

## **Lovecraft, Rand and the Abyss of Opportunity**

### **Introduction**

Initially speculating on how more convincing an “Old One” or “Elder Thing” might be than a human being as one of the remote, egoistic heroes of *The Fountainhead* or *Atlas Shrugged*, I started considering other similarities and differences between H.P. Lovecraft’s and Ayn Rand’s work across philosophy, politics, art theory and other topics—an obvious starting point being the strong attraction each writer continues to hold for teens and new adults.

Nineteen-sixties Rand proponent, the late Ronald Merrill, acknowledges in the first edition of *Ayn Rand Explained* (1991) how, “within a few pages, I was hooked” upon first encountering *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) at the age of fifteen, “a common age for converts to the ideas of Ayn Rand”—a recollection remarkably similar in its passion and absorption to that of many who first came into possession of a second-hand copy of *The Tomb and Other Tales* (Ballantine, 1970), or an individual Lovecraft story in some anthology in their youth. **(1)**

Whatever their similarities or differences in worldview, both writers clearly appeal to that hungry mixture of anticipation and imagination so strongly animating the adolescent need for validation and direction.

### **Roots in Reaction**

While it is Rand’s latter novels which serve as comprehensive entrees to the tenets of Objectivism over seventy years on, compared with the impact of stories from most points in Lovecraft’s brief career, of particular note is the extremity of social and family circumstances which shaped the themes and tone of both authors’ fiction and commentary.

For Lovecraft, it was being an acutely precocious child, with high expectations, born in 1890 into a once-privileged New England family, fallen into poor repute and near-destitution.

Raised over the years by a controlling mother and aunts following the commitment (in 1893) and ultimate death of his father, Winfield Scott Lovecraft, by syphilis in 1898, a formerly successful salesman for a Boston-area silver business, Lovecraft was hit hard a few years later by the passing of his maternal grandmother and grandfather, the influential Whipple Van Buren Phillips, who (with the support of his voluminous library) played a major role in his development.

Repeated relocations in Massachusetts and around Providence, further declines in the family’s savings, combined with an intermittently poor emotional constitution precluded Lovecraft’s academic and professional ambitions, both as a student at Brown University and perhaps as an astronomer. **(2)**

Rand, raised Allysa Rosenbaum, also had the short-lived luck to witness a declining family situation at age twelve when her father's prosperous business was seized by the Red Army in 1918. Residents of the coveted Nevsky Prospek address in St. Petersburg, Rand's parents, Anna (of a wealthy background) and the rather quiet, yet principled Zinovy, culturally nurtured their oldest daughter, whose romantic inclinations (Victor Hugo is considered a major influence on her early work) and sense of destiny, like Catherine the Great, sustained her though the family's repeated relocations between home and Crimea against the impoverishing demands of the emerging Soviet system. Though more outgoing in youth than Lovecraft, Rand's social circle similarly remained small as her creative and intellectual characteristics flourished, making numerous stabs at fiction by her teens (with a similar penchant for O. Henry-style shock and twist endings as Lovecraft). **(3)**

Moving in with relatives in Chicago in 1925 after studying history at the University of Petrograd, Rand emerged from her formative years with a reactionary bent just as severe as the xenophobia and class-mindedness which would especially permeate Lovecraft's post-Brooklyn output.

Interestingly, despite the upheavals of the Bolshevik takeover and her subsequent advocacy of social standing based solely on individual skill and commitment over gifted title, Rand's youthful soft-spot for Russian nobility found expression in her first novel, 1936's semi-autobiographical *We the Living*, whose aristocratic Leo Kovalensky is reduced to black market dealings just to survive **(4)**—a theme of class degradation frequently taken to physiological extremes by Lovecraft in such tales as "Arthur Jermyn" (1920) and "The Lurking Fear" (1922).

To be sure, Lovecraft's later heroes do embody legitimate accomplishment, such as the learned Professor Armitage of "Dunwich Horror" (1928) and the collective expertise of the Antarctic expedition featured in 1931's *At the Mountains of Madness*. But because many end up, well, committed, in the psychiatric sense, they, like the once-respected Delapore family of "Rats in the Walls" (1923) and counterparts in other stories, reflect a caricature of what happened to Lovecraft's own clan and, as a result, what didn't happen for him in his own life.

Though what happened to shape Rand's views had more to do with what was taken from her family, rather than what it brought upon itself, in the end, what counts is how both writers' experiences impacted the twentieth century literary and socio/political scenes.

