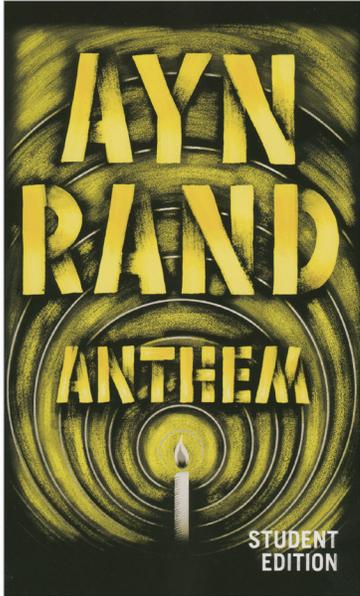


2019 ANTHEM WINNING ESSAY

11TH–12TH GRADE



FIRST PLACE



Cynthia Lu, Belmont, Massachusetts – Belmont High School, Belmont, Massachusetts

Does the World Council of Scholars reject Equality only because he is different or for some additional reason? What is it about Equality, specifically, that they are so opposed to, and what do you think motivates their opposition toward him? Explain your answer.

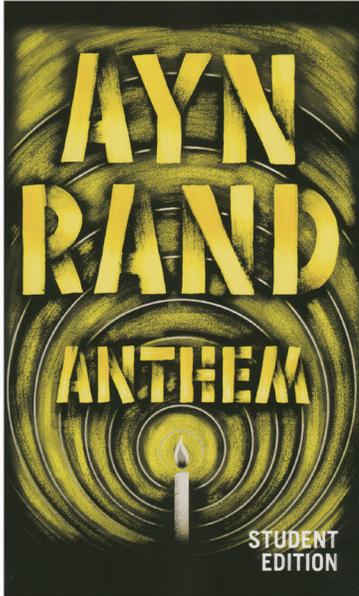
“There’s equality in stagnation,” Ellsworth Toohey declares to Peter Keating in *The Fountainhead* (639), and it is around this abhorrent collectivist doctrine that the dystopian society of Ayn Rand’s novella *Anthem* is founded. Ironically, it is Equality 7-2521—the individual named after this ideal—who successfully challenges the society commanding him to “exist through, by, and for our brothers” (8). Equality is reprimanded for being different, but it is his conscious embrace of this difference that truly garners the animosity of the ruling Councils. Maintaining their power not through physical force, but by draining men of judgment and choice, these leaders are threatened by Equality’s unbroken spirit and seek to first assimilate, then crush him altogether. Whereas the mindless masses accept what is dictated to them, Equality is fixated on the pursuit of truth, in two main forms—truth that governs the natural world around him, and self-truth derived from his individual capabilities. This pursuit distinguishes his psychological strength, serving to both condemn him as a menace to the status quo and serve as an ultimate means of freedom.

In the City, life revolves around “a sundial in [the] courtyard, by which the Council of the Home can tell the hours of the day” (12). Each monotonous day, men wake up, toil until the sun falls, and go to sleep. Then, they grow old and die without ever having achieved or even conceived of a possible greater purpose. When the Councils discover that Equality cannot resign himself to such a meaningless existence and that instead of shrinking from the inexplicable forces of nature, he “look[s] too long at the stars at night, and at the trees and the earth” (14), they assign him to be a Street Sweeper, barring access to further learning. Despite the Councils’ attempt to stifle his differences, the spark in Equality burns brightly, and in a secret underground tunnel, he rediscovers electricity. “[N]ever have men known what causes lightning” (36), he observes, yet through his efforts alone, he is able to understand the truths of the natural world and his power in it. With such knowledge, even “the sky can be made to do men’s bidding” (42) and he eagerly presents it before the World Council.

