

## FIRST PLACE



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*Atlas Shrugged* is a story that portrays a dramatic conflict of characters and their values. What is the most significant conflict in the story? Is it the conflict between the creators and the looters? Is it the conflict the creators experience in their own souls? Is it something else? Explain your answer.

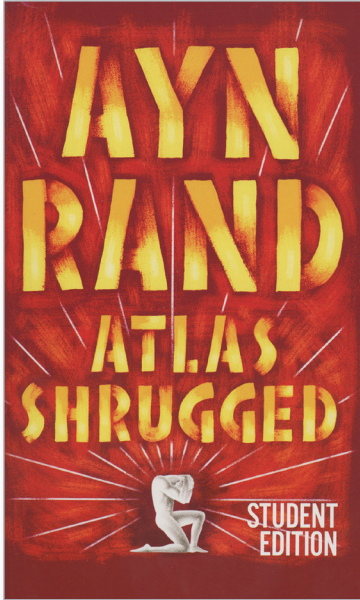
### THE POWER THEY PROVIDE IT: THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND THE CENTRAL CONFLICT OF *ATLAS SHRUGGED*

First-time readers of Ayn Rand's novel *Atlas Shrugged* are likely to notice early on the conflict between two main types of characters: the creators, who work to achieve and produce values, and the looters, who do not produce and instead seek to take values from others. There is a sense in which the clash between these two groups is the essential conflict in the novel: They represent two fundamentally opposing approaches to life. However, the plot structure of *Atlas Shrugged* is designed to turn most crucially on another conflict: the conflict within souls of the creators, who are faced with the dilemma of deciding how to act in a world heavily populated by looters. By placing this dilemma as the central conflict in the novel, Rand illustrates in dramatic concrete events the implications of her crucial moral principle that evil has only the power the good provides it.

The plot structure of *Atlas Shrugged* is complex, but a single action functions as the prime mover of all the rest: John Galt's strike of the creators. The strike is the cause for the rapid decline in the state of the world, since the disappearance of the creators leaves society with an increasing dearth of the main resource needed to create wealth: productive men. It is also increasingly the cause of the struggles facing non-striking creators, like Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden, who find that as more creators disappear, a heavier burden falls on the shoulders of the few who remain. The resolution of the novel's plot—the fate of its main characters and of society as a whole—is consequently determined by the question of whether and in what manner the strike succeeds at its goal of destroying and replacing the looters' moral code by stopping the motor of the world.

The strike is, in an important respect, an action taken by the creators in conflict with the looters. The strikers harm the looters and make their goal of living off the efforts of others harder to attain, and the looters, once they become aware of the phenomenon, try to stop creators from "deserting." But the progression of the strike is not determined by the success of the looters in stopping the creators from withdrawing from society. The primary factor determining whether the strike will advance toward its goal is the decision of each individual creator either to join it or to continue working in the looters' world. Once a creator makes the decision to go on strike, he is never prevented from carrying out his intention. The only obstacle he must overcome is his own motivation to remain in the world.

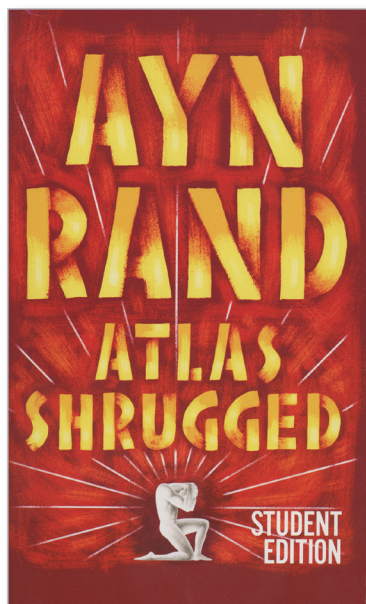
This internal conflict, between the principles of the strike advocated by Galt and his allies, and the reasons to continue trying to create in the world despite the looters, takes place



within the soul of each creator, and the sum of these individual conflicts determines whether the strike succeeds or fails. If enough of the creators decide to adopt Galt's principles and, refusing to allow the efforts of their mind to be taken by the looters, go on strike against the existing social system, that system, which depends on there being enough productive creators to provide resources for the unproductive looters, will collapse. The strikers will thrive independent of such a society, while the looters will perish. On the other hand, if the creators reject Galt's principles, society will continue to function as-is, with the looters in charge. The decision to join the strike or not also determines the fate of each individual creator. Those who join the strike, paying the price of abandoning the outside world and everything they have built there, free themselves from the political chains of the looter society and the moral chains of the code of sacrifice. They are able to escape the dangers of the collapsing world and live their lives freely, by their own effort. Those who do not join the strike remain in the outside world to fight for their remaining values there, at the price of continuing to serve the looters' ends. On the level of each individual character's fate and on the level of the entire world, the resolution of every plot question in *Atlas Shrugged* is ultimately determined by the creators' resolution of their internal conflict between joining the strike or remaining in the looters' world.

