

Selfishness and selflessness in the fountainhead



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The impact literature can impose on society remains striking even to this day. Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* contains themes that resonated so significantly with readers that it triggered a political movement, and assisted in forming the Libertarian party. *The Fountainhead* often referred to as "a novel of ideas," brings some illuminating claims surrounding selfishness and selflessness to surface. The novel provides unique definitions for selfishness and selflessness, supporting Rand's central theme of celebrating and encouraging individualism and freedom of speech. Rand explains her beliefs regarding selfish and selfless actions through each main character in the novel, exposing the nature in admirable characters versus malicious characters. Rand uses the often negative connotation associated with the word 'selfish' and the positive perception of the word 'selfless' to her advantage by reversing the roles for the theme of the novel.

In *The Fountainhead* being selfish is the virtue, while being selfless is a fault. Rand argues that you must identify yourself as an individualist and not continue to live life depending on other people's judgments. An example of this is stated by self-proclaimed selfish (and proud) character Howard Roark in the following passage: "The thing that is destroying the world. The thing you were talking about. Actual selflessness." "The ideal which they say does not exist?" "They're wrong. It does exist—though not in the way they imagine. It's what I couldn't understand about people for a long time. They have no self. They live within others. They live second-hand. Look at Peter Keating" (Rand 633). Although being selfish continues to have a negative connotation attached to it, Rand suggests selfishness is simply the act of putting your own desires and opinions first, instead of seeking approval or

advice from others. The only way to maintain the pursuit of happiness and ultimately achieve your goals is to put yourself and your wants first.

The theme of selflessness is also an important component to understanding Rand's beliefs toward selfishness. Rand believes a selfless person is an unfulfilled person with zero sense of self or identity. In the quote above, Rand even goes as far to say that selflessness is "the thing destroying the world." Selflessness in "The Fountainhead" means the lack of self and identity, rather than a selfless action (done for another) that commonly receive such high acclaim. Rand also goes on to state that despite evil being typically related to selfishness, the more accurate conclusion is that the most "despicable action" is due to the lack of one's self. This notion is evident through character Ellsworth M. Toohey throughout the novel, but especially for being the "ultimate collector of souls." This notion is also evident through Peter Keating's malicious climb to the top of the architectural industry, and inevitable fall back to his mother's house. Rand further commends selfishness when she introduces the idea that a person cannot be selfish (despite selfish actions) if they have no sense of self or individualism. Rand defines a selfish character as one who acts solely for their personal wants, while a selfless character acts only for the approval and admiration of others. Peter Keating is representations of this idea through the development of his character. Once a famous, successful, and praised architect, Keating is left at the end of the novel empty and almost lifeless. Rand uses Keating's rise and fall tale to expose that true success and happiness does not come from what people think about you.

According to Rand, success is measured by a confident individual with an established sense of self. Rand's definition of selflessness directly ties to a person's indecision. More often than not, people allow the opinions of others to influence their own decisions. Rand argues that a person should not seek the advice of others regarding important, life-changing decisions. An instance of this is demonstrated on page 22 when Howard Roark states, "If you want my advice Peter," he said at last, "you've made a mistake already. By asking me. By asking anyone. Never ask people. Not about your work. Don't you know what you want? How can you stand it, not to know?" (Rand 22). This clearly demonstrates indecision as a problematic selfless action and should only be dealt with by finding one's sense of self. Rand is stating her dissatisfaction with indecision while encouraging each individual to think for him or herself, and act based on what they desire.

Through *The Fountainhead*, Rand expresses the importance of identity, individualism, and thinking for one's self. By expanding on such abstract subjects like selfishness and selflessness, Rand presents numerous ideas through one central theme. These words already had presumptions tied to them, but by not conforming to general beliefs Rand creates a complex and interesting outcome. The idea of selfishness is looked at as a virtue and admirable trait for expressing individualism, self-worth, and opinions. Moreover, the notion of selflessness is looked at as a fault, because of the absence of identity and the disgraceful actions that stem from its nonexistence. Rand also presents the notion that a person cannot be selfish without having a sense of identity or self. Or in other words, a person cannot act for oneself (selfishly) if he does not know him or herself. Lastly,

selflessness inevitably ends up crawling in bed with indecision, a crippling problem creating the “cult of incompetence” within our society. Rand’s message is clear; think for yourself, be who you are, follow your dreams, and continue onto the pursuit of happiness with your freedom.

Works Cited Rand, Ayn. *The Fountainhead*. New York: Penguin Group, 1943.