

## FIRST PLACE



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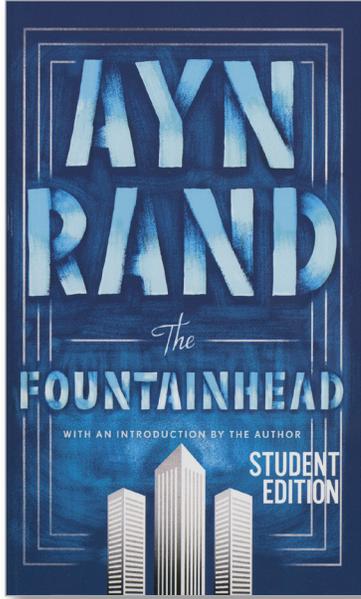
**In his climactic courtroom speech, Howard Roark states: “The creator’s concern is the conquest of nature. The parasite’s concern is the conquest of men.” Explain how this quote relates to the theme as dramatized through the characters of Howard Roark, Peter Keating and Ellsworth Toohey.**

For some, the idea of conquering nature may evoke a sense of destruction and human hubris. All too often, nature is upheld as a divine miracle that cannot and should not be grasped. Ironically, a humble attitude requires no effort to understand natural law, which leads people to act in ways that distort nature due to their ignorance and evasion of reality. On the other hand, one who is well acquainted with Ayn Rand’s philosophy would understand that the conquest of nature does not involve rebelling against nature. Rather, it amounts to honoring the laws of nature, using nature’s gifts to further man’s life, and improving nature—these are a creator’s concerns. Through her book *The Fountainhead*, Rand gives form to her philosophy, allowing the reader to experience a world where her ideas are fully realized.

How a creator views nature is effectively captured in the opening scene of the novel. Roark is expelled from college for transgressing the “sacred tradition” (23) and designing buildings according to his own ideas. For a brief moment, he considers the principle behind the Dean and the adversities ahead, but, in awareness of nature around him, judges that such artificial concerns have little relevance to his life. At the top of the cliff, alone and naked, he laughs. He looks down and sees nature as an essential resource for his creative pursuit, the works of which will fulfill his spiritual need to concretize his values. He sees nature “waiting to be split, ripped, pounded, reborn; waiting for the shape my hands will give them” (16).

Roark’s indifference to social practices is so profound throughout the book that his behaviors are as startling as they are satisfying. A quality that distinguishes him from the rest of the characters is his capacity to deal with nature directly. To him, nature is neither transcendental nor unfathomable, but part of reality that merely exists and must be conquered. Nature is the metaphysically given, the entirety of existence that behaves according to its given identity. Roark displays perfect indifference because his knowledge and understanding of the world come directly from his observations of nature. As he devotes to his convictions to understand the world as it is and accept irrevocable natural law, he confronts little surprises as he lives. An innovative architect, he is focused on working with nature while adhering to its laws to create a new combination of natural elements and further himself.

Roark also commits to the nature of his self—his ego. Facing nature alone is his only way of deriving truth. Thinking independently, forming values, and committing to those values in action are his ways of living. As he claims in his speech, the mind is a human’s only weapon and tool for survival. Animals rely on physical attributes to meet their needs, but only through “a process of thought” (679) can a man grow his

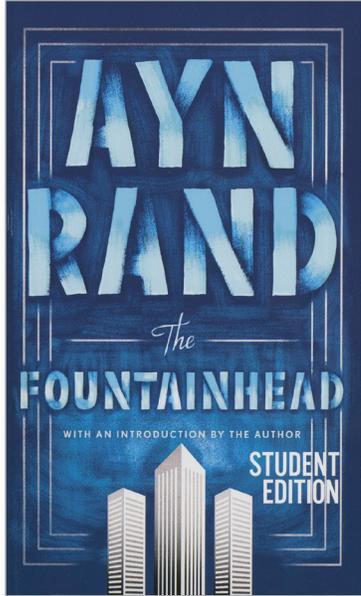


own food, make fire, invent the automobile, and pursue creative achievements to thrive on earth. But the mind is individual as “there is no such thing as a collective brain” (679), so each man must live autonomously for his work and his own survival. Thus, under no circumstances does Roark sacrifice his mind, not even when he feels the pinch and must compromise his design to appease his clients for the Manhattan Bank commission. His designs are his principles, which are how his mind chose to grasp existence. Then, as his mind is his self, his buildings are him. Hence to Roark, compromising his work is tantamount to selling his soul, an essential component of his existence. Closing down his office is certainly upsetting, but building a corrupt, dead building (196) poses a critical threat to his being. Even a minor alteration in the façade would be an act of self-sacrifice. In this regard, Roark is a selfish man who lives according to his nature—driven only by his own welfare and life. As a creator, he places his own values above all things and takes pride in his selfishness.

