

The Fountainhead (a review)



Ayn Rand

As a novel *The Fountainhead* is certainly flawed. It is over-long and parts could have been deleted on editing. However, it is one of those essential reads. Written by a philosopher and political theorist, it is a book with a message rather than a “pure novel” (whatever that is).

Ayn Rand’s reputation goes before her, but *The Fountainhead* was not what I was expecting. I was expecting a story eulogising capitalism. It is nothing of the kind, and that will teach me not to judge by what a person’s enemies say. (On the other hand, Rand was undoubtedly a firm supporter of *laissez-faire* capitalism, right enough).

Ostensibly, at least initially, *The Fountainhead* appears to be about the rivalry between aspiring architects Howard Roark and Peter Keating. Rather quickly it becomes apparent that this is not the true subject matter. Roark never considers himself to be in such a state of rivalry, and certainly not with Keating, who lacks the stature to be a credible rival to the genius of Roark. Roark is the embodiment of Rand’s heroic man, the central pillar of her Objectivist philosophy. He lives for the purity of his vision and has the hero’s total disdain for convention and popular approbation, even in the face of crushing hardship.

The story opens with Roark being unceremoniously thrown out of university without a degree. He is unconcerned. He had learnt what he needed to learn and had no need of the bit of paper they were offering graduates. So we know straight away that we are dealing with an unusual individual in Roark. He is a man who – arrogantly to some – will be steered only by his own values and standards, without compromise to those of lesser vision.

(There may be an autobiographical origin to Roark’s expulsion. Rand herself was “purged” from Petrograd State University shortly before graduating).

I would argue that Roark is not the central character of the book – and Keating most certainly is not, as his life trajectory quickly degenerates into a cautionary tale. Of course, Roark is an exemplar, but he is too superhuman for the reader’s empathy.

The key character is, in my opinion, Ellsworth Toohey. If Roark is held up to be Rand’s vision of a role model and ideal man – and he is – then Toohey is The Enemy. Here we have the socio-political theme made clear. Roark stands for the heroic individualist, embracing non-conformity and independence as his absolute right, expecting to be given nothing and demanding absolute personal freedom, all projected from an adamant personal integrity.

Toohey, in stark contrast, and as a foil to Roark, is the cunning collectivist. As a Russian émigré, Rand (born Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum) had good reason to regard collectivism as the antithesis of everything desirable. It is the sly scheming of Toohey which gives the novel its ballast and its political edge. It was the portrayal of Toohey and his *modus operandi* which impressed me most about the book. Through Toohey, Rand displays the collectivist stratagem of undermining all things of real value, real merit, as a means of driving out individuality.

Naively, I had not realised that this strategy was so explicitly understood and in 1943, when the book was published. Nor did I appreciate that it had been devised with such malice aforethought, though I presume Rand was reflecting upon what she had experienced in Soviet Russia. This is why the “progressives” are the enemy of meritocracy, and why they habitually promote the vulgar and valueless. It isn’t just bad taste. No, the promotion of the crass, the ugly, the undeserving dross (think contemporary art) is specifically to drive out things of real value. This is why people of this ilk are the antithesis of Roark – or of anyone who even aspires to his worldview.

Thus, we find Toohey, the influential critic, busily – and knowingly – engaged in promoting rubbish, in art, in architecture, in literature, in theatre. His purpose is to bring down all the Roarks of the world. The collective has no place for those who stand far above the rest. If “the rest” cannot achieve the same heights (and they cannot) then the Roarks must be scythed at the knee – or neck. As Roark is the embodiment of the hero, Toohey is the personification of envy and resentment, the very same negative character traits which lie behind identity politics and drives our present social and political divisions. This 77 year old book is bang up to date, because the theme is perennial.

It is worth noting that *The Fountainhead* was turned down by 12 publishers before Rand was successful. Recall that even two years later, in 1945, Orwell had trouble getting *Animal Farm* published, despite being a well-known author and journalist. At that time it was politically and culturally unacceptable to criticise socialism within intellectual circles and an unofficial censorship was in place, at least in the UK and I presume there was a similar phenomenon in the USA. (Read Orwell’s account in his [preface to Animal Farm](#)).

In this extract we find Toohey making his method of cultural destruction plain to an aspiring playwright, both of them knowing full well that the play in question is garbage,

“Ibsen is good,” said Ike.

“Sure he’s good, but suppose I didn’t like him. Suppose I wanted to stop people from seeing his plays. It would do me no good whatsoever to tell them so. But if I sold them the idea that you’re just as great as Ibsen – pretty soon they wouldn’t be able to tell the difference.”

“Jesus, can you do it?”

