

**Exposition vs. Drama: A Scene Viewable Online from *Atlas Shrugged, the Movie* vs.
the Scene from the Novel**

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This essay compares one scene, viewable on the Internet, of the movie *Atlas Shrugged Part I* (The Strike Productions 2011) to the corresponding scene in the source novel *Atlas Shrugged* by Ayn Rand. In this essay, my secondary purpose is to judge this small part of the movie; my primary purpose is to highlight—through contrast—the Romantic style of Ayn Rand’s novel. I analyze this one scene instead of the whole artworks so that you, dear reader, can study for yourself the evidence for my conclusion: The scene in the movie is Naturalistic exposition; the scene in the novel is Romantic drama.

If you have not yet viewed the online movie scene, entitled “Henry Rearden Comes Home” and viewable (at <http://www.atlsshuggedpart1.com/atlas-shrugged-movie-scene-henry-rearden-comes-home>) on the official Web site for the movie, I suggest that you do so before continuing to read this essay.

The movie scene is in two parts. Here is a synopsis of the first part.

With a look of seriousness, Rearden approaches his house. He enters and finds his wife Lillian, his Mother, his brother Philip, and their friend Paul conversing gaily in the living room, though their words are indiscernible. Lillian greets Rearden and chides him lightly for being late for dinner. Rearden, standing with his hands folded in front of him, gently acknowledges, “I know, I’m late.” Lillian casually asks Rearden to save a date three months away. Rearden politely indicates the difficulty of saving a date so far in advance, and mentions that he started a major new pour of metal today. Lillian lightly springs the fact that the date is their wedding anniversary. Mother chides Rearden. Rearden amiably assures Lillian that he will save the date for her. Lillian expresses her appreciation. Phillip chides Rearden for working too hard; Rearden accepts the chiding with a polite smile. Rearden absently remembers something, or at least he makes

it seem as though he absently remembers, and he hands a jewel case to Lillian. Lillian expresses eager anticipation over the gift. As she opens the jewel case, Rearden says, "I had it made, from the first pour of Rearden metal." Lillian opens the jewel case and sees the crude bracelet, and her anticipation turns to disappointment. She lifts the bracelet and disparages it. Then she seems to suppress her disappointment while saying, "It's wonderful." She goes on to praise the gift, but her praise devolves into sarcasm. Rearden seems disappointed but not surprised. Philip calls Rearden selfish. Lillian defends Rearden while disparaging the gift again by saying, "It is not the gift, it's the intention." Mother agrees with Philip, saying that another man would have given his wife a diamond bracelet for her pleasure, not his. Lillian delivers another sarcastic and ironic insult: "The chain is appropriate. I think it's the chain by which he holds us all in bondage." As Rearden, again disappointed though not surprised, walks to another room alone, Lillian delivers a final sarcastic defense of Rearden to the others. Philip retorts, "It's pathetic," and follows Rearden.

And here is a synopsis of the second part.

Philip smugly engages Rearden in conversation. Rearden—wary, reluctant, and trying to focus on other things—inquires after Philip, who smugly answers that he is working for Friends of Global Awareness. Rearden, with understated disapproval, cuts to the chase and asks Philip, "What do you want?" Philip is equally frank, yet still smug, and answers, "Money. Doesn't everyone?" Rearden, simply trying to dismiss Philip, replies, "Call my office first thing in the morning, I'll authorize a hundred grand for you." Philip replies, "You really don't care about helping the underprivileged, do you." Now impatient, Rearden replies, "No Philip, I don't. But it will make you happy," as if saying, "But it will get you out of my hair." With equal derision, Philip replies that the money is not for himself but "for the benefit of the less privileged." Rearden smiles derisively as if observing hypocrisy. Now with blatant condescension, Philip asks for the money in a wire, not a check. This is the first part of the conversation that surprises Rearden and gets his full attention. Philip continues, "It's a progressive group. They wouldn't appreciate your name on a check." Rearden now is very surprised. Finally, Philip delivers an unabashed insult to his benefactor: "It would embarrass us to have you on a list of our contributors."

The dialogue in the first part of this movie scene is similar to the dialogue in the novel.

The overall structure of the first part is the same as that in the novel in these particulars:

Rearden comes home to these people; Lillian springs the trick about their wedding anniversary; Rearden presents his gift; Lillian ridicules the gift with wit and charm; Mother and Philip support Lillian; and Rearden turns away from the others. The second part of the scene deviates more starkly from the novel but still uses much of the novel's dialogue (with one notable exception that I discuss later).

