admitting the relevant character of the notions “good” and “evil” themselves.
- Ayn Rand tries to create a more attractive reality by bringing into existence extremely positive and extremely negative characters. The polar qualities of the polar characters are determined by egoism – the least convincing criterion of morality, declared however as such a priory.
- The myth of ethical egoism has spread to a degree of stereotype due to its ability to catch keenly and react promptly to imminent social needs.
- Ayn Rand’s own life frustrated her theory. At an old age, being sick, she had to apply for social medical care, which she had claimed disgraceful all her life.

Thus, Rand’s ethical doctrine proves to be that same “pillar”, which offers a superficial solution to the problem, claiming to restore moral justice (Villalobos-Antúnez, 2015).

5. Conclusions

Unfolding on the pages of Ayn Rand’s novel the confrontation between egoism postulated by her and altruism, an ideology more traditional for the western world outlook, Rand not unfoundedly speaks about filling her novel with a new content. New as this content may be, it does not, however, reach the level of high literature since it is based on the ethical doctrine which suits a myth of popular literature in all its characteristics. The way Rand theoretically justifies her idea evidences the fact that for her it is the truth itself. And the fact that she manages to convince a great number of people of the truthfulness of her idea speaks for her artistic skillfulness in the realm of popular literature (Weiss, 2014).

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