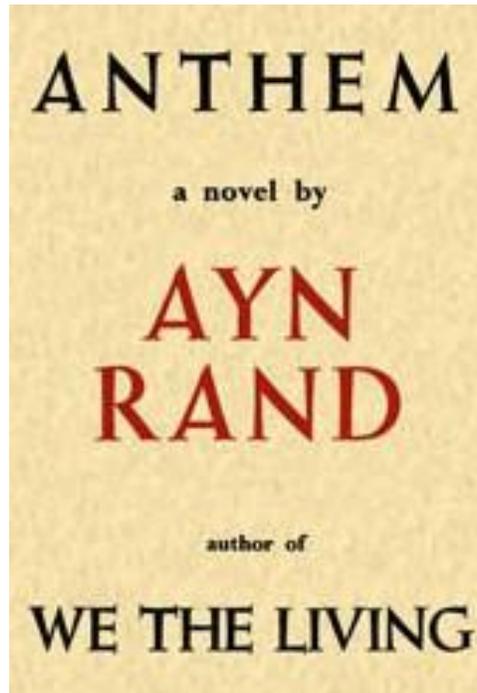

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English: Literature and Social Issues

The Regression of a Future Collectivist Society into a Second Dark Age and Cultural Transition in Ayn Rand's *Anthem*

S. K. Arathy, M.A. & Dr. P.Mythily



Abstract

Ayn Rand born Alisa Zinov'yevna Rosenbaum, on February 2, 1905, is a Russian American Novelist, philosopher, playwright and screen writer. Ayn Rand explored contemporary cultural issues and questions of identity in her 1937 novella *Anthem*. Her books portray a future in which individuality and free will have been stamped out. Sci-Fi works are interesting from a cultural studies perspective because they're not just about fantastical adventures and escapism. Instead, she used the genre to highlight real-life issues and themes relating to politics, ethics, philosophy, culture, individualism and human nature. Rand herself grew up in Soviet Russia and

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developed a hatred of collectivism, so *Anthem* presents Rand's ideas about the functioning of society and the concept of society itself.

This paper is relevant to cultural studies, in which it shows the flip side of socialism. Rand however, had witnessed socialism at its most repressive stage. *Anthem* engages in the analysis of transition culture and it also questions about group identity vs. Individual identity, and shows how any society, no matter how lofty its goals, has the potential to be overrun by mass ideology and repression.

Key Words: Individuality, cultural studies, escapism, ethics, philosophy, socialism, mass ideology, repression.

Ayn Rand



Ayn Rand

Courtesy: <http://www.famousauthors.org/ayn-rand>

Ayn Rand born Alisa Zinov'yevna Rosenbaum on February 2, 1905 is a Russian American Novelist, Philosopher, Play Wright and screen writer. Ayn Rand explored **Language in India** www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:3 March 2017 T. Vembu, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed., (Ph.D.), Editor. *English: Literature and Social Issues* S. K. Arathy, M.A. & Dr. P.Mythily
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contemporary cultural issues and questions of regression of future collectivist society and identity in her 1937 novella *Anthem*. Her books portray a future in which individuality and free will have been stamped out. Sci-fi works are interesting from a cultural studies perspective because they are not just about fantastical adventures and escapism. Instead, she used the genre to highlight real-life issues and themes relating to politics, ethics, philosophy, culture, individualism, collectivism and human nature.

