

Notes to the individual

Business



“ I swear, by my life and my love of it, that I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask another man to live for mine,” the renowned novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand promised to herself when writing her best-known book *The Fountainhead*.

This mantra of simple ethical egoism was planted when Rand was a child growing up in a Jewish bourgeois family during the rise of communism in the Soviet Union. After escaping to the United States in 1926, Rand turned to writing timeless masterpieces that would echo her advocacy for capitalism and individualism. *We the Living* is the author’s first semi-autobiographical exploration of the value of life through the intertwined stories of three personalities that are pressured and eventually crushed under the burden of a collectivized state. *Anthem* is one man’s revelation and thus highlights mankind’s journey toward that revelation, of what it truly means to be alive. Yet it is through the usage of musical images and allusions in both novels that Rand best contrasts the dire circumstances of collectivism with a symbol of light-heartedness and personal emotion, ultimately suggesting that humanity must preserve and value life and individualism to counter the growing evils of totalitarianism.

To Rand, music is pure and sensual. In her *Romantic Manifesto*, she describes that music “ evokes man’s sense-of-life emotions” (46). It is a method used to understand the world through art, a way of interpreting feelings toward life. She further explains more scientifically that “ one perceives the music, one grasps the suggestion of a certain emotional state and, with one’s sense of life serving as the criterion, one appraises this state as enjoyable or painful, desirable or undesirable, significant or negligible,

according to whether it corresponds to or contradicts one's fundamental feeling about life," (Romantic Manifesto 53). Music is therefore more than just a source of expression—it is a way of relations. One connects his or her experiences with the melody and reacts emotionally based on those very experiences.

In understanding the subtle powers of music on humans, Rand incorporates them as effective emotional weapons for her characters and symbols in her literary works. The title of Anthem sets the best example of a musical motif that represents the uphill battle toward individualism and pursuit of happiness against collectivism. The dystopian novella follows Equality 7-2521, a curious man who craves reason, logic, and progress. Everyone around him, though, is bound by the chains of collectivism in a world where the word " I " is nonexistent and " ego " has been eradicated from language. He escapes into the Uncharted Forest, the woods that every man fears, after rediscovering electricity and it is there that he eventually understands the philosophy that the individual prevails over the State.

Renaming himself Prometheus, Equality 7-2521 promises the world that " for the coming of that day shall I fight, I and my sons and my chosen friends. For the freedom of Man. For his rights. For his life. For his honor..

. the sacred word: Ego" (Anthem 105). While the word " anthem " is never used directly in the lines of the book, it has a connotation of a hymn that is uplifting, untouchable, and sacred. In a way, Prometheus creatively develops his own anthem, which is a celebration of who he is as a man, completely

contradicting the norm. The anthem can be compared to the most important word, Ego.

Rand insinuates that it is therefore a necessary moral duty to love, enjoy, and work for one's own self-centered sake. References in *We the Living* to the foxtrot tune "John Gray," an authentic West-European song composed by Matvey Blanter that gained immense popularity in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, follow a similar pattern and symbolize the people's need to escape the horrors of collectivism. The lyrics tell the story of a foreign man who falls in love with a girl who refuses to reciprocate that affection. As a result, "its gaiety was sad; its abrupt rhythm was hysterical; its frivolity was a plea, a moan for that which existed somewhere, forever out of reach. Through winter nights red flags whistled in the snowdrifts and the city prayed hopelessly with the short, sharp notes" (*We the Living* 156).

To the characters of *We the Living*, "John Gray" evokes empathy because, as in the cases of a lost love, the feeling of hysteria, desperation, and sadness are known all too well under oppressive Party rule. The only difference is that while life's adversity must be conquered directly with a brave face for the Soviet citizens, John Gray's dilemma of loss occurs on a much smaller scale and hides behind a facade of twinkling and sweet-sounding music notes. Because this colorful, uplifting atmosphere provides stark contrast against the backdrop of gray collectivization, it is a psychological remedy for the people. The song takes the form of a hope, albeit weak, and tells listeners that life can still have its lighthearted moments. "John Gray" serves a double meaning as well: while it provides a

false and short-lived sense of security, it also is a sad reminder of all the liberties collectivization has stripped away.

One of the most important incidences is when Kira Argounova, the protagonist who simultaneously falls in love with a counterrevolutionary and a Soviet Communist Party official, is ashamed of how dirty her clothing is and begins furiously washing them: “ Beyond the bedroom door someone in Marisha’s room [was] playing ‘ John Gray” on a piano with a missing key [and] the pain [was] growing in her back,” (We the Living 208). She listens again to the lyrics with her sister shortly afterward, saying that ““ Even if [the song] is overplayed...it has such a nice rhythm.

.. clicking...

like rivets driven into steel...” (We the Living 273). The comparison of the song’s rhythm to “ rivets driven into steel” highlights the idea that the music is almost industrial, like the heart of the Soviet Union itself.

In both cases, “ John Gray” is played when Kira is haunted by her past. In the first, she is embarrassed of the conditions she lives in as a proletariat compared to the lifestyle she led as a bourgeois. In the second, Kira is nostalgic about being expelled from the university, where she longs to study engineering and architecture, and losing her chances of building the city she has always dreamed of. Thus, Rand utilizes allusions to “ John Gray” to show what could have been and the aspirations Kira had that might have come true, if evil totalitarianism had not taken over. As a result, the examples remind readers of the potential universal spread of socialism. Collectivism

can plant itself anywhere and ruin the lives of anyone—nothing is quite safe from its greedy hands.

