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The Fountainhead: The Morality of Selfishness

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Ayn Rand once said of the process of writing *The Fountainhead*, “My research material for the psychology of Roark was myself.” She endowed Roark with her own uncompromising beliefs: that it was the right of the gifted person to work solely to refine their talents, that love of mankind did not have to be collective, and that one did not owe respect to any man but the most intelligent, the most noble. Throughout her life, Rand declared herself to be a ‘hero-worshipper’, but it is telling that she identified herself with the hero, not the heroine, of her stories. Roark is a hero, but not one that society is used to. He does not spend chapters wailing over his feelings of inadequacy, his internal conflicts; he does not need encouragement from a conveniently placed mentor to take up his staff and set out on his quest. When he is introduced to the reader, laughing on a cliff, he is already miles down the road. He contains multitudes, but what he contains is not a confusing blend of composite characters. It is pure, innocent selfishness, in the sense that only Rand uses the word: full of self. No other composition defines or connotes the words ‘selfish’ and ‘selfless’ as *The Fountainhead* does. *The Fountainhead* does not ask if selfishness is moral. It asks if it is moral to have a self and concludes, as I have, that it is immoral not to.

It is an inhuman cruelty to expect a man to serve someone who enjoys his humiliation, craves his defeat, and takes pleasure in his subjugation, but altruism expects a man to feel this contempt for himself, to behave as both slave and master without reaping the rewards. In her speech at Roark’s trial following the creation of the Stoddard Temple, Dominique Francon says, “To glorify man, said Ellsworth Toohey, was to glorify the gross picture of the flesh, for the realm of the spirit is beyond the grasp of man. To enter that realm, said Ellsworth Toohey, man must come as a beggar, on his knees. Ellsworth Toohey is a lover of mankind” (356). Toohey claims to love mankind, but according to him, “Personal love is an act of discrimination, of preference” (322). He asks, in the name of selflessness, that a mother put aside her love for her child, a man put aside his love for his wife, and a creator put aside his love for his creation. He does not love man, but the faceless specter of mankind. The hatred of an individual does not benefit the many. Those that despise greatness in others despise it in themselves. Every time a great man is lowered, the soul of every human being is lowered along with it. The reason that Roark is instinctively hated by the average and mundane is not, as Keating suggests, because they are afraid of him. It is because they are afraid to lose what he represents, but society has told them that it is evil to hang on to it. “To say ‘I love you’,” Roark tells Dominique, “One must know first how to say the ‘I’” (377). If man does not care for himself, he has no heart with which to care for others. When there is no individual, there is no one left to love.

While others are defined by their social connections, Roark is defined by his work and actions. When Heller gives him a commission, it is not because he is impressed by his looks, his family name, the college he attended, or the parties to which he is invited. In fact, he has never met him before. He has seen his buildings, and needs no further information. Roark knows this; his only defense of himself at the Stoddard Temple trial is not a statement of his motivations or character, but ten photographs of the temple itself. This is appropriate because it is not Roark that is on trial, but the Stoddard Temple. It is the temple, not Roark, that is accused of public indecency, of corruption, and of presuming to possess a self, to call the human spirit sacred. Toohey says, “A man braver than his brothers insults them by implication. Let us aspire to no virtue which cannot be shared” (305) but Roark, in his climactic courtroom speech, counters, “But the mind is an attribute of the individual. There is no such thing as a collective brain” (680). Rather than lower himself to the level of others, Roark raises others by consequence of his own superiority. It benefits no one for all to be substandard, but the talented can help others if only by accident. There is no way to assist anyone when you are beside them in the trenches.

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of *The Fountainhead* is that there are very few that set out to hate Roark. His greatest enemy is not a single man or the masses, but the ignorance that acts on them. Most characters of *The*

Fountainhead believe that others have a complex inner life and they are the only one without. They live in fear that this fact will be discovered, and are content to struggle along, loving without reciprocation, if only they can be forgiven for being the same as everyone else. Their stunted egos are encouraged by Toohey, who declares that having no personality is "... the greatness of the personality", and are promptly ashamed that they cannot do what no human being should ever be asked to do: erase themselves, destroy their own existence, stifle individual thought so as not to offend those who are not individuals. "Only when you can feel contempt for your own priceless little ego," says Toohey, "Only then can you achieve the true, broad peace of selflessness..." (300), but this peace is the peace of the dead. The greatest profanity, according to altruism, is one's own name. Despite his persecution, Roark refuses to be a martyr. He tells Wynand, "Mankind will never destroy itself" (693), not because of his faith in mankind's selflessness, but because of his faith in mankind's desire to live.

In a speech given at Yale in 1960, Rand said, "Do not confuse altruism with kindness, good will or respect for the rights of others. These are not primaries, but consequences... The issue is whether you do or do not have the right to exist without giving a beggar a dime." The source of all evil in the world is the idea that a man does not have the right to exist, but this right cannot be given or taken away unless someone can make you believe that the right never existed in the first place. In his courtroom speech, Roark says, "The creator's concern is the conquest of nature. The parasite's concern is the conquest of men" (681). Roark exists in a vacuum; he does not sacrifice himself to harm others, nor does he harm others to benefit himself. He says, "The man who enslaves himself voluntarily in the name of love is the basest of creatures. He degrades the dignity of man and he degrades the conception of love" (681). What he describes is adultery of the soul, loving the idea of a person at the expense of the reality. True selfishness does not ask anything from anyone. It does not desire payment or recognition, but the right to its own time, liberty, and creation. Roark does not need anyone, which makes it more meaningful when he wants someone. Love is a choice, not to lessen yourself so that another person can be greater, but to advance yourself so that another person can advance beside you. In the last pages of *The Fountainhead*, Dominique rises to join Roark at the top of the Wynand Building. Selflessness would dictate that he descend to meet her, but if this were the case, neither would enjoy the view.