This scene demonstrates that Grant Bowler (who plays Rearden) and Rebecca Wisocky (who plays Lillian) are talented and skillful actors (as are the other actors in this scene). With an economy of expression, Bowler conveys pride, benevolence, disappointment, disdain, and surprise. Wisocky is adept at saying one thing while clearly thinking and feeling another.

The scene conveys a fair amount of information about the characters. Rearden, the productive industrialist, loves his work and wants to share this love with his wife. The others, who chide Rearden for being absorbed in his work, nevertheless do not seem to mind enjoying his wealth. We see a clash of perspectives, of Rearden's vs. that of the others, with each side feeling bad about not being understood by the other. Moreover, a viewer of the movie might feel sympathy for each of the characters.

In order to follow my analysis, now is a good time for you to read the scene from the novel. I suggest that you begin reading just before the scene, in the middle of Chapter 2 of Part 1 (Rand 1957, 31), with this passage that is not shown in the movie:

He touched the bracelet in his pocket. He had had it made from that first poured metal. It was for his wife.

As he touched it, he realized suddenly that he had thought of an abstraction called "his wife"—not of the woman to whom he was married. He felt a stab of regret, wishing he had not made the bracelet, then a wave of self-reproach for the regret.

He shook his head. This was not the time for his old doubts. He felt that he could forgive anything to anyone, because happiness was the greatest agent of purification. He felt certain that every living being wished him well tonight. He wanted to meet someone, to face the first stranger, to stand disarmed and open, and to say, "Look at me." People, he thought,

were as hungry for a sight of joy as he had always been—for a moment's relief from that gray load of suffering which seemed so inexplicable and unnecessary. He had never been able to understand why men should be unhappy.

[The scene continues through to the end of Chapter 2.]

In my judgment, the scene in the novel is more dramatic, more emotionally evocative, more entertaining than the scene in the movie. But why? What is the cause of the discrepancy between the movie scene and the novel scene?

Is the discrepancy caused by the selection of moments from the novel for inclusion in the movie? Significantly, the movie scene does not include any moments showing Rearden's profound joy. (If you have not seen the entire movie, here is one claim of mine that you cannot verify: the scenes from the movie preceding the scene under analysis do not show Rearden's joy either.) But the selection of moments is not the primary cause, nor is the change in medium from novel to movie or the need for condensation that the movie medium requires. In my judgment, the primary cause is the way in which the movie scene depicts the moments that it does show. To make my case and to help us compare the movie scene to the novel moment by moment, here is a synopsis of a hypothetical movie scene that I believe depicts each moment selected for inclusion in the movie in a manner more faithful to the meaning of the novel. This hypothetical movie scene has the same duration as the actual movie scene. (The single quote marks below denote actual descriptions from the novel, and double quote marks denote actual dialogue from the novel. See Rand 1957, 32–43 for the scene in the novel.)

Rearden approaches his house. At the front door, he reaches into his pocket and removes the bracelet (which is not in a jewel case). He is filled with joy. He closes his hand over the bracelet and enters the house, finding his wife Lillian, his mother, his brother Philip, and their friend Paul. Lillian, who may have noticed Rearden enter, delivers a glib insult against men interested in "purely material ingenuity." Lillian greets Rearden and chides him lightly for being late for dinner. Rearden, standing with his hands at his side but with one hand closed as before, gently acknowledges, "I know, I'm late." Excitement builds in Rearden as he continues, "But today at the mills, we poured—" Lillian listens with patronizing

