

## FIRST PLACE



Cora Usurelu, Woodbridge, Ontario, Canada – Thornhill Secondary School, Thornhill, Ontario, Canada

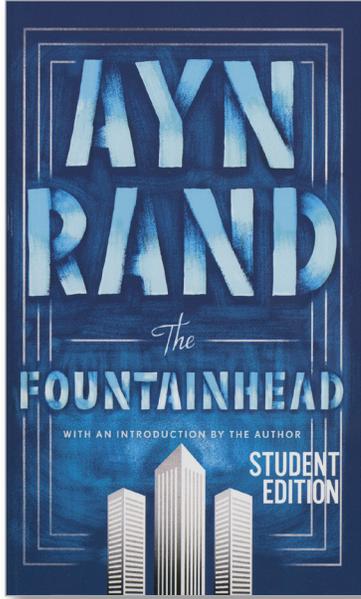
**Why does Toohey support Keating’s career early on? What is Toohey’s purpose in promoting the careers of people like Keating, Gordon Prescott, Lois Cook, Ike the Genius, and Gus Webb? In what way does his purpose relate to his campaign against Roark? How does this issue relate to the wider themes in the novel?**

### **Parasitism of the Collectivist Man: The Philosophy of Ellsworth Toohey in Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead***

“There are no men but only the great WE, One, indivisible and forever.” (19) This is the chilling government mantra Equality 7-2521 must abide by in the world of *Anthem*. But while *Anthem* examines the more obviously visible danger of having a government impose collectivist doctrines such as this, *The Fountainhead* explores a much more potent evil, the infiltration of collectivism, not into politics, but into the very essence of man’s soul. The paragon of this evil is a feeble, weak journalist named Ellsworth Toohey who inherently opposes, through his fundamental character, the spiritual greatness of Howard Roark.

Ellsworth Toohey is a useless mediocrity. The only manner in which Toohey can become a great man is by destroying the very concept of greatness, which is his main objective throughout the novel. Toohey has dedicated himself to the destruction of independence, individualism, and integrity by asserting control over others who are spiritually weak. Toohey preaches an abhorrent collectivist doctrine to the masses, disguised as moral virtue; he encourages altruism, self-sacrifice, and the renunciation of one’s ego for the greater good; he releases didactic novels and carefully crafted articles that conceal mendacious propaganda. His purpose in doing so is to break down the individualist spirits of men, “collect [their] souls” (298), and insert his own ideas into the empty shells that remain.

Peter Keating is a mediocre architect and a fraud; he copies the styles of the past and the work of his peers. Keating himself can produce nothing of value nor substance; he is useless alone. Rand portrays Keating as the epitome of selflessness, in the practical sense, because he lacks a self. Individual values are meaningless to a man like Keating whose only ambition is to succeed in the eyes of others. Ellsworth Toohey knows this about Peter, he accepts it, and he revels in it; Peter Keating is a perfect victim. Toohey works hard to bolster Keating’s career whilst simultaneously crushing his spirit. He praises Keating in the journals, brings him great fame and recognition, and packages him as the new standard of architectural greatness. Concurrently, Toohey destroys Keating’s self-worth and sabotages Keating’s one redeeming value, his loving relationship with Catherine Halsey, by persuading him to marry Dominique Francon instead. After reducing Keating to an empty shell,

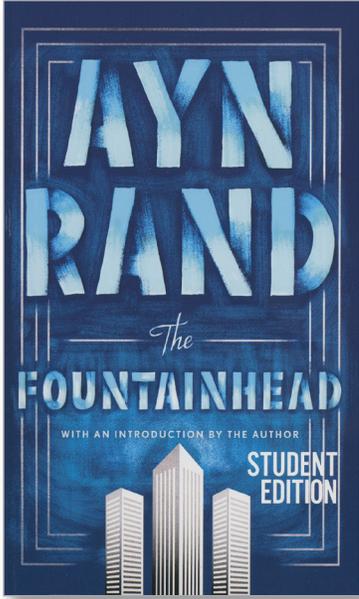


Toohey disposes of him, picking the disgustingly incompetent Gus Webb as his new architectural martyr.

Toohey's purpose in supporting people like Peter Keating, Gus Webb, Lois Cook, Ike the Genius, and Gordon Prescott goes far beyond the need to assert control upon them. The one thing all these characters have in common is that they are incredibly mediocre in their respective fields. Keating, Webb, and Prescott are unremarkable architects. Lois Cook is a novelist who writes incomprehensible nonsense. Ike is a terrible playwright offering no new ideas. Toohey promotes and upholds mediocrity as the golden standard in each profession by bolstering the careers of ciphers such as these. He coerces the public into praising the unremarkable and spurn great men like Roark, in an effort to conceal his own shortcomings. Some men, like Gus Webb, are aware of the role they play in Toohey's plan. Others, like Peter Keating, refuse to accept it. The reason why the masses are susceptible to Toohey's plan is because they are all what Roark calls "second-handers" (658); they live through others. Even characters like Gail Wynand who exhibit some Roark-like qualities are flawed by their fundamental dependency on other people. Toohey himself is a second-hander; his philosophy of rejecting one's own individuality, aspirations, and personal pursuit of happiness makes him entirely reliant on the masses he himself controls. By increasing his following, Toohey thickens the buffer between himself and the real world. The concept of second-handedness not only explains why the masses are vulnerable to Toohey's indoctrination, but also why his influence does not extend to Howard Roark.

Howard Roark is the paragon of a great man, an individualist. He is unconcerned with other men and their opinions "The only thing that matters . . . is the work itself. My work done my way." (579) Toohey is all-consumed by the need to eliminate Roark, whose very existence is a threat to his philosophy. Although these two male protagonists are presented as opponents, they are certainly not equals. When Toohey completes his Stoddard Temple scheme, it would appear to the reader as if he has won. He has destroyed Roark's career, defeated him in court, and now revels in watching Roark observe the mediocre architects hired to disfigure his art. But when Toohey's so-called success brings him face to face with Howard, he asks him, "Mr. Roark, we're alone here. Why don't you tell me what you think of me?" (389) To which Roark replies, "But I don't think of you." (389) In Toohey's eyes, Roark is his greatest nemesis, but to Roark, Toohey is an insignificant nuisance.

Ellsworth Toohey represents the great evil of collectivism in man's soul. He engineers the social climate in an attempt to destroy man's ego, preaching that it is "blessed to believe, not to understand" (380). Whilst Toohey, and men like him pose a great philosophical threat, their filth is only allowed to thrive through the sanction of the victim. As *Atlas Shrugged* protagonist John Galt vowed to "stop the motor of the world" (671) by imploring the world's creators to remove their sanction, so too was Toohey stopped when Gail Wynand removed his sanction by closing *The Banner*, stripping Toohey of his power. As Roark proclaims, there are only two ways for a man to live: "by the independent work of his own mind or as a parasite fed by the minds



of others” (679). The only way to overcome parasites like Toohey is to never grant them access to our minds, nor our resources. *The Fountainhead* and its characters have great cultural significance in this respect; they help us recognize the influence of collectivism upon man’s soul, and thus prevent it from ever entering our own.

## Works Cited

Rand, Ayn. *Atlas Shrugged*. Signet, 1992.

Rand, Ayn. *The Fountainhead*. Signet, 1993.

Rand, Ayn. *Anthem*. Signet, 1996.