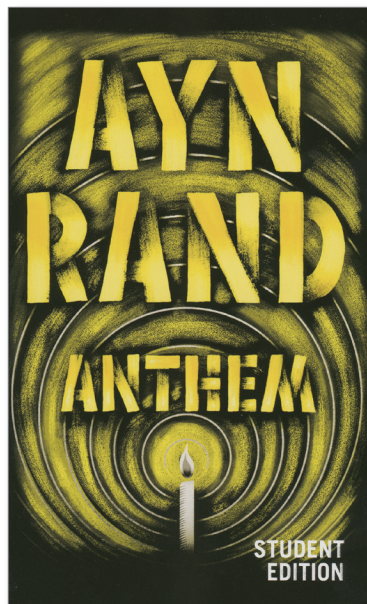


# 2020 ANTHEM WINNING ESSAY 8TH, 9TH AND 10TH GRADE



## FIRST PLACE



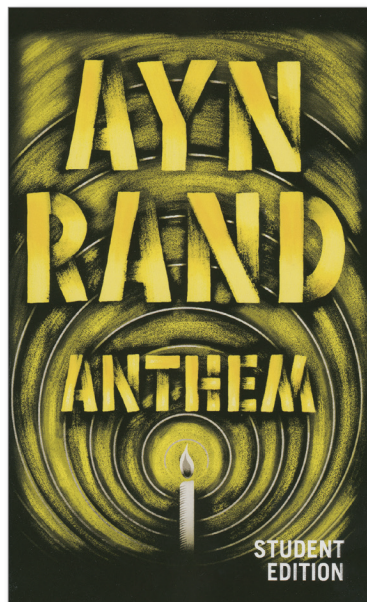
**Georgia Mirică, Bucharest, Romania – American International School of Bucharest, Voluntari, Bucharest, Romania**

**Aside from very rare exceptions, there is no opposition to the leaders in this society. Why is this? What ideas must the people in this society have accepted to live a life of obedience, drudgery and fear?**

The systematic construction of the literary universe in which Ayn Rand's *Anthem* unfolds oversees a global society that strips human beings of their fundamental dignities and forces them to live in constant oppression and suppression of individualism. The novella follows the protagonist, Equality 7-2521, in his discovery of forbidden knowledge and subsequent escape, divulging truths about the dangers of collectivist ideals and totalitarianism, holding a mirror up to a tumultuous contemporary world. In *Anthem*, the re-programming of human values through complete indoctrination of collectivist ideals makes it so that the inhabitants of this society cease to be individual human beings, and instead are viewed as gears in a vast system. Having no notion of the self, they accept oppression as dutiful, being depersonalized to the point that they can be exploited completely without rebellion. Violently cradled by the arms of a totalitarian state from birth, perpetually kept in darkness, halted by ideological barriers, the result is a people submissive to abuse without question, having never been taught to question.

One may argue that, upon birth, human beings are no more than lumps of clay to be shaped by this mysterious force called life and hardened by maturity, adopting the values of their environment unconsciously. In *Anthem*, all infants, produced out of duty to the state, are institutionalized after birth and grow up in an abyss of indoctrination devoid of warmth and humanity, closely reminiscent of the organizational structures seen in the military. Here, they exist in sterile sleeping halls “white and clean and bare of all things save one hundred beds” (PART I). They are branded with generic names, taught never to question, are unjustly punished and scorned for developing any particularities from their peers, and, lacking a parental shield to protect them from abuse, have no compass to tell apart right and wrong. They know only the false construction of *brotherhood* and are forced upon a Procrustean bed that aims to eliminate all individuality of thought and spirit, to the point that the pronoun “I” is unknown, replaced by “We.” Religiously, and with a historically suggestive elevation of the right hand, the children recite before going to bed: “We are nothing. Mankind is all. [ . . . ] We exist through, by and for our brothers who are the State. Amen” (PART I). Brought up without knowing that there is a self, citizens of this regime carry the conviction that “the great transgression and the root of all evil” (PART I) can be encompassed in one word: individuality. As such, they are denied their existence as human beings, as individuals, depersonalized to the superlative by an ideology mercilessly drilled into their minds, leaving them extremely vulnerable to exploitation. Herein lies the

