

## FIRST PLACE



Stephanie Aldrich, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, PA

**In the novel, James Taggart's first words are "Don't bother me, don't bother me, don't bother me." Why is this significant? How do his first words relate to his thoughts and actions throughout the novel?**

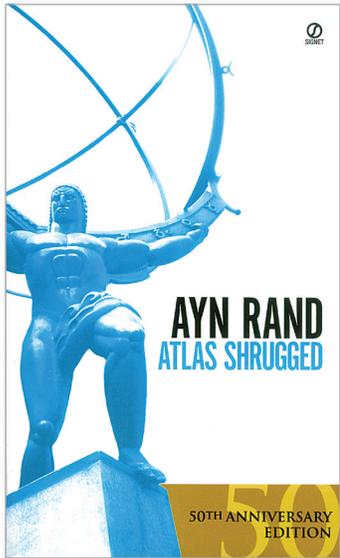
A central pillar of Objectivism is the concept of an objective reality characterized by absolutes: What exists exists, and has certain properties, and obeys certain laws. James Taggart, like many of the villains of *Atlas Shrugged*, refuses to accept these principles. A world of immutable absolutes is a world not subject to his whims, and this frustrates him endlessly. His first words in the novel, "Don't bother me," foreshadow his relentless struggle to deny reality.

Taggart is speaking, in this case, to an employee who approaches him with a pessimistic report about Taggart Transcontinental's recent failures. That cry of "Don't bother me" characterizes Taggart's habitual approach to this and other unpleasant truths. To shield himself from reality, Taggart constructs an irrational value system that celebrates his mediocrity; he demands that more capable people protect him from the consequences of his shortsighted decisions; and he even conceals from himself the nature of his own spiteful, self-defeating desires. James Taggart is a man who cannot bear to be bothered by inconvenient absolutes, no matter what price he must pay to preserve his illusions.

Taggart is most vocal in his rejection of reality when trying to convince others—and himself—that he is a "superior sort of person" (248). The moral purpose of a conscious being, as John Galt explains in his radio speech, is its own life; therefore, "all that which is proper to the life of a rational being is good" (927). Because "man's mind is his basic tool of survival" (926), he must learn and apply his knowledge in order to reshape his environment in service of his life and happiness. To live "by means of achievement" (928) is the only moral path, because the law of cause and effect does not allow human values to be fulfilled through inactivity or failure. Therefore, a person's worth lies in the extent to which he uses his mind to create value—and by this measure, Taggart is a worthless man. His affinity for deception and graft enables him to seize what others have made, but he lacks "the capacity," and the desire, "to produce wealth" (361). He feels hounded by the successes of more capable people, as if he were always "running to catch up with them" (502). He is unwilling to face his own mediocrity, but unforgiving reality does not allow him to escape it. Immutable causality will not reward him for his lack of ability.

His defensive reaction is to idealize an imaginary world in which morality is uncoupled from reality, a world in which he is superior because he is worthless. He insists, as if repetition will make it true, that the ability to produce wealth is not "the standard . . . by which one gauges a man's value to society" (18). Instead, he urges the celebration of "non-material considerations" (61) at the expense of tangible achievement: he places weakness on a pedestal, while demonizing the producers of wealth as selfish,

# 2014 ATLAS SHRUGGED WINNING ESSAY



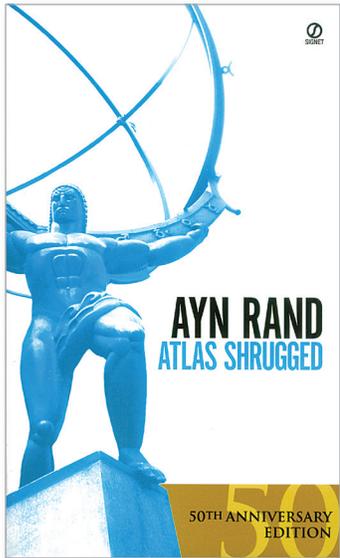
arrogant creatures who “ought to apologize” (248) for their successes. Because he wants to be loved simply for existing, not “for anything I do or have or say or think” (809), he argues that it is intrinsically virtuous to love and praise the undeserving. In Taggart’s ideal world, his incompetence in the physical realm would imply a nobility of spirit; his unhappiness would be the “the hallmark of virtue” (248); and to admire him unconditionally would be a “supreme gesture of charity” (361).

For all his denial of objective reality, however, Taggart is powerless to alter it. Instead, he constructs the facade of his utopia on the backs of producers. Taggart is able to leverage his political skills to achieve personal victories at the expense of others, but depends entirely on the “master[s] of reality” (1048) to provide the loot. He receives an unearned position of power in a company built by his ancestors and operated by his subordinate sister, the Railroad Unification Plan permits him to seize his competitors’ profits, and he even wins his wife’s admiration by taking credit for his sister’s achievements. Yet his parasitic empire is unsustainable. It can persist only so long as there is something to steal, and this is yet another truth that Taggart cannot bear to confront.

As John Galt recruits most of the great producers to his strike, the burden of humanity’s survival falls increasingly heavy on the shoulders of those that are left. At the same time, Taggart and his fellow “pull-peddlers” (836) tighten their grip on the market, redirecting the wealth that remains into their own pockets. Starved of resources and shackled by increasingly oppressive laws, those men of ability who are still willing to maintain civilization find themselves unable to do so. Yet Taggart refuses to see reason. He demands that the producers find some way, in defiance of all logic, to prop up the cardboard edifice of his utopia—“as if, by agreeing to fake the reality he orders them to fake, men would, in fact, create it” (957). “I want this kind of world,” he tells his sister; “. . . it allows me to feel important—make it work for me!” (839). When Hank Rearden explains how the Steel Unification Plan will bleed him dry until he and the looters perish together, and asks why they expect any better outcome, Taggart’s only response is, “Oh, you’ll do something!” (902). By this point, the only way to save human civilization is allow the producers to rebuild it without interference, but this is an option Taggart will not consider. Rather than bow to reality, rather than admit that his looters’ paradise is subject to causality and cannot persist no matter how much he wishes it could, he clings to its crumbling remnants until there is nothing left to grasp.

This is the truth that lies at James Taggart’s core, the truth he is most desperate to deny: He would rather die alongside the “master[s] of reality” than live with them. Although he pretends to be motivated by a desire for money, the trappings of luxury stir no feeling in him. His rare moments of pleasure are always in reaction to a harm suffered by a capable, life-loving person—even when the consequences of that harm are catastrophic for Taggart himself. Every person who embraces reality is a reminder that Taggart is bound by that same reality, and he responds with mindless spite. Although he deludes himself about his motives, all of his actions—his business practices, his political dealings, and even his abuse of his wife—serve his compulsion to kill all that is good “for the sake of killing” (827). He is driven solely by “the urge to defy reality by the destruction of every living value” (1048), at the inevitable cost of his own survival.

# 2014 ATLAS SHRUGGED WINNING ESSAY



Taggart's ultimate goal is so loathsome that the knowledge of it is both his greatest fear and his eventual downfall. He seeks to bring about a "triumph of impotence;" to find "proof of the defeat of rational reality" (957) in the death throes of human civilization; to sacrifice all value on the altar of "the lack, the fault, the flaw—the zero" (945). The cry "Don't bother me" is the futile demand that Taggart makes of all existence. He cannot bear to be bothered by anything, and so there is nothing for him to aspire to but death.