

FIRST PLACE

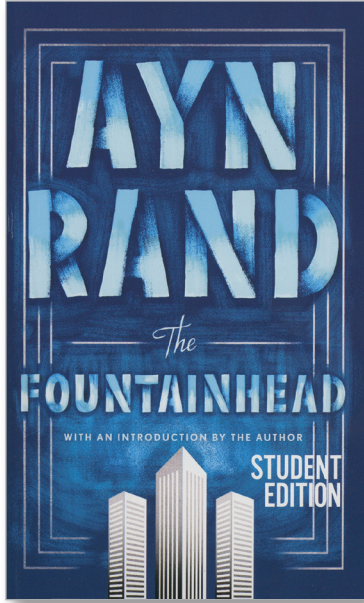


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The novel opens with the line “Howard Roark laughed.” What things does Roark laugh at in this scene, and in other scenes? Give a few examples from the book. Later in a scene with Keating, Toohey reveals that part of his method is to “kill by laughter.” What things does Toohey laugh at? Give a few examples. What is different about the things Roark and Toohey laugh at? Explain how the contrast reflects wider themes in the novel.

Charles Chaplin, a renowned comedian, once declared: “A day without laughter is a day wasted.” As this adage demonstrates, laughter is often considered benign and virtuous in popular culture. Expressions such as “lighten up!,” “laughter is medicine,” and “loosen up and laugh!” all portray laughter as an uplifting, positive activity. However, such understanding of humor is dangerously one-sided and superficial. Fundamentally, one laughs at something that is incongruous with their worldview to dismiss it as worthless and insignificant. Thus, every individual possesses a unique sense of humor that reflects their personal values and beliefs. In *The Fountainhead*, the heroic protagonist, Howard Roark, contrasts sharply with his antithesis, Ellsworth Toohey, in their source of laughter. Roark, a great individualist whose primary concerns are his work and happiness, laughs to dismiss external factors unworthy of consideration. In contrast, Toohey, driven by his own sense of inadequacy, employs laughter to manufacture a culture of selflessness and mediocrity. The theme of humor, therefore, sheds light on the two characters’ respective identities and values.

The Fountainhead begins with an enigmatic yet powerful scene: standing naked on a cliff, surrounded by sublime nature, Howard Roark laughs. It is later revealed that he was laughing at his expulsion from the Architectural School and “at the things which now lay ahead.” This revelation may render Roark incomprehensible to many readers; how can one laugh at such predicament and disgrace? To understand his behavior, one must first grasp the symbolic significance of his expulsion. Roark was expelled because he refused to blindly honor “sacred” traditions and public opinions. Because he was an individualist committed to his own architectural views, he posed a menace to the Dean’s authority; when Roark asks why architects must only seek to emulate, and not improve, traditional styles, the Dean must reassure himself that Roark “is not threatening [him].” As such, the Dean, who endorses artistic conformity, is reminded of his incompetence in the presence of Roark’s tenacious individuality. Per the Dean’s proposal, Roark would have been accepted back into the school had he apologized and agreed to observe established standards of artistry—in other words, if he sacrificed his spirit and replaced it with collectivist beliefs. However, he instead laughs at the Dean’s unsuccessful attempts to corrupt him under the guise of respecting the past. Roark knows that he will continue to face various forms of social ostracism; yet, rather than responding with fear, he

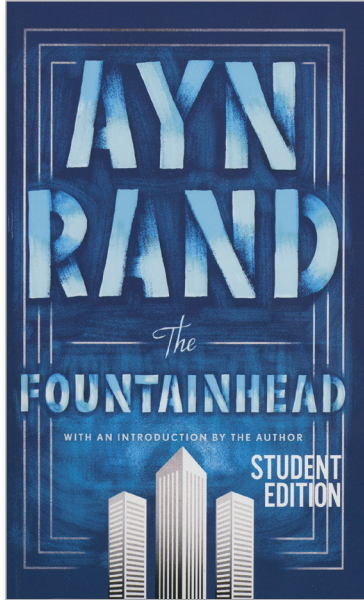


laughs at such ludicrous practices that make no sense to him. He laughs because he is amused by the collectivist sentiments that have no fundamental impact on a man who derives his self-fulfillment not from public approval but from actualization of his potential.

As he rightfully predicts, Roark constantly faces societal rejection and deterrents to his architectural career. Nevertheless, Roark remains indifferent even in the face of apparent humiliation. For example, he “[throws] his head back and laugh[s]” upon discovering that he was chosen “as the worst architect” the clients could find. Hence, he is able to humorously brush off hostile criticism that many would find mortifying. While such disapproval would be destructive to those who derive self-worth from popular admiration, it holds little significance to Roark, for he does not need external validation to know his worth and seek happiness. Repudiating the artistic standards society imposes upon him, Roark stays true to his artistic convictions and prioritizes personal fulfillment. In short, he exists in his own specific way, whether society accepts it or not. Thus, his laughter symbolizes the power of his individual will, refusal to let collectivist evil conquer his spirit, and recognition of the impotence of such evil against his integrity.

Such carefree attitude poses a stark contrast to his reverence of nature. Despite laughing at his expulsion only moments before, Roark stops laughing as he becomes aware of the earth around him. He contemplates his natural surroundings: the granite “to be cut . . . and made into walls,” a tree “to be split and made into rafters,” and the underground iron ore “to be melted and emerge as girders against the sky.” While honoring the essence of these natural elements, he exercises creative power over them and endows them with artistic meaning. Through architecture, Roark thus takes on the role of a creator and transforms raw elements into products of his mind. Like the individual who discovered fire for his own well-being, Roark is self-motivated to actualize his architectural vision. His innovative buildings not only provide personal fulfillment, but also drive human progress—this makes him a “great” man. This creative process is not a laughing matter to Roark; it is the guiding philosophy of his life, the unalterable truth that enables his success and human advancement.