Similarly, Rand's allusions to singing in Anthem serve the same purpose of degrading the basis of collectivization. When the protagonist, Equality 7-2521, is finally happy after meeting with the Golden One, a secret lover, he thinks: "we felt that we wanted to sing, without reason... 'We are singing because we are happy,' we answered the one of the Home Council who reprimanded us. 'Indeed you are happy,' they answered. 'How else can men be when they live for their brothers,' (Anthem 45). Singing allows for freedom of expression of joy or sorrow, two very personal sentiments.

Yet Equality 7-2521 is scolded for exercising this liberty and is told that his sole purpose is to serve those around him and that he should be content with just this. The injustice is overwhelming because singing should not be considered prohibited or even a privilege—it is part of one's self. To silence a song is to take away the very essence of human nature—the ability to perceive and communicate emotion. Therefore, Rand points out the senselessness in collectivism as it creates men who might be ignorantly selfless but are simultaneously joyless and unworthy. Interestingly, the influence of music is a two-way street, joining the sides of the proletariat and the Soviet regime. Specifically, "The Internationale" song rings true as a signification of Red power and the Russian people's struggle to overcome it.

Originally composed for the French Communist march, the song has been played in Mao Zedong's China and Vladimir Lenin's Soviet Union and now stands as the swelling anthem of communism. It is no surprise that the

allusions to the song “ appear as a reminder that the Bolsheviks are always there,” (Berliner 150). In *We the Living*, Kira first notices the hymn during a flag-raising at a communist lecture. She thinks to herself that it “ is the first beautiful thing I’ve noticed about the revolution” and later tells the girl beside her that “ when all this is over, when the traces of the revolution are disinfected from history-what a glorious funeral march this will make!” (*We the Living* 74). While the effect of the music on the rest of the audience is one of nationalism and pro-socialism, the magic of a soaring and patriotic ballad is lost on Kira.

Kira’s, and therefore Rand’s, mocking stab is a thorn against the side of communism. While the protagonist’s outburst is exceedingly stupid, individualistic, and brave, it tells readers that there is always someone who will fight for what is right and that there shall always be a cause worth fighting for. For Kira, this worthy cause is shown through “ *Song of Broken Glass*”. It is the only fictitious piece of music mentioned in *We the Living* and serves as a symbol of Western culture and Kira’s desire to escape from oppressive communism to travel abroad. It is a made-up number, supposedly sung by a Viennese beauty as she kicks crystal goblets down a balustrade. Michael Berliner, a professor and philosopher writes in a chapter of *Essays on Ayn Rand’s “ We the Living”* that “ for Kira [“ *Song of Broken Glass*”] evoked the West-the spirit of a free, productive society, which stood in stark contrast to the grayness and horror of life in Soviet Russia” (Berliner 149).

Kira is a headstrong and sophisticated woman, taking on a persona very much like Rand’s herself. She asks for nothing but the enjoyment of life and is completely against not only the methods of the proletariat, but the <https://assignbuster.com/notes-to-the-individual/>

underlying ideals of the Soviet Union. Kira first hears the operetta as a young child and is immediately drawn to “ the song of a nameless hope that frightened her, for it promised so much, and she could not tell what it promised; she could not even say that it was a promise; it was an emotion, almost of pain, that went through her whole body,” (We the Living 60). At first, it appears that Kira is promised hope and happiness but in reality, the song has entitled her with the gift of opportunity and freedom, two elements that the Soviet Union steals from her through making every worker a weak and lowly laborer. For the remainder of the novel, “ Song of Broken Glass” is, in essence, Kira’s theme song, serving as a strong representation of all the reasons why she is against communism and of everything she wants in life.

Most importantly, Rand includes “ Song of Broken Glass” to explain the one true remedy to communism: individuality. This is shown toward the last pages of We the Living, after the song has followed Kira through the entirety novel, even up to her tragic death. As she lies dying in the snow, “ little notes of [◆]“ Song of Broken Glass”]eaped and exploded and laughed, laughed with a full, unconditional, consummate joy...

the music had been a promise; a promise at the dawn of her life. That which had been promised then, could not be denied to her now,” (We the Living 463). It is through death that Kira breaks the shackles, finds happiness, and escapes fully from tyranny’s iron grip. Through this revelation, Rand depicts the inhumanity and cruelty of collectivism. It breaks a person down until the option of death becomes more worthwhile than living. Collectivism kills—it is a simple and blunt theme that gains momentum through the bitter irony that

the title of a tune that suggests destruction resonates so deeply with Kira's need for intellectual and individual freedom.

Through the use of multiple motifs of music, Ayn Rand suggests that people must incorporate individuality to work against collectivization. She highlights the true necessity of creative expression by depicting hardships and loss of hope felt under communism. The musical metaphors paint both the light and the darkness, from the dreams of escape in " Song of Broken Glass" to the harsh reality that " The Internationale" is a funeral march. But it is the individual and his song that overcome collectivism through ipseity and rediscovery of egoism and the understanding of the self over others. Music might seem like black notes on paper but to Kira, Equality 7-2521, and Rand its universal power goes far beyond the physical page.