You can be sure he can, and did, frequently. And by this means, one man, well placed, can undermine and drive out all of true worth in a given field, as bad money drives out good. No one passes on their gold if people are accepting wooden nickels. Later, when the play is performed, we read this,

“The things being done on the stage were merely trite and crass; but the undercurrent made them frightening. There was an air about the ponderous inanities spoken, which the actors had absorbed like an infection; it was in their smirking faces, in the slyness of their voices, in

their untidy gestures. It was an air of inanities uttered as revelations and insolently demanding acceptance as such; an air, not of innocent presumption, but of conscious effrontery; as if the author knew the nature of his work and boasted of his power to make it appear as sublime in the minds of his audience and thus destroy the capacity for the sublime within them. The work justified the verdict of its sponsors: it brought laughs, it was amusing; it was an indecent joke, acted out not on the stage but in the audience. It was a pedestal from which a god had been torn, and in his place there stood, not Satan with a sword, but a corner lout sipping a bottle of Coca-Cola.”

Do this seem horribly familiar?

Peter Keating ends up a wreck. His career was initially bolstered by Toohey, who lavished fraudulent praise upon his works early in his career. But of late Toohey has dropped Keating completely. Keating, definitely not heroic, whines and receives this response from Toohey,

“I’m sorry to see that you haven’t understood me at all. In all these years, you’ve learned nothing of my principles. I don’t believe in individualism, Peter. I don’t believe that any one man is any one thing which everybody else can’t be. I believe we’re all equal and interchangeable. A position you hold today can be held by anybody and everybody tomorrow. Equalitarian rotation. Haven’t I always preached that to you? Why do you suppose I chose you? Why did I put you where you were? To protect the field from men who would become irreplaceable. To leave a chance for the Gus Webbs of the world. Why do you suppose I fought against – for instance – Howard Roark?”

Political discourse is replete with ambiguous terms; “individualism” is one of them. Both sides of the political divide can be accused of “individualism”, but the word has totally different meanings to each. In the following extract, Roark and newspaper proprietor Gail Wynand are discussing the broken-down Peter Keating, and Roark explains Rand’s peculiar take on selfishness versus selflessness, totally reversing their laudatory or pejorative norms,

“I’ve looked at him – at what’s left of him – and it’s helped me to understand. He’s paying the price and wondering for what sin and telling himself that he’s been too selfish. In what act or thought of his has there ever been a self? What was his aim in life? Greatness – in other people’s eyes. Fame, admiration, envy – all that which comes from others. Others dictated his convictions, which he did not hold, but was satisfied that others believed he held them. Others were his motive power and his prime concern. He didn’t want to be great, but to be thought great. He didn’t want to build, but to be admired as a builder. He borrowed from others in order to make an impression on others. That’s your actual selflessness. It’s his ego that he’s betrayed and given up. But everybody calls him selfish.”

Did you ever wonder in our politics today who are the useful idiots and who the evil geni? Here’s Toohey making it clear which he is, and which Peter Keating is,

““You make me sick”, said Toohey. “God, how you make me sick, all you hypocritical sentimentalists! You go along with me, you spout what I teach you, you profit by it – but you haven’t the grace to admit to yourself what you’re doing. You turn green when you see the truth. I suppose that’s in the nature of your natures and that’s precisely my chief weapon – but God, I get tired of it. I must allow myself a moment free of you. That’s what I have to put on an act for all my life – for mean little mediocrities like you. To protect your sensibilities, your posturings, your conscience and the peace of mind you haven’t got. That’s the price I

pay for what I want – but at least I know that I've got to pay it. And I have no illusions about the price or the purchase.

“What do you want, Ellsworth?”

“Power, Petey”.

In the next extract we have Toohey making absolutely explicit the strategy of degrading all standards as a means to undermine the enemy – those who would be independently heroic. Think of the decline of educational standards, “all must have prizes”; think of the replacement of beauty by ugliness and “shock value” in the arts.

“I shall rule”

“Whom...?”

“You. The world. It's only a matter of discovering the lever. If you learn how to rule one single man's soul, you can get the rest of mankind. It's the soul, Peter, the soul. Not whips or swords or fire or guns. That's why the Caesars, the Attilas, the Napoleons were fools and did not last. We will. The soul, Peter, is that which cannot be ruled. It must be broken.....There are many ways. Here's one. Make man feel small. Make him feel guilty. Kill his aspiration and his integrity.....Here's another. Kill man's sense of values. Kill his capacity to recognise greatness or to achieve it. Great men can't be ruled. We don't want any great men. Don't deny the conception of greatness. Destroy it from within. The great is the difficult, the rare, the exceptional. Set up standards of achievement open to all, to the least, to the most inept – and you stop the impetus to effort in all men, great or small. You stop all incentive to improvement, to excellence, to perfection. Laugh at Roark and hold Peter Keating as a great architect. You've destroyed architecture. Build up Lois Cook and you've destroyed literature. Hail Ike and you've destroyed the theatre.”