They come to a decree: that “[it] must be destroyed” (54), for only in a technologically backward society can perverse, complete equality between men be achieved. The weakest, whose minds are as dim as the candles lighting the city, chain down the intellectually superior until all are forced to “[toil] for other men” (54) without producing anything of value—instead feeding off a common sense of duty that blurs into oppressive guilt and shame. In rejecting the light Equality has created,

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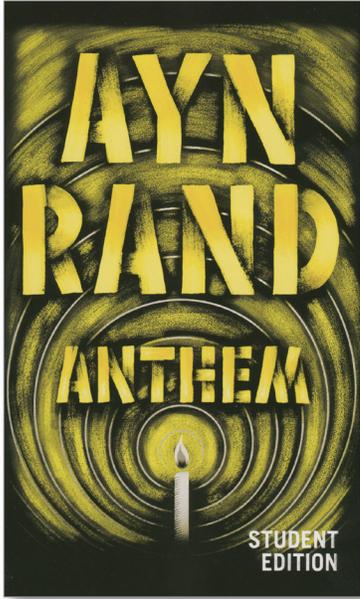
they reject what he stands for—an individual capable of judgment and creation, of disrupting a collectivist City that must be shrouded in darkness in order to keep its inhabitants complacently ignorant.

Yet Rand does not intend for darkness to be a symbol of malignancy—rather, its contrast with light represents the black-and-white world of reason and science that Equality strives for. Even as a Street Sweeper, he finds “peace in the [night] sky, and cleanliness, and dignity” (30)—the rights that men have been robbed of by the Councils. He is drawn to the “black patch” (32) of the Uncharted Forest, undaunted by rumors of wild beasts. Thus, rather than fear the dark like his brothers, Equality views it as a representation of unharnessed potential—a land where he is free to discover and create. It is the pure, untouched darkness of his tunnel, after all, that provides the environment for him to bring forth light. What Rand condemns as evil is grey—that vague intermediate between truth and lie. The Judges in the Palace of Corrective Detention are “small, thin men, grey and bent” (44), contrasting with the proud, straight lines of Equality’s figure. Similarly, the candles create a gray world that allows just enough light for the Councils to control the shadows that men see, resulting in the “fear without name, without shape” (30) that hangs in the City. As Toohey confides, “Say that reason is limited . . . [that] there’s something above it. What? You don’t have to be too clear” (637). It is from this irrational vagueness that the Councils derive their power—the blind leading the blind—and their desire to maintain this power motivates their hatred of Equality’s clean, white light, the direct product of his intellect.

Eventually, inevitably, Equality’s pursuit of scientific truths leads to an even greater personal truth: the realization of his self-potential as a human being. As a youth, his individuality resists suppression, and though he promises to “work for our brothers, gladly and willingly” (12), Equality’s secret experiments defy his life mandate as a Street Sweeper. His rejection of the base, dehumanizing role he has been assigned to by society is unconscious at first, though once he escapes from the City, he declares, “I owe nothing to my brothers . . . I ask none to live for me.” (72). Rather than clean the forever tainted streets of his brothers, Equality sets out to carve his own path and rejects the fate meted out to him. In discovering the word “I,” he discovers an expression of ownership over what is rightfully his—his mind, his body, and by natural extension, the products he creates. Upon inventing his light box, Equality writes that “this wire is a part of our body, as a vein torn from us, glowing with our blood” (42). He understands instinctively that the “thread of metal” (42) is the result of his own time and energy—and he is proud of his possession, for it is as much a part of his identity as the mind and hands that created it. But pride is a dangerous concept for the Councils—a man who takes pride in himself is independent of his brothers in thought and action, and will not submit to the atmosphere of shameful weakness that preserve the Councils’ dominance. Recognizing that these collectivist values are ingrained beyond hope, Equality escapes into the Uncharted Forest to protect his light—a light that brings him “happiness [with] no higher aim to vindicate it” (72).

“Happy men are free men. So kill their joy in living” (636), Toohey instructs Keating. And indeed, in *Anthem*, that is what the Council does. By teaching that nothing can

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bring joy unless all men have it, they reduce the ideal to a tainted, worthless thing that only chains society together further in its misery. After all, the Council members seek to cripple and destroy Equality because they themselves are incapable of such creation, and only upon leaving the City is he able to live up to his true potential and take unadulterated pride in his pursuit of truth.

So too, did the Greek gods fear Prometheus—but while a single man can be chained, the light he brings forth cannot.