indifference as she hands Philip an hors d'oeuvre. Mother fiddles with herself, not listening. Rearden cannot complete his thought, and says instead, "It's just that I ... forgot." As Phillip chides Rearden for working too hard, Rearden slowly reaches his closed hand into his pocket and withdraws the hand empty. Lillian casually asks Rearden to save a date three months away. Rearden politely indicates the difficulty of saving a date so far in advance. Lillian lightly springs the fact that the date is their wedding anniversary. Lillian and the guests stop their movements as they stare with sly anticipation at Rearden. Rearden smiles 'an open, unresentful smile'. Rearden assures Lillian that he will save the date for her. Lillian expresses her appreciation, but seems less pleased than when she sprung the fact of the wedding anniversary. Deliberately, Rearden 'put his hand in his pocket.' Rearden says, "I brought you a present, Lillian." 'He did not know that he stood straight and that the gesture of his arm was that of a returning crusader offering a trophy to his love, when he dropped a small chain of metal into her lap. Lillian Rearden picked it up, hooked on the tips of two straight fingers, and raised it to the light.' "What's that?" she asks. Rearden replies, "The first thing made from the first heat of the first order of Rearden Metal." Lillian's frown may be confusion or something else. Then she becomes still, as if weighing or calculating something, realizing the power she holds in this moment to hurt him. She "You mean," she says, now speaking gaily, "it's fully as valuable as a piece of railroad rails?" 'He looked at her blankly.' Philip calls Rearden conceited. Lillian defends Rearden while disparaging the gift again by saying, "It isn't the gift, it's the intention." Mother agrees with Philip, saying that another man would have given his wife a diamond bracelet for her pleasure, not his. "No, it's sweet," said Lillian. "It's charming." 'She dropped the bracelet down on the table [casually underscoring her view of the gift's insignificance]. She got up, put her hands on Rearden's shoulders, and raising herself on tiptoe, kissed him on the cheek, saying, "Thank you, dear." He did not move, did not bend his head down to her. After a while, he turned, took off his coat and sat down by the fire, apart from the others.'

And here is a more faithful rendering of the second part of the scene. (In the novel, this second part follows a scene—which appears later in the movie—between Rearden and Paul.)

Rearden sees Philip, looking sullen. "What's the matter, Phil?" Rearden asked, approaching him. "You look done in." "I've had a hard day," said Philip sullenly.' "What were you doing today, Phil?" he asked patiently. "It wouldn't interest you." "It does interest me. That's why I'm asking." "I

am trying to raise money for Friends of Global Progress. We need ten thousand dollars for a vital program. When I think of the kind of bloated money-bags I saw today, but I couldn't squeeze just a hundred bucks apiece out of them.” Rearden laughs at ‘the hint and the insult, offered together.’ And then Rearden’s expression changes with a new thought. Trying to infuse some of his own joy into his brother, Rearden says, “Philip, call Miss Ives at my office tomorrow. She'll have a check for you for ten thousand dollars.” ‘Philip stared at him blankly; it was neither shock nor pleasure; it was just the empty stare of eyes that looked glassy. “Oh,” said Philip, “We'll appreciate it very much.” There was no emotion in his voice, not even the simple one of greed. Rearden could not understand his own feeling: it was as if something leaden and empty were collapsing within him.’ ““You don't really care about helping the underprivileged, do you?” Philip asked—and Rearden heard, unable to believe it, that the tone of his voice was reproachful.’ “No, Phil, I don't care about it at all. I only wanted you to be happy.” “But that money is not for me. I have no selfish interest in the matter whatever.” ‘His voice was cold, with a note of self-conscious virtue. Rearden turned away. He felt a sudden loathing: not because the words were hypocrisy, but because they were true; Philip meant them. “By the way, Henry,” Philip added, “do you mind if I ask you to have Miss Ives give me the money in cash?” Rearden turned back to him, puzzled. “You see, Friends of Global Progress are a very progressive group and they have always maintained that you represent the blackest element of social retrogression in the country, so it would embarrass us, you know, to have your name on our list of contributors.”’ ‘He wanted to slap Philip's face. But an almost unendurable contempt made him close his eyes instead. “All right,” he said quietly, “you can have it in cash.” He walked away, to the farthest window of the room, and stood looking at the glow of the mills in the distance.’ Speaking to the other guests, Lillian says, “A chain Appropriate, isn't it? It's the chain by which he holds us all in bondage.”

In the (actual) movie scene, Rearden—the hero—is essentially passive, even more passive than his antagonists. The choices or decisions that Rearden does make in the scene—his offering of the gift to Lillian and his offering of money to Philip—are merely his carrying out of decisions he has made before the scene starts. He decided earlier to give Lillian the gift, and he actually gives the gift only when he off-handedly remembers this past decision. In the second part of the movie scene, Rearden’s decision to give Philip money seems to be merely Rearden’s usual expediency for getting Philip out of his

hair. Thus the movie scene is merely a slice of Rearden's life, showing how Rearden habitually acts and how he typically feels when things happen to him.

In other words, the style of the movie scene is Naturalism¹. It is not Romanticism, because it does not show us volition. According to Ayn Rand, who called herself "a Romantic Realist" (Rand [1963] 1975, 167), "Romanticism is a category of art based on the recognition of the principle that man possesses the faculty of volition." (Rand [1969] 1975, 99).

