Background Essay: Ayn Rand

**Early Life and Education**

Ayn Rand was born Alissa Rosenbaum in 1905 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Rand was raised in an upper-middle-class, European-oriented family, in the midst of the mysticism and nationalism of Russia. Having taught herself to read, Rand, at the age of 8, became captivated by the heroism in a French-language serial adventure titled *The Mysterious Valley*. At the age of 9, Rand decided to become a writer, inspired especially by Victor Hugo's novels. Hugo's writing helped arm her against the fatalistic view of life that dominated Russia, a country she later described as "an accidental cesspool of civilization."

In February of 1917, Ayn Rand witnessed the first shots of the Russian Revolution, and later that year she witnessed the Bolshevik Revolution as well. In order to escape the fighting, her family went to the Crimea, where Rand finished high school. The final Communist victory brought the confiscation of her father's pharmacy and periods of near-starvation. When introduced to American history in her last year of high school, Rand immediately took America as her model of what a nation of free men could be. Her love for the West — especially America — was fueled by the Viennese operettas and American and German films, which the Soviets temporarily allowed to be shown.

When Rand and her family returned from the Crimea, she entered the University of Petrograd to study philosophy and history, graduating in 1924. She entered the State Institute for Cinema Arts in 1924 to study screenwriting. During this period, Rand produced her first formal writings, essays about Hollywood, published in 1999 by The Ayn Rand Institute Press as *Russian Writings on Hollywood*.

**Immigration to the United States**

In late 1925, Ayn Rand obtained permission to leave the Soviet Union to visit relatives in the United States, on the pretext of learning the American film business. After six months with relatives in Chicago, she moved to Hollywood to pursue a career as a screenwriter. On her second day there, she had a chance meeting with her favorite American director, Cecil B. DeMille, who took her to the set of his epic film *The King of Kings* and gave her a job, first as an extra, then as a script reader. During the next week at the studio, she met an actor, Frank O'Connor, whom she married in 1929; they were married until his death 50 years later.

**Career Highlights**

After struggling for several years at various non-writing jobs, including one in the wardrobe department at the RKO film studio, Rand sold her first screenplay, *Red Pawn*, to Universal Studios in 1932. Rand saw her first stage play, *Night of January 16th*, produced in Hollywood in 1934 and then on Broadway in 1935. Her first novel, *We the Living*, was completed in 1933. The most autobiographical of Rand's novels, *We the Living*, was rejected as too anti-Communist and wasn't published in the United States until 1936. In 1937, Rand devoted a few weeks to write her novella *Anthem*, which was soon published in England but was not published in the United States until 1947, ten years later.

Although positively reviewed, neither *We the Living* nor *Anthem* garnered high sales. Not until the publication of *The Fountainhead* did Ayn Rand achieve fame. Rand began writing *The Fountainhead* in 1935, taking seven years to complete the book. In the hero of *The Fountainhead*, architect Howard Roark, she presented for the first time the kind of hero whose depiction was the chief goal of her writing: the ideal man, man "as he could be and ought to be." *The Fountainhead* was rejected by 12 publishers but finally accepted by Bobbs-Merrill. Although published in 1943, *The Fountainhead* made history by becoming a bestseller two years later, through word-of-mouth, and it gained for its author lasting recognition as a champion of individualism.

Ayn Rand returned to Hollywood in late 1943 to write the screenplay for *The Fountainhead*, but wartime restrictions delayed production until 1948. Working part-time as a screenwriter for producer Hal Wallis, Rand wrote such scripts as *Love Letters* and *You Came Along*, and she began her major novel, *Atlas Shrugged*, in 1946. In 1951, Rand permanently moved back to New York City and devoted herself full-time to the completion of the novel *Atlas Shrugged*. Despite extremely negative reviews, *Atlas Shrugged* quickly became a bestseller.

**Rand's Philosophy: Objectivism**

After the publication of *Atlas Shrugged* in 1957, Ayn Rand realized that she would have to identify the philosophy that made her heroes possible. She termed this philosophy Objectivism and described it as "a philosophy for living on earth." Rand offered private courses on both fiction and nonfiction writing and, in 1958, helped form an institute to teach her philosophy. For the remaining years of her life, Rand devoted herself to nonfiction writing, penning and editing a number of articles for her periodicals. These articles later appeared in numerous philosophic collections and dealt with topics including ethics(*The Virtue of Selfishness*), politics (*Capitalism: the Unknown Ideal*), aesthetics(*The Romantic Manifesto*), and the theory of knowledge (*Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*). At the time of her death in 1982, Rand was working on a television miniseries of *Atlas Shrugged.*