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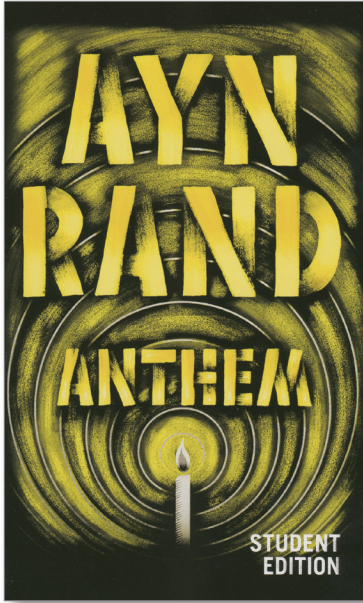
question: *since the individual does not exist, how could he possibly be entitled to any rights?*

Further underlining the disastrous consequences of indoctrination, Equality 7-2521, upon his escape, reflects: “Everything which comes from the many is good. Everything which comes from one is evil. This have we been taught with our first breath. We have broken the law, but we have never doubted it” (PART IX). Since birth, the citizens of this society are raised without a sense or worth of self, in complete and utter darkness as to the world around them, meaning that, unless they know another reality, they are doomed to live without questioning the society around them, doomed to remain in its unforgiving grasp. One does not question one’s condition unless exposed to an alternate truth, just as one cannot judge one’s upbringing without an external frame of reference. It is this that keeps people in totalitarian regimes under the *iugum* of oppression and suffering for decades on end, under the impression that being exploited is by no means extraordinary, but only the natural course of life.

Deprived of knowledge, the indoctrinated masses are facile to control, as the only light in an otherwise dark space will be followed, although it may well be leading to an open chasm. An especially potent symbol noticeable throughout is that of light. There is the light of the old order, the finite and state-regulated torches and candles that waste away, and the light of the new order, the electricity discovered by Equality 7-2521 that is infinite and of his own making. This presents an interesting parallel to be drawn with the idea of enlightenment, of the endless and free pursuit of knowledge, in contrast with the idea of state-imposed censorship. Censorship is ubiquitous in the society created by Rand, in which language and history are rewritten so as to fit the agenda of the collectivist regime. An especially perceptive example intervenes in the form of the geographical form of censorship: “Men never enter the Uncharted Forest, for there is no power to explore it and no path to lead among its ancient trees which stand as guards of fearful secrets” (PART II). This carries metaphoric value, illustrating the induced ignorance and fear of the unknown, with the intent of creating a more easily controllable population. Emancipation comes with knowledge, and it is this knowledge that provides the aforementioned frame of reference that can enable one to recognize violations and fight back against them. Thought threatens the fibers of such totalitarian regimes, which is why, apart from the aristocratic ruling class, the members of the intellectual classes are the first to be purged. Such is the case of our protagonist, whose innate remarkability means his repartition to the job of Street Sweeper, where the intelligent work alongside the unskilled. Breaking spirit means building character, and in manual labor, there is no room for thought.

According to Prometheus, the name that Equality 7-2521 later gives himself, the single most damning circumstance that condemned humankind to such oppression was the idea of the collective, expressed in the following narrative: “What disaster took their reason away from men? What whip lashed them to their knees in shame and submission? The worship of the word We” (PART XII). This synecdoche for collectivism expresses the profound cruelty of the regime, how it

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enslaved children from the crib and kept them in bleak darkness, unaware of everything else but that two-letter word, just as the gods kept the clay-forged humankind in darkness until the titan Prometheus gave them fire stolen from the divine hearth and set them free of blind dependency.

In essence, the ideas that the oppressed must have accepted to endure such horrors are those of the inferiority of the individual in comparison to the group, the inexistence of the “I” in face of the “We.” The country of my origin, Romania, experienced one of the most brutal communist dictatorships in Eastern Europe, and, to a certain extent, all previously mentioned methods of oppression were applied by the authorities, leaving behind severe ideological trauma that persists to this day. Deprived of a frame of reference, isolated within the borders of a domain, one cannot truly understand the extent of the abuse that one is subjected to, and this makes one infinitely susceptible to exploitation, as was perfectly illustrated in Ayn Rand’s substantial oeuvre.