Rearden is a great industrialist; he thinks brilliantly and makes difficult choices in order to be successful. But what the movie scene actually *shows* about Rearden is passivity. Consequently, the scene is mere exposition, somewhat poignant, but not drama. According to Ayn Rand, drama requires choice by a character, carried out in action, in the face of an internal conflict of values.²

Ironically, the antagonists of Rearden in the movie scene show more volition than Rearden does. Lillian is more assertive in her asking Rearden to save the date of the anniversary than Rearden is in giving the gift. And Lillian does make a choice in the face of apparent internal conflict: she tells Rearden that the gift is wonderful while she apparently thinks otherwise. In the second half of the movie scene, it is Philip who pursues Rearden for money, and it is Philip who seems to make the only new choice in the scene when he asks for a bank wire and deliberately insults Rearden. Remarkably, in a scene based on a novel by Ayn Rand, it is the antagonists who drive the (minimal) action while the hero is passive.

¹ Ayn Rand ([1962] 1975, 124) writes, "Naturalism rejected the concept of volition The Naturalists proclaimed that values have no power and no place, neither in human life nor in literature, that writers must present men 'as they are' which meant: must record whatever they happen to see around them"

² For the need for action, see Rand [1958] 2000, 17,18, 22. For the need for internal conflict of values, see Rand [1958] 2000, 40.

Since the movie scene has antagonists along with the hero, there is a modicum of conflict, of the 'man vs. man' variety. But Ayn Rand ([1958] 2000) has said,

Now I want to clarify the difference between drama and melodrama.

A drama involves primarily a conflict of values *within* a man (as expressed in action); a melodrama involves only conflicts of men with other men. (These are my own definitions. ...)

In the novel, Rearden does decide prior to this scene to give the chain to Lillian, but this scene in the novel lets us see him hesitate and change his mind right before our eyes. And we see why he does so, as he struggles with his passionate desire to share his celebration against his sense that such a sharing is somehow not right. We don't know what he will choose to do in the next moment. We wonder what he *should* do, what *we* would do. And when he does choose to withhold his gift, our heart breaks for this great achiever who has no one with whom to share his achievement. And we wonder what he will eventually do with the bracelet. And then we see him change his mind again in the face of new information (Lillian's offering of an anniversary party), offering his gift in a return gesture of pride and benevolence. He makes his offer not in a way that hides how much the gift means to him, but in a way that leaves him open to be hurt terribly. Here the reader awaits, in suspense, the response to the hero's climactic choice to bare his soul.

What I have just described is an instance of drama, and this instance demonstrates why drama requires choice, carried out in action before the viewer's or the reader's eyes, in the face of an internal conflict of values.

Moreover, this choice by Rearden to offer his gift to Lillian makes possible a more dramatic choice by Lillian. In the movie scene, Lillian does make a choice in the face of internal conflict. But the conflict and the choice are trite: Lillian in the movie is evidently a gold digger, and she subordinates her disappointment in not receiving fine jewelry in order to placate Rearden. This conventional characterization and conflict are contrary to the novel. In the novel, Lillian does not spend much of Rearden's money. Her conflict in the novel is whether to face the reality of her own inferiority to Rearden and to try to live

up to Rearden from now on, or to tear Rearden down and thereby make it easier to evade her inferiority. She chooses the latter. She exercises her power to hurt Rearden when this unexpected, small yet powerful weapon—the bracelet—literally falls into her lap. Such a conflict and such a kind of choice ultimately hold Lillian’s life in the balance, and so are much more dramatic than the choice of whether to be gracious in the acceptance of an unwanted gift. A reader of this scene for the first time would not fully grasp Lillian’s deep conflict and immoral choice until near the end of the novel, when Rearden grasps it. But an astute reader would, like Rearden, grasp in this scene from the novel that there is something about Lillian that must be figured out. Hence, this conflict and this choice by Lillian in the novel are more suspenseful, as well as more dramatic, than the conflict and choice by Lillian in the movie.

In the second part of the scene, the contrast between the movie and the novel is even more extreme. In the novel, it is Rearden who approaches Philip, not the other way around. It is Rearden who chooses, dramatically, to offer Philip money, despite Rearden’s contempt for Philip’s cause and without Philip even asking for the money. Rearden does so out of magnanimity, sincerely thinking that he can bring a little happiness to Philip and inspire Philip to do better things. Even when Philip delivers a final insult, Rearden again makes a dramatic choice: suppressing his contempt for Philip, Rearden agrees to give Philip cash and walks away.