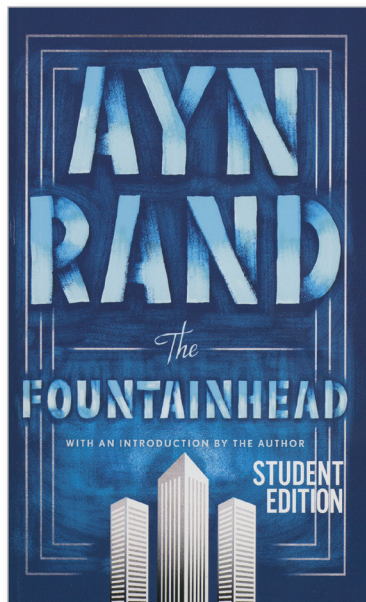
In contrast, Toohey employs laughter as a weapon to derogate all virtues and values. He is aware that he lacks the creative capabilities necessary for prosperity, and thus feels threatened by self-sufficient individuals. However, as he cannot blatantly deprecate the good, he laughs at all things that stem from individuality, such as selfish decisions, personal thoughts, and individual greatness. In a conversation with Keating, Toohey reveals his true motive: “Kill by laughter . . . don’t let anything remain sacred in a man’s soul—and his soul won’t be sacred to him. Kill reverence and you’ve killed the hero in man.” By destroying people’s minds and hence their autonomy, he transforms them into submissive subjects with no ideals or ambitions. In short, Toohey uses laughter as a self-defense mechanism to thwart others’ individuality and potential for success.



Toohy’s humor, therefore, evokes a feeling of scorn, which discourages independent thinking and erodes people’s self-confidence. This is how he gains power over individuals that are spiritually weak, such as Catherine. For example, Toohy “laugh[s] so much” upon hearing her decision to marry Keating that she begins to doubt her choice and eventually abandons the relationship. Similarly, when Catherine asks who would enter the “gates of spiritual grandeur” when they do open, Toohy laughs. Though Catherine brings up a legitimate concern—that she may lose her sense of self if she continues her social work—Toohy invalidates it immediately by laughing as if to suggest that her worry is childish, uninformed, and misguided. Toohy’s laughter thus undermines her faith in her own decision, discourages her from seeking happiness, and perpetuates her selfless spirit. As a result, he prevents her from ever fulfilling her potential; despite once being a motivated, independent woman determined to go to college, Catherine ultimately becomes inescapably dependent on Toohy’s guidance.

Although such weak-minded people make easy targets, Toohy understands that he cannot destroy the souls of true individualists. Nevertheless, he still dismisses their greatness through humor. For example, he mocks Roark by printing a photo of him with the caption “Are you happy, Mr. Superman?” While this ridicule will have little impact on Roark himself, it conveys a clear message to the public: the qualities that Roark embodies—independence, genius, and selfishness—are subjects of scorn. Thus, Toohy’s malicious humor promotes a culture of selfless mediocrity. In this culture where individuality invites mockery, people will strive for conformity and submit willingly to the collectivist spirit. Upon witnessing the constant deprecation of Roark and his consequent lack of clients, people will also begin to emulate the popular, talentless architects such as Peter Keating. In other words, they will admire mediocrity and become blind to true greatness. This collectivist culture, fostered through Toohy’s malevolent humor, not only influences public opinion but also undermines those who believe in individual greatness. The college student, before meeting Roark, feels discouraged from pursuing his passion for music in such conformist society; Henry Cameron, a commercial failure, resorts to heavy drinking and indulges in self-pity; Dominique is convinced that a great individual like Roark will never achieve success; Gail Wynand agrees to condemn Roark on the *Banner*, thus becoming a mere vessel of public opinion.

Toohy takes his malicious humor to the extreme by laughing at himself, an act of spiritual suicide. Thus, when he declares to Keating that “anything goes—nothing is too serious,” he means those words in their fullest sense. To him, even his own self is a mere laughing matter. Toohy therefore sacrifices his dignity for a meaningless ambition: conquest of others. He undeniably reaches this goal, since he gains influence and popular admiration as “a man who [can] laugh at himself.” However, he can never achieve true victory, for his malicious humor—however powerful it may be to the weak-minded—is helplessly ineffective against great individuals. In fact, Toohy is the ultimate loser in this one-sided battle; not only does Roark’s absolute greatness remain unaffected, but Toohy also invests his entire life in a pointless, self-destructive pursuit. His subjugation of others contributes nothing to his true



well-being, which can be achieved only through autonomy and productive work. In short, in seeking to conquer others' souls, he ultimately destroys his own.

By juxtaposing Roark and Toohey, *The Fountainhead* effectively captures the two faces of humor. Toohey laughs to breed selfless masses that feed on jest, worship mediocrity, and scorn greatness. On the other hand, Roark's laughter does not stem from insidious planning; it is his genuine reaction to society's trivialities, including public criticism of his architectural vision. Popular opinion, being utterly subjective, is a mere contemptibility for Roark whose absolute philosophy prioritizes self-fulfillment. Roark's unbound, ringing laughter declares the unshakeable will of the individual, reminding us once again to pursue our own happiness relentlessly and unapologetically.

Bibliography

Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*