

FIRST PLACE



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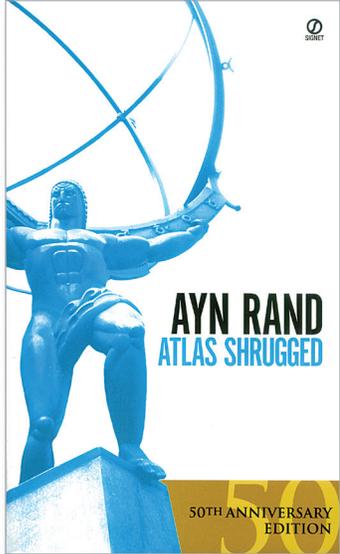
Who is John Galt?

“Why ask useless questions? How deep is the ocean? How high is the sky? Who is John Galt?” (45) When Paul Larkin gives the above reply to Rearden’s sincere question, “What’s wrong with the world?” (45), he implies that there’s no point in trying to answer either question. Indeed, throughout *Atlas Shrugged*, when people ask, “Who is John Galt?” the last thing they expect is an answer. The cryptic phrase is a way of throwing up one’s hands and pleading ignorance about questions and problems one is either unable or unwilling to deal with. Dagny Taggart is particularly bothered by the expression, eventually searching for the John Galt behind the empty rhetorical abdication. As her search progresses, John Galt starts to coalesce in her mind from figure of speech into mythical character, before she finally identifies him as an actual man.

Beginning with its title, *Atlas Shrugged* is rife with mythological parallels. To understand the significance of these parallels, however, it is important to identify where they end. Some myths uphold heroes who act altruistically: Atlas holds the world on his shoulders and Prometheus suffers horribly for giving mankind the gift of fire. Other myths focus on the demise of heroes who use their gifts in selfish or “antisocial” ways: Phaethon’s ambition almost sets the world on fire; Aesclepius’ skills in medicine threaten to put Hades out of business. John Galt transcends the myths in that he does not act altruistically, he does not let society punish him for his selfishness, and he successfully deprives society of its victims.

In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, René Girard argues that a close reading of mythology reveals a universal tendency to engage in collective violence against innocent scapegoats. Though much of Girard’s work contrasts with Objectivism, his hypothesis that a scapegoat mechanism underlies mythology is exemplified in *Atlas Shrugged*. Ayn Rand’s novel shows both real and mythical heroes being punished and misunderstood until, finally, Galt bucks the trend. John Galt is the realization of the heroic ideals that are obscured, punished, and subverted in mythology.

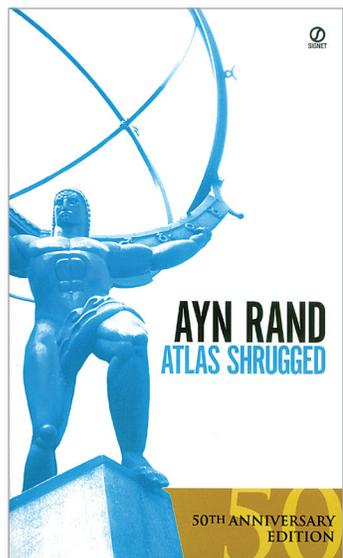
Although many great individuals could rival John Galt’s ability and industry, he stands out in his absolute refusal to act altruistically. Men like Galt have always held the world on their shoulders, but Galt is the first to consciously relieve himself of the burden—not to succumb to despair, but to deliberately, reasonably, stop bearing the burdens of others. He is able, but absolutely unwilling, to go shouldering the weight of the world like Atlas. He is like Atlas in ability, but the comparison ends when it comes to altruism. Never mind that in the myth, the gods forcefully conscript Atlas into the service of society: Galt, by contrast, is not just unwilling to volunteer altruism; he is immune to the threats of a parasitic society because he knows that without his sanction, those threats are empty.