Gail Wynand, rich and powerful newspaper proprietor, and survivor of teenage years as a gang member and thug, had the capacity to be heroic himself – he was one of the few to appreciate and understand Roark – but he failed to make the grade because he was flawed, particularly by the fatal weakness of seeking power. He sold his soul by deliberately pandering to the downwardly spiralling popular taste. He built his newspaper business by doing so, but had no overt politics of his own. His staff, though, were another thing. We read, of Wynand,

‘He had known for several years the trend which his paper had embraced gradually, imperceptibly, without any directive from him. He had noticed the cautious “slanting” of news stories, the half-hints, the vague illusions, the peculiar adjectives peculiarly placed, the stressing of certain themes, the insertion of political conclusions where none was needed. If a story concerned a dialogue between an employer and an employee, the employer was made to appear guilty, simply through wording, no matter what the facts presented. If a sentence referred to the past, it was always “our dark past” or “our dead past”. If a statement involved someone's personal motive, it was always “goaded by selfishness” or “egged on by greed”. A crossword puzzle gave the definition of “obsolescent individuals” and the word came out as “capitalists”’.

Here's a remarkable passage in which Rand exposes the fraudulence of the right-left dichotomy, in the context of the second world war, particularly remarkable for being

published in 1943. In this passage we are reminded of the left's constant accusatory refrain of "fascist" whilst behaving in much the same way themselves. This is Toohey speaking,

"We've found the magic word. Collectivism. Look at Europe, you fool. Can't you see past the guff and recognise the essence? One country is dedicated to the proposition that man has no rights, that the collective is all. The individual held as evil, the mass – as God. No Motive and no virtue permitted – except that of service to the proletariat. That's one version. Here's another. A country dedicated to the proposition that man has no rights, that the State is all. The individual held as evil, the race – as God. No motive and no virtue permitted – except that of service to the race.... Watch the pincer movement. If you're sick of one version, we push you into the other. We get you coming and going. We've closed the doors. Heads, collectivism, and tails, collectivism. Fight the doctrine which slaughters the individual with a doctrine which slaughters the individual."

Rand uses Roark's trial as an opportunity for him to expound her perspective on the heroic individual. The hero creates, the "second hander" as Roark calls them, is parasitic.

"The creator originates. The parasite borrows. The creator faces nature alone. The parasite faces nature through an intermediary. The creator's concern is the conquest of nature. The parasite's concern is the conquest of men."

Here we are regaled with Rand's view of altruism as the root of all evil, and egoism as the essential feature of the hero. It's easy to understand why many people balk at that. Roark tells us,

"The first right on earth is the right of the ego. Man's first duty is to himself. His moral law is never to place his prime goal within the persons of others. His moral obligation is to do what he wishes, provided his wish does not depend primarily upon other men.... A man thinks and works alone. A man cannot rob, exploit or rule alone. Robbery, exploitation or ruling suppose victims. They imply dependence. They are the province of the second-hander. Rulers of men are not egoists. They create nothing. They exist entirely through the persons of others."

"From the beginning of history the two antagonists have stood face to face: the creator and the second-hander.... The contest has another name: the individual against the collective."

Hmm, I claim no great understanding of Rand's Objectivism. I can readily agree with the lauding of independence, creativity and adherence to personal standards of integrity. I will enthusiastically join in the condemnation of the wicked collectivist strategy of social deconstruction. But one feels there is an ethical dimension missing from Rand. Compassion, for example, ceases to be a virtue at all, unless it so happens in a given case that such an attitude coincides with one's best interests. But there is a weakness in this position which is shared with utilitarian morality, namely that it is unclear what these "best interests" are that one is advised to maximise. Rand had no truck with religion, but what if a person of deep faith regarded their best interests as being dependent upon following a religious path and belief? Rand would, I think, regard them as being in serious error, and probably seek to persuade them so. So it would seem her espousal of independence has limits, which I suppose she would argue under the need for rationality. Yet the materialistic, or scientific, position does not have the monopoly on rationality that its adherents invariably suppose – which

brings us right back to the individuals' right to decide for themselves. All far too hard for me to figure out.

Finally, although this is certainly a novel of ideas rather than of engaging characterisation, there are many adept touches, including the noble art of character portrayal in few words. For example,

“Eva Layton believed that her mission in life was to be the vanguard – it did not matter of what. Her method had always been to take a careless leap and land triumphantly far ahead of all others. Her philosophy consisted of one sentence – “I can get away with anything”. In conversation she paraphrased it to her favourite line: “I? I’m the day after tomorrow”. She was an expert horsewoman, a racing driver, a stunt pilot, a swimming champion. When she saw that the emphasis of the day had switched to the realm of ideas, she took another leap, as she did over any ditch. She landed well in front, in the latest. Having landed, she was amazed to find that there were people who questioned her feat. Nobody had ever questioned her other achievements. She acquired an impatient anger against all those who disagreed with her political views. It was a personal issue. She had to be right, she was the day after tomorrow.

Her husband, Mitchell Layton, hated her.”

Of the latter, Rand informs us,

“He could not forgive his country because it had given him a quarter of a billion dollars and then refused to grant him an equal amount of reverence.”

Excellent.