

Role of individuality in the construction of the self in the fountainhead

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The Fountainhead is a philosophical fiction novel published in 1943 by the Russian American writer Ayn Rand. The book was the author's first overly successful novel, and is now thought of as a great introduction to her objective philosophy and other works of literature.

The novel was initially rejected by twelve publishers because "it was 'too intellectual', 'too controversial' and would not sell because no audience existed for it" (Rand, 1971, p. 6). However, no more than two years after its original release, The Fountainhead had become a bestseller. Today, 75 years after its publication, the controversial objectivist novel is considered a modern classic and continues to be a widely popular book, having sold over 7.9 million copies around the world (Ayn Rand Institute).

The ideas found in The Fountainhead have been the subject of a lot of controversy since its release. Some consider Rand's philosophy in the book to be too extreme and unrealistic, while others believe them to have created a masterpiece of literature and philosophy (Matthew, 2007). Others, however, have simply not understood or overlooked the underlying story that is told through Howard Roark's life in The Fountainhead.

The novel tells the story of Howard Roark, a young innovative architect that "struggles for the integrity of his creative work against every form of social opposition." (Ayn Rand Institute). The Fountainhead narrates a tale that revolves around architecture, "the scientific art of making structure express ideas." (Wright, 1955, p. 44). The theme of the novel, however, in the words of the author herself is "individualism versus collectivism ... in man's soul;

the psychological motivations and the basic premises that produce the character of an individualist or a collectivist.” (Ayn Rand Institute).

Some of the concepts described in Ayn Rand’s novel can still be applied to today’s society, which is the reason why I am drawn to attempt to understand and explain the philosophy that is the foundation of the novel. The purpose of this essay is to carry out an analysis of Howard Roark and Peter Keating, two of the main characters that appear in Rand’s story, in order to answer the question: “ What role does individuality play in the construction of the self according to Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*?”

The aforementioned question is based on the entire theme of the book and has been of value to people since the novel’s release. *The Fountainhead* was a novel that described and analysed many of the flaws of the time’s society, such as the fear to explore new territory and their craving for people’s admiration. In the present, many of those flaws are still found in people around the world. In the past, it was important to understand *The Fountainhead*’s message to be able to analyse people’s behaviours. Today it is just as important. Through understanding Rand’s novel’s philosophy of the role of individuality in the construction of the self, it is possible to identify those characteristics in today’s society and understand why some elements of them are still the same almost a century later.

Howard Roark is the main character of *The Fountainhead* and Ayn Rand’s first representation of her objectivist philosophy’s ideal man. He is a true independent and individualist architect that firmly stands for his morals and

beliefs, even when faced with obstacles from critics, colleagues and the society around him. Throughout the entirety of Rand's novel, Roark finds himself in various different situations; sometimes he is successful, at other instances he's at incredibly low points, being critiqued by multiple paper, unable to get a job, and at times even at court. However, there isn't even one moment in which Roark stops being the individualist that Rand envisioned when she created him; he never once doubts or changes his beliefs, methods, or passion in the slightest.

Roark's story in *The Fountainhead* begins when he's expelled from the Architectural School of the Stanton Institute of Technology for not submitting to the institute's traditions towards architectural design. Once this occurs, the school's dean proposes to Roark to take a year off to grow out of his modernist style of "sheer insanity" (Rand, 1971, p. 21) and then resume his studies at the Institute of Technology. The young architect, however, refuses the offer saying "I won't be back. I have nothing further to learn here." (Rand, 1971, p. 22). He explains that all he needed to learn from the institute was in the structural sciences to later be able to create buildings in his own way, and that the institute's traditions in architectural design would give him nothing, so it would be best for him to abandon his education at the Architectural School.

This expulsion is the first instance in which Roark is faced with the decision of ignoring his morals and being successful, or standing for his beliefs and facing consequences. If Roark had decided to conform to the school's artistic traditions, he could have graduated and become a renowned architect.

Nevertheless, he chose to stand for his own architectural style at the expense of a degree for his education.

After leaving the Architectural School of the Stanton Institute of Technology, Howard Roark decides to move to New York to look for a job with Henry Cameron, another innovative architect who had been famous in the 1880s for being the first to create buildings in a never before seen style, which happened to be very similar to Roark's. For years Cameron had been the best in his profession, but when Roark went looking for a job with him, he was "nobody anymore!" (Rand, 1971, p. 36). And yet, Roark went straight to his office and didn't hesitate to work for fifteen dollars a week, because Cameron understood Roark's style, story, and passion for architecture better than anyone else, and with him, Roark would be doing what he always intended to do, create new unique buildings that served their intended purpose.