John Galt does not let others punish him for acting selfishly. While society holds Dagny and Hank Rearden hostage for much of the book, Galt does not give that society anything it might use against him. Like Achilles (a hero never explicitly mentioned in the novel, but whose heroism finds its perfection in Galt), John Galt refuses to keep contributing without his rightful compensation. But unlike Achilles, whose attachment to the slain Patroclus breaks his will to stay on strike, Galt shrewdly protects everything that matters to him—Dagny, his generator, and above all, his mind—from the clutches of men who would use those things against him. Not only does he stay aloof from the threats of the looters; he also refuses to let the moochers impose guilt on him. On the contrary, he is perfectly happy in his selfishness. He enjoys bodily pleasures and luxuries free of guilt, knowing that “the man who sleeps on an inner-spring mattress” is better off than the one “who sleeps on a bed of nails” (963). Whether smoking a cigarette, working, or making love, he revels in pleasures that he has a right to enjoy. This contrasts sharply with James Taggart’s inability to truly enjoy the pleasures of drink, friendship, or love, having earned none of them. In this respect, Galt fully realizes the heroic ideal latent in the myth of Phaethon. John Galt shows that the true story of Phaethon is not one of punishment for *hubris* or for being too happy. Rather, the true story is told in Richard Halley’s opera: the story of a man who dares to do more than his fellow-men and succeeds (69). In this redeemed retelling of the myth, ambition is a virtue, not a vice; unlike Taggart’s guilty, vulgar pursuit of pleasure, the joy of achievement is not adulterated by fear and shame.

Having discovered the way to happiness, John Galt goes on to deprive society of its victims. As Francisco narrates to Dagny, he began with himself: “John Galt is Prometheus who changed his mind. After centuries of being torn by vultures in payment for having brought to men the fire of the gods, he broke his chains—and he withdrew his fire—until the day when men withdraw their vultures” (478). Like Prometheus, Galt and his kind have always given mankind the sophisticated knowledge and technology needed to live comfortable lives. Indeed, people like Galt love to discover and create, and they are generally happy to share the benefits of their labor through honest trade. They don’t want to quit: the struggles of Dagny and Hank Rearden show how hard it is for them to go on strike. But Galt realizes that withdrawal is the only way to avoid being victimized. As seen already, when he deprives his persecutors of his sanction and cooperation, they are powerless against him. Galt highlights the absolute dependence of the looters and moochers upon their victims when he tells the mechanic how to fix the torture device: the parasitic society can’t even torture Galt without his help (1047).

Having refused to be a victim himself, Galt goes on to deprive society of its other victims—his fellow producers. In doing so, he realizes the ideal shown but punished in another myth: that of Aesclepius, the doctor who grew so skilled at his art that he could even bring the dead back to life. When Hades complained that Aesclepius was depriving him of his victims, Zeus struck the doctor dead with a lightning bolt. Like Aesclepius, Galt deprives a parasitic society of its victims; unlike Aesclepius, Galt doesn’t succumb to punishment by perverse authorities. Although strikes have happened before, Galt is the first to “have done by plan and intention what has been done throughout history by silent default” (962). He gives the strike its full moral significance by *identifying* it for what it is: victims withdrawing their sanction from a parasitic society.



Just as the ancient tellers of myths discerned some truth, however limited or obscured, in their heroes, even the moochers and looters discern bits of the truth about Galt. Mr. Thompson sees Galt's ability—that “he knows what to do” (983)—but fails to comprehend that Galt neither would nor could fix society's problems on Mr. Thompson's terms, as “Economic Dictator.” He describes the moochers' relationship to producers like Galt quite honestly—“we need him!” (985)—but misses the more important fact that their need imposes no claim on Galt. Wesley Mouch understands that Galt will never compromise, but his formulation of that fact—that Galt is “a man who is not open to a deal” (985)—ironically glosses over the fact that a true deal, the free exchange of value for value, is the one thing that men like Galt emphatically *are* open to. James Taggart finally realizes that “it was Galt's greatness he had wanted to torture and destroy,” but because he chooses not to “accept reality” (1048)—to exercise the fundamental choice of using his own reason—the corollary realization of his own smallness ruins him.

Unlike the Greek heroes, Galt is not heroic because of any innate superiority over his fellow men. But neither is he an Everyman, whose mediocrity makes him identifiable to the masses. What makes him heroic is not his human nature, which every human shares. It is his virtue: the fact that he lives according to his nature. Indeed, everybody can relate to Galt insofar as everybody shares in his human nature.

Like the oak tree that Eddie Willers remembers from childhood—“a thing that nothing could change or threaten” (13)—the heroes of myth can be deeply inspiring. Surely when they capitulate to the unjust demands of the “common good,” it is just as devastating as when a lightning bolt reveals the tree's hollow core to Eddie. In John Galt, however, the heroic image upheld in myth—the image “of man as god” (1045)—is fully supported in substance. After years of hearing the question, “Who is John Galt,” repeated as an expression of defeat—the mental “blank” that Galt condemns repeatedly in his radio address—Dagny finally learns the answer. When she meets the man whose way of life is the answer to all those blanked-out questions, she immediately feels that “this [is] the way men were meant to be and to face their existence—and all the rest of it, all the years of ugliness and struggle were only someone's senseless joke” (645).

Works Cited or Consulted

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