### **Evolving Perspectives**

A mechanistic materialist, Lovecraft saw free will as something more obviously illusory the greater the scale at which it could be applied, as physical and chemical processes at all levels of reality would have impacts on one another. **(5)**

The man who had so heavily immersed himself in Greco-Roman mythology that he renounced Christianity for paganism while in Sunday school and edited an astronomy magazine in his teens, went on in adulthood to temper scientific wonder with a secular humility in a time of dizzying industrial and cultural change—a fundamental theme manifest in his fiction via the reckless uncovering of visceral and hyper-dimensional revelations too dreadful for direct human apprehension. The haunting lines from the journal of George Gammell Angell in “Call of Cthulhu”, Lovecraft’s now-signature 1926 tale of a globally-distributed threat to humanity, sets the tone starkly with its pining for the “peace and safety of a new Dark Age”. **(6)**

While also materialist and an atheist, this dour perspective is something Rand had no use for, as she saw, at least individualistically, life and the world fraught with knowledge and enterprise, however hard-fought they might be to attain **(7)**; Where Rand saw opportunity, Lovecraft entertained a looming abyss if such ambitions were plumbed too quickly or recklessly.

### **The Nietzschean Variations**

As to abysses and what is found in them, it’s well known how much of an impact Friedrich Nietzsche had on both Lovecraft and Rand. What’s so distinctive is how each interpreted his socio/biological idea of a Super- or Overman and the role of contemporary society on his Lamarckian emergence.

For instance, Ayn Rand, a non-English speaking immigrant, virtually reinvented herself in the United States starting as a bit actress and script reader for Cecil DeMille (his pet name for her was “Caviar”), later, a challenging, but struggling screenwriter/playwright (1933’s *The Night of January Sixteenth* assayed the convoluted ties between public envy and fame; *Think Twice*, a two-act precursor to *Atlas Shrugged*, was written six years later). Her greater recognition came as argumentative social commentator and novelist when she switched from favoring a traditional Nietzschean hero to a less extreme, domineering variant of her own devising introduced in *The Fountainhead* (1943). **(8)** Howard Roark, the Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired protagonist of her third major work of fiction (the antithesis of what the conservative Lovecraft admired in building design), does not stand out from his peers by virtue of being a Superman or even an exceptional man, but by being an ultra-determined model *for* every man. Interpersonally repressed, yet plugged into every aspect of his undertakings as an architect, he readily takes up work in a quarry when temporarily forced out of his position--a prospect not likely favored by the class-bound “Gentleman of Providence”. **(9)**

In his oeuvre, Lovecraft transfers the status of “supermen”, ironically, to an assortment of monstrous alien beings who maintain, generally, a Rand-like indifference to humanity (who become anthropomorphized objects of rationalist admiration and pity by the remnants of Miskatonic University’s Peabody-Lake Antarctic expedition in *Mountains of Madness*). **(10)**

Indeed, such creatures have a seductive appeal for humans in Lovecraft's work. The Mi-Gos of "Whisperer in Darkness" (1930) entice inquisitive humans with the promise of a disembodied intellectual nirvana of insatiable cosmic exploration. Be it an academic, an obsessed tinkerer like Crawford Tillinghast of "From Beyond" (1920), or the hybrid denizens of Innsmouth, humanity's expected role is to lay down the path for the arrival (or, more specifically, the return of) such creatures, roughly comparable to Nietzsche's view of each person's responsibility in paving the way for humanity's successor: "I love those... who sacrifice themselves to the earth so that earth may someday belong to the Superman.

"I love him who lives for knowledge and who wants knowledge that one day the Superman may live. And thus he wills his own downfall."

--*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885) **(11)**

As part of this philosophical evolution, Rand extolled as central moral value self-direction in one's life akin to the Thelemism of Aleister Crowley (but without a near-militant eschewing of social obligation) **(12)**, almost like a productive counterpoint to the indulgent motives of Lord Wootton, who lures the titular character of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into a life of idle depravity, so that the older nobleman doesn't have to struggle with pursuing higher aspirations for himself.

Coincidentally, it was from the preface to this 1891 novel where Wilde decries "all art is quite useless" in response to the didacticism of his time, where Lovecraft derived a major component in an art theory arguably as protean as his philosophical views.

