

Personification of objectivism in the fountainhead



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Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* showcases four men who exhibit varying strength of character, resolve, and ethics to create a concise illustration of the distinct levels of objectivity that pepper the spectrum of the human character. The obvious protagonist of this literary work, Howard Roark, is an exquisite personification of Rand's philosophy, while the other three main characters are depicted in terms of their opinion of and relationship with Roark. The four parts of *The Fountainhead* primarily address the character for which they are named, but Roark is a vital, indispensable force throughout the novel, and characterization of the other three men would be impossible without him. By using a writing style that reflects Roark's Objectivist philosophy - absolute, unwavering, and unadorned - Rand constructs obviously simple characters to present an uncluttered allegory for Objectivism. When we first encounter Howard Roark, his primal intimacy with the natural world is made brilliantly evident through concise, beautifully illustrative language. The Metaphysics of Objectivism, that the external world exists independent of man's consciousness and that man's task is to perceive reality, not invent it, are personified in Roark. As he stands on the cliff at the book's commencement, he appreciates the natural beauty around him while remaining a separate entity. The concept of man shaping nature emerges as Roark muses on the landscape that surrounds him; " He looked at the granite. To be cut, he thought, and made into walls. He looked at a tree. To be split and made into rafters. He looked at a streak of rust on the stone and thought of iron ore under the ground. To be melted and emerge as girders against the sky." (16.) Roark is further a perfect example of Rand's doctrine in that he rejects mysticism, particularly in his discussion of the Stoddard Temple. He tells Mallory, " The place is built around it. The statue

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of a naked woman. If you understand the building, you understand what the figure must be. The human spirit. The heroic in man. The aspiration and the fulfillment, both. Uplifted in its quest - and uplifting by its own essence. Seeking God - and finding itself. Showing that there is no higher reach beyond its own form..." (332) In this assertion, not only does Roark reject faith as a means of gaining knowledge; he explores his confidence in the value of the individual, beautiful, priceless human spirit. Furthermore, he expresses the idea that art should be " a selective re-creation of reality according to an artist's metaphysical value-judgements." In other words, Roark conforms to Rand's philosophy by remaining true to his art, architecture, throughout the novel in order to preserve it as a unique and primary offspring of no soul but his own. Gail Wynand is *The Fountainhead's* only main character who does not fit neatly into the black-and-white distinction between Objectivists and non-Objectivists. While he fully understands and appreciates the philosophy of Objectivism, Wynand has chosen to conduct his media empire as its antithesis because he feels that he cannot survive otherwise. It may be argued that Wynand understands Objectivism even better than Roark does, as Wynand has subjected this system of values to closer scrutiny in order to manifest its polar opposite in himself. It is certain, however, that Wynand appreciates the fact that not all men are equal. He differs from Roark in that he has not attempted to dedicate his life to his own individuality, but he has used this fact to become a model of material wealth and deficit of soul. He takes pleasure in corrupting men with ideals, hoping to prove that an incorruptible man does not exist. After his first conquest, a talented young writer who had a reputation for staying perfectly true to his ideals, "... (Wynand) laughed too

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long, as if he could not stop it; his laughter had an edge of hysteria.” (414) His private art gallery is a synthetic soul that takes the place of the one he left behind. He acknowledges this, saying, “ Every man on earth has a soul of his own that nobody can stare at...everybody but me. My soul is spread in your Sunday scandal sheet...so I must have a substitute.” (413) His appreciation for art is harmonious with the Objectivist mindset, and the gallery allows him to appreciate beauty, yet it serves as a torturous reminder of the ideals of his youth. Wynand does, however, subscribe to reason and capitalism in his own life, for these have facilitated his rise to power. He uses reason to survive in the business world by producing what the public will buy, and he capitalizes on the public’s interest in the absurd, tawdry, and scandalous. When Wynand encounters Roark, they have an instantaneous connection, as is the case with all men who truly understand Roark’s genius and ideals. Roark refuses to be corrupted by Wynand, so Wynand must re-evaluate his worldview. As their relationship becomes stronger, Roark gives Wynand the capacity for redemption, but ultimately the mogul rejects his own salvation so as not to destroy the empire he has built. In his final act of the novel, Wynand acknowledges all that has transpired by commissioning Roark to build the Wynand Building “...as a monument to the spirit which is yours...and could have been mine.” (692)The weakest of the four main characters of *The Fountainhead* is Peter Keating. While Roark is first introduced naked, alone, in nature, contemplating and reveling in his own genius, Keating is presented shrouded in a graduation robe, constantly mulling over the opinions that others hold of him, comparing himself to others, and evaluating and re-evaluating his opinion of self-worth based on these opinions and comparisons. Initially, he serves as a foil for Roark, but by