Roark claims there are two ways of survival: “by the independent work of his own mind or as a parasite fed by the minds of others” (679). Roark is the creator who looks to nature, uses his independent judgment for truth, and applies his reason to nature—only by doing so can he create. With faith in himself and only in himself, he produces structures that can come into being only through his mind and hands. Thus, it can be said that he creates life when he erects buildings. He is the only character that conquers nature and the only character that “lives” not merely “exists.” He triumphs in that he lives as a man should in every aspect. The values that he embodies are everything a man needs to pursue life.

Peter Keating is also an architect but by no means a creator. He is what Roark calls a “parasite” who understands reality through other people’s minds and borrows other people’s work. The conquest of men is his prime concern because men are central to his survival. Facts do not matter; only what others think is important. Though he is a mediocre architect, he devotes himself to convincing others of his greatness. He schemes to eliminate his rivals at his firm and violates other people’s rights to advance his career. To fulfill social expectations, he copies Roark’s designs and caters to popular taste, but his sense of shame that vaguely exists in his awareness takes a backseat to the fact he can get social approval. He gains self-worth not through his work, but through external validation—from others whom he manipulates to accept his lies and affirm his greatness. Such is the way of surviving as a parasite who has no sense of reality and exists through others.

The inevitable destiny of a parasite is that he lives in constant fear of facing rejection from his hosts. Driven by a sense of insecurity, Keating commits to self-destruction in frantic attempts to cling to his hosts. He willingly places the welfare of others over his, allowing their desire to control his life. Though he hates architecture, he satisfies his mother by becoming an architect. Similarly, he marries Dominique for Toohey’s approval. Though outwardly, Keating achieves success after success, it’s impossible to find joy in his life. This is a natural outcome as nothing is real about him: his work, his happiness, his very being are all illusions. His fears are realized when the public stops recognizing him and Toohey no longer writes about him. Reality strikes him that “public favor had ceased being a recognition of merit, that it had become almost a brand of shame” (563). After the Cortland case when he is exposed as a fraud, his life



collapses because he had uncritically sacrificed everything he had loved for an empty, meaningless victory. Keating embodies a status-seeking parasite who directs itself toward death, not life.

Parasite takes a more dramatic form in the power-seeking Ellsworth Toohey, the ultimate evil and antithesis of Roark. Aware of his incompetence to thrive, he compensates for his weakness with his charisma and manipulative language. For his goal, he uses his knowledge of collectivism to control the masses “to think—together. To unite, to agree, to obey . . . to serve, to sacrifice” (636). He instructs people to live for others and relinquish their values and desires. He promotes humility, equating excellence with arrogance, and happiness with guilt (636). Consequently, Toohey can enshrine second-rate mediocrity and rise above Keating-like parasites.

On the surface, Toohey may seem a powerful figure who exerts great influence over men. Indeed, he empties people’s souls so effectively that they become helplessly dependent on him. Even after Toohey reveals his evil motives and everything he has done to Keating, Keating begs, “Don’t go, Ellsworth” (640). To the plea, Toohey coldly responds, “You can’t leave me and you’ll never be able to leave me” (640).

Mental control, however, cannot change reality. A character from Rand’s other novel *Atlas Shrugged* grasps this point: “Existence exists; reality is not to be wiped out, it will merely wipe out the wiper.” This explains why Toohey exerts only a superficial impact on truly talented individuals like Roark. Despite Toohey’s intricate schemes, at no point is Roark’s life fundamentally affected. Toohey may take away Roark’s clients but cannot destroy his greatness, as Roark doesn’t need clients to live up to his highest potential. Not even Toohey’s failure matters to Roark, for Toohey does not exist in Roark’s mind. No matter the outcome of Toohey’s maneuvering, Roark has “won long ago” (668). On the contrary, Toohey’s well-being depends entirely on Roark. When Roark wins the Cortlandt case, the illusions Toohey devoted his entire life imparting are instantaneously dismantled. Left at the bottom, he would struggle his way up, but the reader knows he has no chance of winning in a world that recognizes justice. Evil is impotent because lies and jealousy cannot defeat nature and reason.

Though Rand wrote *The Fountainhead* after witnessing the Bolshevik regime, her ideas pertain to everyone living in modern society. The book recognizes that collectivism exists not just in a dystopian future or socialist society but also in the modern world where egalitarianism is a popular concept. Roark is a real-life hero—not a superhero that sacrifices for others—who simply lives the life all humans are naturally entitled to. People, trying to “get ahead,” often neglect what they sacrifice, but by creating a personified model of her ideals, Rand awakens the reader to the true meaning of life.

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