Howard Roark described his rules for architecture in the following way. A building is alive, like a man. Its integrity is to follow its own truth, its one single theme, and to serve its own single purpose. A man doesn't borrow pieces of his body. A building doesn't borrow hunks of its soul. Its maker gives it the soul and every wall, window and stairway to express it. (Rand, 1971, p. 24) Henry Cameron shared this idea, and for that reason, Roark didn't even consider working with anyone other than him, even if it could have meant more recognition and money for him. This is another moment in Roark's story where it is evident that the young architect cares more about his beliefs than about fame or success. Before heading to New York, Peter

Keating, a fellow architect from the Stanton Institute of Technology, offered Howard to try to get him a job at Francon & Heyer, a very prestigious architectural firm. Roark, however refused, proving once again that he wouldn't disregard his ideals to be wealthy and well-known.

After years of working with Henry Cameron, the previously famous architect retired, and Roark found himself having to work in other architectural firms, including Francon & Heyer, until he later was able to open his own office.

Some years later, however, after a long time of not receiving any commissions, Roark was forced to close it due to his financial instability after having refused a project that would pay him a large commission. The young individualist's submitted design for the project had been chosen, but the board had changed the architect's building, modifying it to include Greek styles of architecture, a decision that lead Roark to decline the offer, even if doing so would mean he had to give up his office.

Once Howard had closed his office, he went to work at a granite quarry in Connecticut because, after seeing his modified design, he felt like he couldn't be an architect for a while; he said he didn't want to touch, see, or help architects do what they were doing (Rand, 1971, p. 198). Roark, when faced with financial instability, decided to work a plain workman's job instead of compromising his morals and asking for jobs at prominent architectural firms or working on popular projects.

Throughout *The Fountainhead*, there are multiple other similar situations in which Howard Roark's ideals lead him to reject offers and walk away from

big opportunities; Roark's life is full of these scenarios. However, there are only some instances in which Roark has been able to maintain his ideals and his designs have been unconditionally approved for projects, only to see them be changed later. Such was the case of Cortlandt Homes. Cortlandt Homes was a government housing project to be built in Astoria, on the shore of the East River. It was planned as a gigantic experiment in low-rent housing, to serve as model for the whole country; for the whole world. (Rand, 1971, p. 565) It was a project desperately wanted by Peter Keating, but his chances at getting it by himself were very slim. Thus, the renowned architect paid a visit to his previous fellow Stanton student, Howard Roark, and asked for his help. Roark agreed to design Cortlandt Homes for Peter with the one condition, for it to be built exactly as Howard designed it. The individualist agreed to get no recognition or pay for it, so long as the housing project was erected how Roark decided it should. This decision is described by Howard as "A private, personal, selfish, egotistical motivation." (Rand, 1971, p. 580). Keating agreed, and both architects signed a contract that specified that, as long as Cortlandt was built following Roark's design, the fact that the project had not been created by Peter Keating would never be known.

Once the Cortlandt Homes deal had been settled between Howard Roark and Peter Keating, and the former had given the credited architect all the sketches for the project, Roark went sailing with a colleague of his for a few months. When he came back, the individualist found out that two designer had been hired to work along Keating in the Cortlandt Homes housing

project, and that Roark and Keating's contract had been breached; his design had been altered.

In this instance, as opposed to the other situations mentioned, Roark doesn't have to decide if he should pay attention to his morals when constructing a building. For this project, Roark had maintained his ethics and created a design; however, his ideals had been ignored and his vision had been changed, and the individualist had no say in the matter. Thus, Roark decides to dynamite the building. I destroyed [Cortlandt] because I did not choose to let it exist. [...] I agreed to design Cortlandt for the purpose of seeing it erected as I designed it and for no other reason. That was the price I set for my work. I was not paid. [...] But the owners of Cortlandt got what they needed from me. They wanted a scheme devised to build a structure as cheaply as possible. They found no one else who could do it to their satisfaction. I could and did. They took the benefit of my work and made me contribute it as a gift. But I am not an altruist. I do not contribute gifts of this nature. (Rand, 1971, p. 683-684) Here Roark demonstrates that he will in no way allow his ideals to be ignored; he will go to extreme measure only to make sure that his morals aren't compromised. This is the exact reason why the individualist Howard Roark is Ayn Rand's perfect embodiment of objectivism's ideal man.

Objectivism is, in the words of the Russian-American creator of the system herself, a philosophy for living on Earth, a system of thought that describes the abstract principles by which a man must think and act in order to live a proper life (Ayn Rand Institute, 1971). She also said " My philosophy, in

essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute." (Rand, 1957). This is also a perfect description of Roark's character, who also matches completely with objectivism's definition of an individualist. Individualism regards man [...] as an independent, sovereign entity who possesses an inalienable right to his own life, a right derived from his nature as a rational being. Individualism holds that a civilized society, or any form of association, cooperation or peaceful coexistence among men, can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights — and that a group, as such, has no rights other than the individual rights of its members. (Rand, 1964, p. 122) This is an excellent description of The Fountainhead's protagonist. Roark is the only person in control of his life and his decisions, the only human that has the right to his life. In Rand's novel, Howard Roark is a selfish person, an egoist. He is an individualist, he is the single owner of his life and his choices; he does only what is best for him and what gives him joy, which is what makes him an egoist, a person whose " individual self-interest is the actual motive of all conscious action" (Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary, 2018).