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the book's end he has become a broken man who is not worthy of such distinction. Keating is in disharmony with Objectivism in that he is parasitically reliant upon others for his sense of value, ideas, and decisions. The need for approval motivates every decision he makes, leading him to inevitable dejection and failure. Searching for what he thinks others will find enviable, Keating only encounters more pronounced emptiness of spirit as his material wealth increases. He both abhors and relies on Roark, his detest intensified by his dependence on his far more talented peer. While working with him at Francon & Heyer, "(Keating) felt a sensual pleasure in giving orders to Roark; and he felt also a fury of resentment at Roark's passive compliance. " (91) All of Keating's suppressed jealousy, resentment, and rage, as well as his mental justifications for his contrived superiority to Roark, explode when he visits Roark. He cries, " Who do you think you are? Who told you you could do this to people? Why should I listen to you? You can't frighten me! You can't touch me! I have the whole world with me! Don't stare at me like that! I've always hated you! I always will! I'll break you some day, I swear I will, if it's the last thing I do!" (193) Several brushes with understanding escape Keating, the most intense of which, ironically, is interrupted by a phone call from Toohey. When he begins to comprehend the ideals of Objectivism and attempts to reconcile his childhood dream of becoming a painter, Roark un pityingly tells him that it's too late. From Rand's introduction of Ellsworth Toohey as "...a thin little body, like that of a chicken just emerging from an egg," (227) he is the advocate for the small, mediocre, and everyday. Toohey, the antithesis of everything Roark embodies and Dominique desires, strives to suppress and ultimately destroy individual thinkers like Howard Roark and Stephen Mallory. Toohey makes

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his designs for society obvious in a conversation he has with Dominique, saying, " Don't you find it interesting to see a huge, complicated piece of machinery, such as our society, all levers and belts and interlocking gears, the kind that looks as if one would need an army to operate it - and you find that by pressing your little finger against one vital spot, the center of all its gravity, you can make the thing crumble into a worthless heap of scrap iron?" (346) This statement confirms Toohey's calculating nature, and also presents an allusion to world affairs at the time of *The Fountainhead's* publication. The world behind the iron curtain, in Rand's opinion, is nothing more than a worthless heap of scrap iron. Toohey contradicts the Epistemology of Objectivism, that reason is man's only method of acquiring knowledge, as he tells the thousands who parasitically rely upon his counsel to reject thought in favor of blind belief. Only when the genius of the individual is destroyed in favor of the mediocrity of men like Keating can Toohey gain authority. Both Toohey's sadistic nature and Keating's weak soul are manifested as, " Keating knew suddenly that Toohey knew he had not designed the plan of the Cosmo-Slotnick Building. This did not frighten him. What frightened him was that he saw approval in Toohey's eyes." (229) Toohey does not meet a concretely ruinous end, however. A Marxist society continues to loom on the horizon and altruism remains a commonly accepted " virtue," with Toohey already contriving his rise to power. After the Banner is shut down, he takes a job at "...the Courier, a paper of well-bred prestige and uncertain policy," (689) where he can quickly and easily gain control. These facts are inconsequential, however, because Roark remains true to himself, and he has succeeded in living on his own terms, with the woman he was destined for remaining by his side. It is a truly

complex novel that can create such an elaborate web of characters with each one being indispensable to the novel's development. Rand does just this as tens of assorted supporting characters enter and exit the lives of Wynand, Keating, Toohey, and Roark, all the while creating a masterpiece of an allegory for the unique, priceless, individual human spirit.