Anthem

Anthem is a dystopian Fiction novella published in 1938 in England. It takes place at some unspecified future date when mankind has entered another dark age. Technological advancement is now carefully planned and the concept of individuality has been eliminated. Rand, as a teenager living in Soviet Russia, initially conceived *Anthem* as a play. After migrating to the United States, Rand didn't think of writing *Anthem*, but reconsidered after reading a short story in "The Saturday Evening post" set in the future. Seeing that mainstream magazines would publish a "fantastic" story, she decided to try submitting "Anthem" to them. She wrote the story of *Anthem* in the summer of 1937, while taking a break from research she was doing for her next novel, "The Fountainhead". Rand's working title was *Ego*; Leonard Peikoff explains the meaning behind this title. "Rand is implicitly upholding the central principles of her philosophy and of her heroes: reason, values, collectivism and individualism." (Peikoff's *A critique of the philosophy of objectivism*, 314). Thinking that the original title was too blunt, unemotional and would give away too much of the theme, Rand changed the title to *Anthem*. The present novel, in Miss Rand's mind was from the outset An ode to man's ego. It was not difficult therefore, to change the working title: to move from 'Ego' to 'Ode' or 'Anthem', leaving the object celebrated by the ode to be discovered by the reader.

A Solemn Hymn

An *Anthem* is a solemn hymn- ordinarily, a hymn to God. Rand did not believe in God; yet as her title suggests, she is trying to project the secular correlative of intense religious feeling. When a new world comes to life in *Anthem*, it is created not by a literal God but by a Godlike human being. According to Rand, every culture has mythic stories that identify its values and

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dramatize its ideas of the way things happen in the World. Anthem is an outstanding introduction to Ayn Rand's philosophy of human nature. The novella's theme and central conflict – the individual versus the collective – occurs in all her novels and is an important element of her moral and political philosophy.

Hero, an Inventor

According to Rand, it is important to note that the hero is an inventor. He has been enthralled by the phenomena of nature since childhood. He loves the "science of things." He desires above all to be a scholar, a scientific researcher. He is so committed to this dream that he faces hardship and endures every difficulty to accomplish it. He is a genius, a Thomas Alwa Edison of the future who in the teeth of every form of opposition, re-invents the electric light. The essential point is that "Equality" is a man of the mind. He is a thinker, a man of reason. An invention such as the electric light is a product of the mind.

Focus of This Paper

This paper analyzes how Rand argues that all aspects of progress - scientific research, medical advances, inventions, technological improvements, industrial production are achievements of the mind. Such accomplishments are not brought about by faith in the supernatural or, primarily, by manual labour, but by the rational mind. Historically, individuals such as Equality thinkers have been responsible for humankind's greatest advances. Men like Copernicus and Galileo, who established that the sun is the centre of the solar system, Charles Darwin, who proved that human life evolved from simpler life forms, the Wright Brothers, who pioneered man's ability to fly, and many more are real-life examples of individuals such as Equality. These are men whose minds have discovered vital new truths that significantly improved human life on earth. The overall principle is that human well-being depends on the reasoning mind.

The Question of Social Condition and Equality

The question Ayn Rand raises in *Anthem* is this: "Is some social condition necessary for the creative mind to function properly? Can the thinkers perform their inventive work under any

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type of political system? Or is rational productivity possible only under certain political conditions? The answer she resoundingly provides is that the independent mind needs freedom.”

Equality discovers a new force of nature. He does not realize that it is electricity; he calls it the "power of the sky" because he knows that it is the same force that is responsible for lightning. His identification of this power, and his ability to harness it to create the light, require his unswerving dedication to the laws of nature and the facts of reality. Society's beliefs are irrelevant to this creative process; in this case, they are mistaken. Equality, if he is to succeed in his endeavour, must allow him to be ruled exclusively by the scientific facts of the case. “Nature, not society, sets the terms in all such research and scientific investigations”. (Ayn Rand, *Anthem*-31). The independent mind commits itself to truth, facts, and the laws of nature. If the beliefs or laws of society contradict the scientific facts, then the independent thinker dismisses such beliefs as mistaken, which is exactly the case with Equality.

Viewing Good and Evil

Scholars, as the leading spokespersons for society, regard the electric light as evil. But Equality has come to understand some truths regarding the nature of electricity and knows, from his research and experimentation, that this force can be harnessed to light cities and homes. Part of his proof is the glass box that he shows the Scholars, the light that glows under his control. The beliefs of his brothers are erroneous. The light is not evil; nor is it dangerous in the hands of a man knowledgeable regarding its power. Equality is a man whose mind is committed to the facts. He is not swayed by the irrational beliefs of his brothers. When society denounces Equality's thinking and opposes the electric light, he does not bow to their commands. He is committed to truth and to the scientific facts, not to the beliefs of others. He has the nature of an independent thinker.

