

FIRST PLACE



Lucas Pringle, Repton, England – Repton School, Repton, England

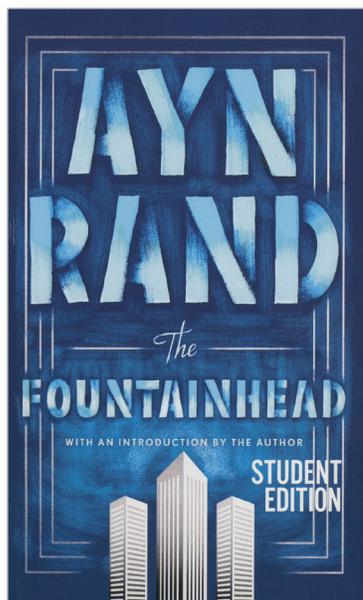
Choose the scene in *The Fountainhead* that is most meaningful to you. Analyze that scene in terms of the wider themes in the book.

'Howard Roark laughed.' (1)

One can view all of Ayn Rand's literature as an explanation of *The Fountainhead's* first three words. The image of Roark, laughing upon the cliff edge, opens Rand's monumental literary achievement and must be considered the work's most important and meaningful image. This short, abrupt sentence is a challenge to the reader, an image that demands elaboration. It poses a question that will loom over the work: why does Roark laugh? Yet, in spite of the question's simplicity, the causes and reasons for Roark's laugh penetrate deeper than the plot or characters of *The Fountainhead*, encapsulating the values and ideals of the entire Objectivist philosophy. For once one understands how Howard Roark, standing upon the granite precipice with his life seemingly in disarray, can laugh, one can finally understand the power of the individual.

To place the scene in context, Howard Roark has just been expelled from the Architectural School of the Stanton Institute of Technology. Within the America of *The Fountainhead*, to graduate with a degree is to take the first step towards what society deems 'success.' This success is the attainment of a high paying job, respect from one's peers, and prestige in the workplace: the veneer of achievement that Keating will embody as the plot progresses. Through his expulsion, Roark has been roadblocked from this societal approval and rejected by his seeming superiors. But Roark was not expelled on the grounds of criminality or stupidity; rather he was cast out of the university due to the fact that his very *being* was antithetical to the values and desires of his society. This becomes evident in light of the Dean and Roark's conversation: while the Dean keeps up the façade of the expulsion being over matters of teaching, the disagreement reveals itself to be a deeper split on matters of morality and individuality. It was not the designs that Roark was expelled for, but for what they represent: his deep rejection of "tradition" (13).

Roark's refusal to engage with the works of past architects is symptomatic of his opposition to all elements of collectivism. He is no more beholden to previous designs as he is to those around him—rather he stakes out his own path both on paper and in life. While the other members of the university place their artistic aims within the works of others, Roark looks only to his own vision in the creation of his buildings. To understand why this is the case, it is vital to consider Roark's designs not as a simple creation, but as an extension of himself. Rand wrote extensively about the relationship between the artist and his creation, arguing that any true work of art for the artist is a 'confirmation of his view of existence.' With Rand's conception of art as an embodiment of inner values in mind, it is clear that the expulsion should not be considered simply as a matter of aesthetic disagreement, but rather as a metaphor for the response of a collectivist society to an individual. When Roark flaunts the



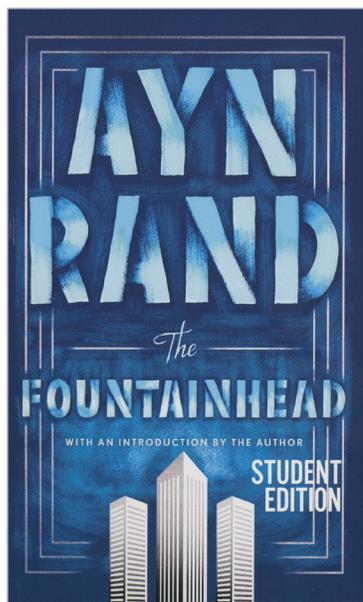
traditions, codes, and systems that underpin a collectivist society, the society strikes back by attempting to destroy him. Thus, when the reader meets the figure of Roark, they meet a man who has not simply been removed from a place of learning, but a man who has been fundamentally rejected by his society.