### **From the Didactic, to the Decadent and Beyond**

Early on a classicist favoring Greco/Roman principles that he felt could not be improved upon for simple elegance and restraint—upheld via his well-espoused fondness for the sympathetic symmetries of 18<sup>th</sup> century Georgian architecture, Lovecraft would later support Decadence in opposition to the Victorian style, with its tedious emphasis on art-as-lesson, rather than existing for its own sake. Ultimately recognizing Decadence as a rather florid reaction to a world increasingly dulled by the more socially-standardizing aspects of industrial society, he would settle, following his time in New York, to an esthetic tied to his origins and local sense of tradition—the emotional foci which helped sustain the "disentimed" nobleman of the 1700s who felt he was only masquerading as a resident of the early-twentieth century (a more substantive artistic credo compared to the client-pandering neo-classicism of Roark's grasping rival in *Fountainhead*, Peter Keating). **(13)**

As explored in pieces like "The Music of Eric Zann" (1921) and "Hypnos" (1922), art's proper mission in all its forms, was an expansion of our scope of the world through dedicated efforts of profound psychological stimulation (for better or worse), as opposed to the gross, transitory effects represented by the crude and sensational renderings of pulp cover artists, whom Thurber condemns in 1926's "Pickman's Model" as

“(splashing) paint around wildly and calling it a nightmare or... a portrait of the devil”.  
**(14)**

Informed both by her Romanticism and the Aristotelean dictum of “is/ought”, Rand’s emphasis on new potentialities over the accepted standard strikes a consonant note in her 1966 Objectivist newsletter essay “Altruism as Appeasement”:

“(The appeaser’s) sense of life dominates modern art and literature: the cult of depravity —the monotonous projection of cosmic terror, guilt, impotence, misery, doom... a preoccupation resembling the mentality of a superstitious savage who fashions a voodoo doll in the belief that to reproduce is to master.” **(15)**

### **Locke and the Fascist Socialist**

Consumers (in the case of Lovecraft, an anticipator) of the ideas of such Nietzschean fellow-travelers as Oswald Spengler (known for his biological model for cultural rise and descent outlined in *Decline of the West* (1926), **(16)** the two writers’ reformative prescriptions were nonetheless radical in curiously opposing ways:

The custody and promulgation of the arts and other societal institutions were the proper responsibility of its cultural elites, Lovecraft surmised in what he called “fascistic socialism”, his Depression-era formulation for a dictatorial welfare state, wherein the masses would exchange the right of political engagement for shorter working hours, more leisure time for personal development and enrichment, minimal capacity for private gain (in response to his growing disenchantment with capitalism), while a centralized elite would maintain control over society. **(17)**

Holding more faith in individual productive and commercial initiative, Rand’s position, as the Objectivist worldview matured, would tend generally toward a “super-Lockean” model, wherein the functionality and cultural emphases of any government authority would be justified only through its faithful reflection of the priorities and interrelations of a rational, self-directed populace. **(18)**

### **“Of Living Death” and Essential Salts**

The weak link in both these proposals, of course is the contested fidelity of human behavior over the long term when freed to express itself fully. That people would, indeed use extra free time as constructively as Lovecraft hoped might be debatable, but the real-world dissent resulting from the application of Rand’s philosophy from within her own mid-century following of self-actualizers (known, ironically, as “The Collective”), up through the corruption-laced collapse last year in South America of an attempted Randian “Utopia of Greed”, the exclusive “Galt’s Gulch Chile” community, speak to this problem. **(19)**

Like Lovecraft, however, Rand saw in established religion not a trusted source of integrity or discipline, but, rather, an insidious, impeding crutch to the right of independent self-development and, in her response to the July, 1968 papal encyclical

*Humanae Vitae*, delivered at the Ford Hall Forum in Boston, defined existing merely in accordance with received dogma, however irrational or unfulfilling, as no better than the life of an animal—a position which informs the undying, mouth-less, yet eternally hungry abominations of *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (1927) created in the lower levels of his Pawtuxet farm with a serendipitously metaphorical weight. **(20)**

Seneca's affecting example of stoicism to Lucilius from the first century of a Spartan boy who bashed his skull into a wall rather than live as a Roman slave may have been more congruent with what Rand had in mind **(21)**, but Lovecraft's defense of atheistic materialism's joyous utility in dealing with the dread of death is more convivial and participatory in not only championing the endless consolations of health, the natural world and its exploration, but—in total opposition to Rand—the obligation “to accept life and serve society as best it may”. **(22)**

From the third volume of Lovecraft's *Selected Letters, 1911-1924* (Arkham House, 1965), his assertion that “Entity precedes morality” cogently articulates the writer's belief in the relationship between human sapience, agency and ethics—to which Rand, ever the defender of life as its own purpose, would possibly have responded: “Entity is morality”. **(23)**

### **The Uses of Religious Allegory**

Just as Lovecraft's early infatuation with Hellenic deities over the stifling anthropocentrism of Christianity provided the backbone for his alien pantheon and its embodiment of cosmic indifference, Rand, too, made use of mythic and Biblical references in her own work.