The fact that the creators hold within themselves the ability to decide how things turn out for themselves and the world at large, while the looters have no ability to affect the ultimate outcome of the novel's events, is not accidental. This element of the plot structure serves to illustrate one of the most important principles advocated by John Galt: It is only the creators who have the power to achieve any sort of goals in reality; the looters are impotent on their own and only able to achieve anything to the extent that the creators help them to do so. Every plan of the looters is reliant on the complicity of some creator: the Steel Unification Plan relies on Hank Rearden's willingness to work at a loss, Project X depends on creative work done by Robert Stadler (when he was still a creator), James Taggart is only able to run the railroad in accordance with the irrational demands of his Washington friends because Dagny does the work to make it possible. The looters can wish for anything they want, but it is only the creators who have the power to make it so—and if they refuse to assist the looters, the wishes simply will not be realized. Thus it is only logical that the events of the novel can only ultimately be affected by the decision of the creators to assist the looters or not. If they refuse, the failure of the looters is completely ensured, no matter what the looters do.

One of the key revelations of the novel is that this principle is the consequence of an even deeper truth about the difference between the creators' and the looters' method of mental functioning. The discovery of this difference, which is perhaps not obvious on first glance, plays an important role in resolving the internal conflicts of two central characters, Dagny and Rearden, who continue to work for the looters even after realizing that the looters' efficacy is due entirely to their cooperation. Rearden's moment of discovery illustrates the principle in a particularly clear light. He is meeting with the leading looters, who are proposing the Steel Unification Plan, a scheme allegedly designed to save the country's steel industry by having Rearden Steel, the only productive steel company, operate indefinitely at a loss. Due to the fact that this plan is obviously completely untenable, since it will soon lead



to Rearden's bankruptcy, the end of the steel industry, and thus the drying-up of one of the country's last available sources of wealth, Rearden is perplexed that they would propose it. "There's no way to make the irrational work," he says, "What can save you now?" "Oh, you'll do something!" replies James Taggart (986). With this, Rearden realizes that the assistance he has been providing to the looters is of a more profound sort than the material help of making it possible for them to live and for their schemes to function. He has been providing them with the assistance of enabling them to think they live in an irrational universe, where their whims are not bound by any laws of reality, where they can demand anything they want and some creator will make it happen for them, somehow. The looters attempt to operate on a completely irrational method, and the creators who cooperate with them put their own rational minds to use helping the looters believe that the irrational is possible.

The fundamental difference in functioning between the two types, then, is that the creators engage with reality, and the looters reject reality in favor of whims. And the conflict facing the creators, the choice that they face when deciding whether to keep working in the looters' world or go on strike, is the choice between twisting their ability to confront reality into the service of those who seek to defy reality, or letting the irrational fall on its own merits—as it must, since, as John Galt says, "reality is not to be wiped out, it will merely wipe out the wiper" (1018).

It is worth observing that, in the ingenious structure of *Atlas Shrugged*, the nature of the central conflict serves to illustrate a philosophical principle, the discovery of which by the main characters then leads toward the final resolution of that conflict. The fact the resolution of the plot turns entirely on the resolution of the creators' internal conflicts illustrates the principle that the looters' embrace of the irrational renders them impotent, and that they derive their power from the willing service of those who use their own rationality to prop up the looters' irrationality. It is then Rearden's grasp of this principle that resolves his internal conflict: immediately after he realizes it, his mind is made up to quit his job and leave the world of the looters. And though Dagny does not strike immediately after grasping this principle herself, it is an important stage in her own intellectual journey, which eventually ends with her joining the strikers, too. This interplay between concrete action and abstract philosophy makes *Atlas Shrugged* so distinctly effective as an artwork concretizing profound philosophical truths and presenting them starkly and dramatically before the reader's mind.

## Works Consulted

Rand, Ayn. *Atlas Shrugged*. Plume, 2005.

Salmieri, Gregory, and Ben Bayer. *The Atlas Project*. 2018, [courses.aynrand.org/campus-courses/the-atlas-project/](https://courses.aynrand.org/campus-courses/the-atlas-project/).