In short, Rearden in the novel drives the action throughout both parts of the scene, and he does so dramatically, making active choices in the face of internal conflicts of values.

In reducing Ayn Rand’s Romantic drama to Naturalistic exposition, the movie scene also alters the characterization of Rearden. Of course, the broad perspective on this alteration is that Rearden is made to appear passive and lacking passion. But there are important particulars too. In the movie scene, Rearden seems to have made up his mind about Lillian and Philip; toward Lillian, Rearden seems to be thinking, “Here we go again”; toward Philip, Rearden is decidedly contemptuous and dismissive from the start. In the novel, Rearden tries to understand both Lillian and Philip, to reach out to them and share

his joy with them. In the movie, Rearden seems decent and somewhat proud and benevolent but also resigned and cold, even cynical. In the novel, he seems courageous, passionate, capable of profound joy, extremely proud and benevolent, and generous even toward his antagonists; because of these traits, he also seems vulnerable. Greater virtue and more vulnerability leads to more drama.

Rearden's antagonists in the movie scene are far different from how they are in the novel. In the movie scene, they are greedy for Rearden's wealth. Lillian, seeing a jewel case, is eager to receive an expensive gift. Philip aggressively tells Rearden that he wants "Money. Doesn't everyone?" This line, which does not appear in the novel, is the glaring addition to the dialogue of the second part of the movie scene. The line comes a few moments after Philip calls Rearden "selfish," and further supports the movie's depiction of Lillian and Philip as greedy hypocrites: they deride Rearden for working hard, being selfish, and having wealth, and yet they want a handsome share of this wealth. Indeed, the movie scene seems to suggest that it is the antagonists' greed, not their altruism, that is the wrong side of their hypocrisy.

In the novel scene, the antagonists are decidedly and explicitly not greedy. The novel is an indictment fundamentally of the morality of altruism, not of hypocrisy. Lillian and Philip are consistent altruists (to the extent that anyone can be a consistent altruist without dying immediately); through these characters and others, Ayn Rand shows that altruism is a morality absent of values and valuing, leading to destruction and death. Moreover, the conflict of selfishness vs. altruism is a fundamental conflict within Rearden's own mind. Therefore, in keeping with the novel's seamless integration of theme and plot, this conflict is essential not only to the novel's thematic content, but also to the novel's drama.

Smaller touches from the movie scene are wrong too. In the movie, Rearden's chain is in a jewel case. Consequently, Rearden's offering of the gift initially makes Lillian believe that she is about to receive a piece of fine jewelry. Rearden in the novel would not be so inconsiderate of Lillian, nor would he invite a comparison between fine jewelry and his

crudely made chain. Moreover, the presence of the jewel case makes Mother's subsequent comparison of the chain to a diamond bracelet seem redundant. Perhaps the jewel case was added to the movie scene because the filmmakers, not grasping the internal conflict in Lillian in the novel, felt they needed to create a conflict for her in the movie.

In conclusion, Ayn Rand's Romantic, dramatic fiction shows passionate heroes making active choices in the face of internal conflicts of values. The movie scene is a semblance of Ayn Rand's story with the drama removed, reducing the scene to Naturalistic exposition of a dull, passive hero and conventional antagonists.

My assessment of this scene from *Atlas Shrugged*, the movie, can be summed up by this ironically prescient passage from *Atlas Shrugged*, the novel:

It was as if a handful of mud and pebbles had been flung at the music, and what followed was the sound of the rolling and the dripping. It was Halley's concerto swung into a popular tune. It was Halley's melody torn apart, its holes stuffed with hiccoughs. The great statement of joy had become the giggling of a barroom. Yet it was still the remnant of Halley's melody that gave it form; it was the melody that supported it like a spinal chord. (Rand 1957, 155.)

My purpose here is not to ascribe blame. Perhaps the movie's deviations from the novel were intentional, perhaps not. It may be that the director and actors had less time to prepare for this scene than I took to critique it. Also, what is written in a screenplay is often very different from what ends up on the screen. Nevertheless, whatever the intentions and commitment of those who worked on the movie, this scene from the movie is what it is. If some good is to come from this scene, I think it will be that that the scene will serve as a foil to enhance understanding of and appreciation for the Romantic, dramatic style in the writing of Ayn Rand.

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