Views of Rulers of the Society

But the rulers of this society have no interest in scientific research or truth. They are interested exclusively in power. In order to maintain their grip over society, they have to control the thinking of their citizens. They cannot allow the mind to function freely. The acquisition and

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retention of dictatorial power requires the suppression of free thought. Therefore, real-life dictators whether Fascist, National Socialist, or Communist always ban freedom of speech that is, freedom of thought and expression. They know that independent thinkers will disagree with their suppressive policies and, by speaking out, rile the masses against them. Dictators recognize that their most implacable foe is the reasoning mind; for thinkers are concerned solely with truth, not with the arbitrary commands of power-hungry rulers.

A dictator's suppression of the mind necessarily extends to scientific research, as well. Equality is consigned to the Home of the Street Sweepers and denied admission to the ranks of the Scholars because the authorities recognize his brilliant mind and independent spirit and relegate him to the task of unskilled manual labour. They will not encourage the development of his thinking even if restricted to scientific questions because they recognize that it is impossible to limit such a mind to science. The dictators are not themselves brilliant men, but they sense in some instinctual way that the mind is their enemy specifically, that "The mind capable of inventing the electric light or formulating the theory of evolution is just as capable of questioning the moral legitimacy of the dictator's regime." (Ayn Rand, *Anthem* 9)

Personal Morality and Political Philosophy

Great minds are not necessarily limited to technical questions and concerns; as individual members of the human race, they are often concerned with matters of both personal morality and political philosophy. The common expression, "The pen is mightier than the sword," is true, because the pen is an instrument of the mind. The deeper truth is, "The mind is mightier than the sword," that is, the mind is mightier than brute force. Ayn Rand's point in *Anthem* is that dictators necessarily stifle the mind. In order to maintain their power, they must do so. This is why Equality is refused admittance to the Home of the Scholars and why, later, he is imprisoned, his light threatened, and his life endangered. A great scientist has no chance to flourish in a totalitarian state. In real life, for example, the brilliant physicist, Andrei Sakharov, was persecuted and imprisoned in the Soviet Union for his outspoken moral condemnation of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

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Global Dictatorship

If the entire world is a global dictatorship as in *Anthem*, if freedom exists nowhere on earth, then the mind can seek no haven, no example such as the United States to which one can emigrate in order to gain an independent life. In such a case, the author shows, the mind will be stifled everywhere. There will be no creative thinking or innovation, no scientific research, no technological progress or industrial advance. In a worldwide dictatorship, human society will not move forward. But the author shows that the implications are even worse. It is not merely the case that humanity will not progress, but that it will regress into a second Dark Age. Society will lose the great accomplishments of the past. If common individuals are to learn from great minds as they do they, too, must engage in rational thinking. The successful student, as well as the teacher, must be a thinker. It takes rational thought to learn to operate computers, to service and rebuild airplanes, to perform surgical techniques, to administer plants supplying electrical power, and so on. One does not fly or repair an airplane by rote memorization; one must understand the process.

Individualism

Those who learn from great inventors and discoverers of knowledge are also individuals of the mind. A society that suppresses the mind, that ruthlessly punishes its most independent thinkers, will soon degenerate into a state of primitive barbarism. When the mind is stifled, a society cannot hold onto the technological achievements of the past. An individual, as well as a society, must prove worthy of the achievements inherited from great thinkers of the past. Innovations are the product of freedom and thinking. If humans are no longer free to think, they will lose the creations of the free mind. To see that, Ayn Rand depicts an accurate picture in *Anthem*, one can look at the historical Dark Age.