Because of Roark's individuality, he was able to create his egoist personality, which, according to objectivism, is good. This is also what lead the architect to always stand firmly for his ideals and not let them be twisted by anyone in any way.

It is clear that Roark is the hero of The Fountainhead, and every hero has a villain. Howard Roark's antagonist is society as a whole, but in Rand's novel,

this is portrayed through another main character of the story, Peter Keating. He is a conformist, and objectivism's ideal representation of the selfless man; he will do anything to ensure himself a spot at the top of the social ladder. In *The Fountainhead*, Roark and Keating often found themselves in similar stages at their lives. Each architect's situations, however, could not have been more opposite.

Peter Keating, like Roark, studied at the Architectural School of the Stanton Institute of Technology. Nonetheless, Keating's situation was much different from Roark's. While the latter mentioned was expelled before concluding his studies, Peter Keating graduated was "star student of Stanton, president of the student body, captain of the track team, member of the most important fraternity, voted the most popular man on the campus." (Rand, 1971, p. 29) and had graduated with honors.

On his graduation day, Keating recalled having wanted to be an artist as a young boy; It was his mother who had chosen a better field in which to exercise his talent for drawing. "Architecture," she had said, "is such a respectable profession. Besides, you meet the best people in it." She had pushed him into his career, he had never known when or how. (Rand, 1971, p. 31) This is a good representation of how Keating only does what will please others and get him approval. He didn't really want to study architecture; he didn't want to graduate at the top of his class. He only did those things to get social recognition and because it was what others expected of him.

Peter's graduation was on the same day as Howard's expulsion, which meant that both architects set off to start their careers at the same time. On this day, when Roark had to decide whether or not to take the Dean's offer to resume his studies in a year, Keating was faced with the choice of accepting a four-year scholarship at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris or a job offer at Francon & Heyer. After asking Roark's -who also happened to be his roommate- and his mom's opinion, he decided to go into Francon & Heyer because it was the option that would give people the most to say about Peter and would help him climb the social ladder faster.

In this instance, as opposed to Roark, who took a job because it aligned with his goals and ideals, Keating started working for a firm for no other reason than it paid well and would make him become a famous architect. Also contrary to Roark, all Peter Keating wanted to do was become a more popular architect, and to do this he would go to any extent. He began by taking a colleague's job, when he started helping the firm's favorite draftsman, Tim Davis, and making it known "with an air of naive confidence which implied that he was only a tool, no more than Tim's pencil or T-square" (Rand, 1971, p. 66). Keating then complained to Guy Francon, Francon & Heyer's co-owner, about Davis' tardiness and unprofessionalism. This ultimately led to Francon & Heyer getting rid of Tim Davis and giving his job and salary to Peter Keating.

Another example of Peter's ways to get what he wants can be seen when he attempts to make Lucius Heyer, Francon & Heyer's other coworker, retire so he could become the new firm's partner. To obtain this, Peter goes to the old

man's house and threatens to have his licence taken away from him if he doesn't retire. This causes Heyer to have a stroke and ultimately die, but Keating, despite having cause the man's death, "felt nothing" (Rand, 1971, p. 186).

Both of these situations show Keating's lack of morals and his drive to do whatever is needed to get higher in life. Peter will use and climb over any person he needs to without thinking twice about it, as long as it gets him to where he desires to be. Further evidence for this can be seen, when at times, like Roark, Peter finds himself in financially unstable situation. However, as opposed to the young individualist, what Keating does in this situations is ask other people for ideas for projects and claim them as his own. The Cortlandt Homes housing project is only one example of this one of Peter's characteristics

After Guy Francon's retirement, and once the great depression had hit Keating's firm, the architect found himself being desperate for any project that would restore his name, and the Cortlandt Homes housing project was perfect for the task. The selfless architect, however, lacked the ability himself to come up with an idea for the project, and, as he did since his university days, relied on Roark for help.

The famous architect did not care about the project, its design, or its purpose; all he wanted was something that would get his name back on the papers and in people's mouths, so he went to see Roark and accepted his request to fully design the building. Keating, however, had agreed to, in

exchange of getting the project's credit, ensure that the building would be erected exactly as Roark wanted it to. But Peter, when forced to work with two other designers, failed to keep his promise.

These character's actions show Keating's utter lack of ideals; he doesn't believe in anything that he does. He has no feelings and no passion whatsoever for his work. All he cares about is being wealthy and famous. He can't say no to someone; he only agrees and expects to be accepted for it. He is Rand's representation of collectivism and an absolutely selfless person.