*Anthem*, her brief far-future dystopian 1938 novella (penned while working on *Fountainhead*), featuring Equality 7-2521, persecuted in Galileoesque fashion by the state for the re-discovery of electricity, was as much about the emergence of a new Prometheus, not only for introducing the light bulb to a Lovecraftian “New Dark Age”, but for also discovering the lost, all-important pronoun, “I”. **(24)**

And while Lovecraft enjoyed playing with the catachistic piety of Biblical passages in his stories, like Wilbur Whately's eponymous brother at the close of “The Dunwich Horror” crying out “*Eh-y-ya-ya-yahaah - e'yayayaaaa... ngh'aaaaa... ngh'aaa... h'yuh... h'yuh... HELP! HELP! ...ff - ff - ff - FATHER! FATHER! YOG-SOTHOTH!...*”—a barbed parody of Jesus' final appeal to God on the cross in Mark 15:34 **(25)**, according to Merrill, Rand could well have been applying structural allegory in *Atlas Shrugged* by associating the 36 named founders of Galt's Gulch (the high-tech Colorado refuge from a decaying mediocratic state) with the Thirty-Six Just Men, the minimum number of people in the world calculated in Judaic mysticism to avert its destruction.

Merrill further suggested how Galt's warning to Dagny Taggart to not look down upon the destruction of Manhattan as they fly overhead at *Shrugged's* climax referenced the

“pillar of salt” penalty for glimpsing the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah—an intriguing conjecture as Sodom’s actual sin, according to Talmudic scholarship, was not excess carnality, but the Randian heresy of state-mandated egalitarianism. **(26)**

### **Creative Integrity vs. Creative Legacies**

The utter pitilessness and rigid demands of Rand’s proposals would doubtfully have set well with Lovecraft, whom, while, initially impressed with Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (much to the outrage of his wife, Sonia Greene, a Russian Jew, like Rand—who would herself take umbrage in later decades of accusations of harboring fascist leanings), was a supporter of FDR and the New Deal as a matter of practicality **(27)** (after an initial flirtation with the same campaign, Ayn Rand, ultimately would become active in the Wendell Wilke camp in 1940 prior to becoming disillusioned with establishment politics, altogether) **(28)**. Yet Lovecraft’s unyielding personal standards toward his creative mission, despite assorted obstacles, so reminiscent of a Roark or Reardon, was partly responsible for his never rising above minor recognition in his lifetime. **(29)**

On the other hand, Lovecraft was famous for his adaptability, patience and generosity when nurturing other writers as correspondent or as chronically-underpaid ghost writer/revisionist, ranging from the elderly, untalented poet Elizabeth Toldridge, to such mainstream horror/suspense successes of later decades as a then-teenaged Robert Bloch. **(30)**

Lovecraft saw the opportunity of inviting others to contribute accretions to what August Derleth would later brand the Cthulhu Mythos not as a means to build a marketable unified fictional universe, but as a sort of literary playground for up-and-comers to eventually develop their own voices. **(31)**

By contrast, the ideological sanctity among Randians of the right to ownership and respect for that of others’ property helped precipitate a succession of expulsions, resurrected and rival ideological formations starting three decades after Lovecraft’s death in 1937, when Rand laid a kind of “name brand” claim to her ideas, as if Objectivism were a technical innovation, like the revolutionary motor in *Shrugged*, rather than a body of life principles. **(32)**

This response to others using her name to validate unorthodox interpretations occurred near the time she fell out with long-time proteges, Barbara and (former lover) Nathaniel Branden (who’s sanctioned Nathaniel Branden Institute-sponsored lectures disseminated the Objectivist word). Following the closure of NBI in 1968, it was not until the year after Rand’s passing in 1982 when long-time loyalist Leonard Peikoff, Rand’s legal heir, established the Ayn Rand Institute, whose board member, fellow philosophy professor David Kelley, supported Objectivist/Libertarian dialogue—stridently forbidden by both Rand and Peikoff. Consequently, Kelley went on to found the rival Atlas Society (developer of the recent *Shrugged* films) **(33)**.

Proportionately, August Derleth's Christian upbringing has had more of a profound (if less tempestuous) influence, on his re-interpretation of Lovecraft's narrative corpus of atheistic and largely cosmic indifference. Introducing new creatures and rare/occult texts, like this mouthful, *An Investigation into the Myth-Patterns of Latter Day Primitives with Especial Reference to the R'lyeh Text* to buttress a scenario of simplistic good and evil anthro-centric super-beings, duking it out for control of the world, with humanity flatteringly caught in the middle, is the furthest thing from Lovecraft's original idea. **(34)**

While different spins or new inspiration may inevitably grow out of older ideas (a similar example can be found between the completely divergent writings on Communism of Fredrick Engels following on Karl Marx's seminal work), they could well turn it into something else completely in the zeal to build greater appeal or credibility.