Reason in Classical World

The achievements of the Classical world were many. Plato and Aristotle were extraordinary philosophers, and their schools the Academy and the Lyceum flourished for centuries. The dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes wrote their brilliant plays in Athens, and the poets Virgil, Horace, and Catullus their great works in Rome. The

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ancients made advances in medicine, in physics, in mathematics, and in astronomy. Athens was the world's first democratic political system, and its standard of living and life expectancy were both relatively high. Both Greece and Rome, though marred by endless wars and political violence, were essentially civilized societies. Because these societies emphasized reason, they provided freedom, education, and a good life for many citizens.

Dark Age

All this ended in the Dark Age that existed between the fall of Rome and the beginning of the Renaissance. The invading barbarians were men of brute force, not advocates of the mind. They sacked the centres of civilization and, in some cases, burned them to the ground. The barbarians were eventually converted to Christianity, but religion emphasizes faith, not reason. During the period in which the Catholic Church held cultural and political power in Europe, unquestioning obedience to religious dogma was required, and freethinkers were often burned at the stake. Independent thinking was stifled, scientific advance was non-existent, and illiteracy was rampant. Europeans of this age fell far below the knowledge level, standard of living, and life expectancy that had been attained centuries earlier. They lost the advances that the Classical period had reached. "Because the culture stifled the mind, it lost the rational achievements reached by freer men of the past." (Ayn Rand, *Anthem* 19) In this regard, the Dark Age of the historical past is an accurate model to one of the fictional future portrayed in *Anthem*.

Rand shows the unrelieved evil of a collectivist society the thought control, the necessity to surrender one's mind and life to the state, and the utter lack of individuality and freedom.

Despite the authors' agreement regarding the stifling evil of totalitarianism, an important difference exists. Rand depicts a future collectivist dictatorship as a society that has made great scientific and technological progress. The state employs an ultra-sophisticated technology to engage in mind reading and thought control.

Collectivism

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Rand's depiction of collectivism is regression to ignorant savagery. Rand believes in the mistake of believing that the mind can continue to function under compulsion. She does not realize that great achievements are the result of independent thinking by humans such as Equality, who recognizes only the truths of nature and who conforms neither to society's irrational beliefs nor to the state's arbitrary commands. In the Dark Age, the independent thinkers were burned, leaving the Church authorities with no one but lackeys following blindly the prescribed dogma. Rand argues that the recent collectivist states, such as the modern Nazis and Communists, are more suppressive of independent thinking than the medieval Church ever was. Therefore, thinkers such as Equality, have even less chance to flourish. A global collectivist dictatorship will sink to a lower standard of living than even that of the Dark Ages.

Communist Society

Ayn Rand grew up in the Communist dictatorship of Soviet Russia and stayed in touch with friends and family in her homeland for as long as possible. She saw firsthand, and fled from, the murderously suppressive policies of Stalin. She knew that any who dared think for themselves, any who criticized the regime, were dragged off by the secret police never to be heard from again. The most independent thinkers, the best creative minds, lived in terror, knowing they dare not speak out. With the best minds murdered or stifled, the country was utterly unable to achieve progress or prosperity. Even with massive help from the free societies of the West, the Soviet dictatorship subsisted in miserable squalor until finally collapsing from its own destitution. Rand had predicted such an apocalypse even decades earlier in *Anthem*. A collectivist world, she shows, in the absence of freedom anywhere on earth, will permit no independent thinking and will inevitably backslide into primitive conditions. When thinkers such as Equality are suppressed on a global scale, there can be neither scientific progress nor industrial production. The backwardness and poverty depicted in the novel *Anthem* are the only possible results.

To Conclude

Despite inciting a number of vehement and critical commentaries, Rand's controversial, original and systematic philosophical positions should be taken seriously and

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treated with respect. Rand presented the cultural transition and the regression of a future collectivist society into a second dark age as an integrated new system of thought with an organized, hierarchical structure. Whatever one's ultimate evaluation of her theories, Rand's unique vision should be considered worthy of comprehensive, scholarly examination.

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