Yet Roark's response is not to beg, cry or lament his pain. Instead, naked and alone, he laughs. Roark laughs at the sheer absurdity of his society and primarily at how ineffective such an action as expulsion could ever be against a true individual. In his pivotal courtroom speech, Roark will examine the disparity in motives between the 'parasite' and the 'individual' (712). While the individual's "primary goal is within himself" (713), the parasite or second-hander must live a life in which they are simultaneously reliant upon and subjugated by others. With this in mind, it is no wonder that in the culture in which Roark exists, a culture of collectivist and altruistic thought, expulsion would be considered a severe punishment. For to be expelled from the university is to be rejected by the collective, and as such, for the 'parasite,' to have your source of inner worth denied. This is the reason that Mrs. Keating reacts with such "astonishment" (8) at Roark's ambivalence towards his punishment; her inner worth is dependent on the approval of other people, and the consideration that Roark has another source of value is bewildering.

Yet Roark can laugh at such an action, for fundamentally his inner worth resides within himself. His uncompromising attitude towards others is a reflection of his inner self-belief: as an individual he has no reason to place his will within the being of another, but rather can rest with confidence in his own artistic vision. Naturally, therefore, Roark's response to expulsion is benignly amused indifference, for to be cast out from the community is nothing to Roark but a breaking of chains—a sentiment that is reflected in Roark's response to the Dean's offer of re-enrolment: "I won't be back. I have nothing further to learn here." (10) As such, once one views Roark's expulsion as a metaphor for the constant attempts of society to corrupt and destroy the individual, the laughter of Roark demonstrates the same eternal truth that John Galt speaks in *Atlas Shrugged*: 'Evil is impotent and has no power but that which we let it extort from us.'

For in his laughter, Roark is able to render society powerless. His laughter is a form of recognition that, ultimately, it is only the ego, only the self that deserves attention; a recognition that "A truly selfish man cannot be affected by the approval of others." (658). The laughter of Roark dismantles the entire system of control that an altruistic society is dependent upon. As Toohey will later explain, the power of collectivist thought comes in the clouding of individual thought through the use of abstract sophistry, holding up concepts such as "'Universal Harmony'—'Eternal Spirit'—'Divine Purpose'—'Nirvana'—'Paradise'—'Racial Supremacy'—'The Dictatorship of the Proletariat'" (666) above the needs and desires of the individual. By travelling to the lake alone and considering the world simply as it is, the human conceptions that are used to disguise the inner truth of individual supremacy fade away. Both man and nature are considered by Roark in their naked state—free from the impositions of collectivist thought.

Dominique will later remark that "The hardest thing to explain is the glaringly evident which everybody has decided not to see" (521)—and it is this exact problem that Rand is able to solve in this opening scene. The ultimate truth of our existence is that each individual has immeasurable value independent of others, and by reducing all other elements of existence



until only Roark on the cliff edge remains, Rand is able to make the glaringly evident the sole focus of the reader's thought. In this sense, the laughter of Roark removes the smoke and mirrors of altruistic thought and reduces himself to a singular figure amid a world built for him. His nakedness is symbolic of his removal of all societal restrictions, conformity, and tradition—leaving behind the singular figure of an individual at one with the world around him. All that is needed is life and the knowledge of how to live it—with these tools the entire world to Roark becomes “granite to be cut,” “wood to be split” and “rust to be melted” (4).

It is true that these ideas about altruism, individuality and society are present throughout the work, and in other scenes receive more direct attention and description by Rand. Yet these scenes and passages lack a more ethereal element, an element of artistic creation that places this first scene above all others, in my view, in all of Rand's literature. This scene is able to attain this primacy in the work due to its aesthetic reflection of Rand's philosophy. The passage feels no need to detail the exact thought passage of Roark; no need to provide detailed explanation of his laugh, but rather lets him stand alone atop the rocks and simply act. The passage itself embodies the values and goals of individualism that the philosophy of Rand stands for: pure individualism. The scene at once sets the tone for the work and invites the mind of the reader to place themselves atop the same cliff edge, in the same situation of Roark, and interrogates their response. Rand defined literature as the 'selective re-creation of reality,' and in this opening sentence she is able to place the reader in a reality in which the individual has its deserved dominance.

Fundamentally, *The Fountainhead* is a treatise demonstrating that the uncompromising is the unconquerable. There is meaning written into each of the work's many scenes yet it is in the opening sentence of the work that Rand is best able to capture the individualist ethos both on a moral and aesthetic level in only three words. Using Roark's expulsion to represent the insidious nature of the collective, Rand in a single laugh is able to demonstrate the unconquerable will of the individual. The will, the drive, the mindset that drives Roark to laugh upon the precipice remains as constant as the granite he stands on throughout the work. As such, it is no wonder that *The Fountainhead* is, in effect, cyclical; the first and last sentences of the work ending with the same image: that of Roark alone amongst the elements.

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