### **Rand, Lovecraft and Academia**

As previously discussed, for Lovecraft, it had been a lifelong ambition to attend Brown University in the hopes of becoming an astronomer or formal scholar of some sort, for which, it is clear he already had the abilities early on, not just in intellectual acumen and drive, but, as demonstrated later on through his activities in the amateur press community and his voluminous letter-writing and revising work can attest, pedagogically, as well. **(35)**

The atmosphere in colleges and universities proved highly hostile to Objectivism by the 1960s, given its experientially-based challenge to the abstract relativism of most philosophy departments—that, from a Socratically skeptical perspective, there was no certainty, and so all canonical schools of thought were worthy of equal consideration, leaving students cynical and aimless, as the outcome suggested there was no right or wrong in life. **(36)**

As harsh and largely impractical as Rand's model for living proved (despite an avowed opposition for almost any manifestation of public-backed social support, Ayn Rand applied for Social Security and possibly Medicare in 1974 after lung cancer surgery), **(37)** its emphasis on personal responsibility and motivation without compromise or social obligation communicated a single clear value for youth in rapidly-changing times.

### **The Superior Narrative**

Certainly within the publishing sphere, both writers have achieved wide success, though over different intervals: The popularity of Ayn Rand among today's Tea Party movement is the latest instance of how her ideas and writings enjoy a resurgence with every major economic upheaval, with *Atlas Shrugged* famously polled in 1991 as the next most popular book after the Bible (if not, itself, regarded as a secular counterpart). **(38)**

Meanwhile, we have seen Lovecraft graduate from small press and innumerable mass market printings over the last five decades to literary recognition through more recent authoritative editions from Penguin and the prestigious Library of America series.

As to literary merit, some general observations are worth noting, most obviously, character development. In this area, both writers' executions are too often unfairly criticized as flawed or unbelievable, when it has to be understood as secondary to exploring, respectively, mood and ideas. If Lovecraft's deranged and fragile characters come off as undeveloped and almost obstinately dense, at times (like the glacial acknowledgment of mounting evidence by Danforth and the other Antarctic explorers in *Mountains of Madness* for the re-awakening of the Elder Things) (39), Rand's more polemical protagonists demonstrate an almost preternatural control in the most dire situations, while embodying an unrealistic lack of correlation between their present vaunted positions of iconoclastic talent and integrity and their varied socio/economic origins. (40)

Still, when it comes to the application of narrative texture, and set-up, ultimately, it is Lovecraft's fiction, which is informed with more conviction and authority than Rand's.

H.P. Lovecraft generated conviction by crafting tales in and around a mixture of real and contrived historical events and texts with seamless adroitness—the persistent belief in the real existence of the oft- and feverishly-described *Necronomicon* and other arcane in-universe books, the reference to Boston's North End smuggler's tunnel network so integral to the suffocating atmosphere of "Pickman's Model", contribute to the real-world weight of his weird fiction like that of few other writers of his day (41):

"No weird story can truly produce terror unless it is devised with all the care and verisimilitude of an actual hoax." (42)

Her culminating example of what Rand termed "Romantic Realism", *Atlas Shrugged* has much more the flavor of an alternate/future history than a novel of immediate import, compared with the more contemporary, if historically-freighted, foreboding extrapolations of Lovecraft. *Shrugged* is a socio/political amalgamation where the American economy seems tanked as in the years of the Great Depression, the personality dominance of major industries seems more like the status quo of the 1890s and the abundance of government agencies and regulation is comparable to the 1970s. (43)

Hence, the overall result, while prescient in some respects, is marred by a scenario contrived to make the plight of powerful, wealthy heroes like Taggart, industrialist Hank Reardon and the enigmatic John Galt, more sympathetic than the circumstances of the novel's late-'50s publication (a period of dramatic upward class mobility and economic vitality) could believably warrant.

## **Conclusion**

Developing into substantive artists, thinkers and commentators of their times and future prospects in human affairs, H.P. Lovecraft and Ayn Rand, considering the fascinating overlap and divergences in their thinking, owe much to their accomplishments to shared formative situations of extremity.

Whether they might have gotten along or not, a possible starting point might have been found in Lovecraft's seeking a venerated security in history and heritage in meeting the unknown, complemented by Rand's indefatigable forward-looking, unfettered by uncritical devotion to stale conventions.

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