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The Fountainhead and the Spirit of Youth

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*Whatever their future, at the dawn of their lives,
men seek a noble vision of man's nature and of
life's potential.*

—Ayn Rand, Introduction to the Twenty-fifth
Anniversary Edition of *The Fountainhead* (xi)

According to Ayn Rand, young men's quest for a "noble vision of man's nature and of life's potential" helps to explain the enduring success of *The Fountainhead*. She identifies this "noble vision" as the "sense of life dramatized in *The Fountainhead*," what she calls "man-worship" (ix). Man-worshippers, she holds, are those who "see man's highest potential and strive to actualize it," those who are "dedicated to the *exaltation* of man's self-esteem and the *sacredness* of his happiness on earth" (x).

Ayn Rand thought it possible to grasp one's own potential introspectively, from one's own soul. But to *maintain* this sense of reverence for man's highest potential—especially in the face of a culture of mediocrity—more is often needed. To begin with, one also wants to know that someone else wants and *succeeds* in achieving the highest possible. One wants this, not to be reassured by others' approval, but to see that the values one seeks are real and can be achieved. For this reason, Ayn Rand claims that without the inspiration of her husband, Frank O'Connor, she herself would not have been able to maintain her sense of life or complete the novel "over a long span of years when there was nothing around us but a gray desert of people and events that evoked nothing but contempt and revulsion" (vi).

But she also observes that the ideal of man-worship is one that has "rarely been expressed in human history" and which is "virtually non-existent" in contemporary culture (x). So portrayal of the ideal is in short supply, but heavily demanded—especially by the young.

The Fountainhead has enduring appeal because it virtually corners the literary market in portraying this man-worshiping sense of life. It does this through the character of Howard Roark, whom Ayn Rand describes in her introduction as an ideal man. She remarks that in a young person's quest to find the "noble vision" of man and life,

There are very few guideposts to find. *The Fountainhead* is one of them.

This is one of the cardinal reasons of *The Fountainhead's* lasting appeal: it is a confirmation of the spirit of youth, proclaiming man's glory, showing how much is possible. (xi)

This essay will explore how *The Fountainhead* confirms the "spirit of youth," which Ayn Rand describes as a "sense of enormous expectation, the sense that one's life is important, that great achievements are within one's capacity, and that great things lie ahead" (xi). In essence, the spirit of youth is the spirit of *man*, i.e., the man-worshiping sense of life—but experienced by those who have not been corrupted by a society that works to oppose it.

The Fountainhead embodies a spirit of man-worship by giving us a portrait of a man worthy of such worship: Howard Roark. But in order to articulate for herself the nature of an ideal man, Ayn Rand tells us that she "had to define and present the kinds of premises and values that create the character of an ideal man and motivate his actions" (vii). In order to show how *The Fountainhead* succeeds in portraying Roark as ideal, this essay will, therefore, identify these premises and values.

Identifying them will also put a common criticism in its place. Critics of *The Fountainhead* often explain its popularity as resulting from "teen infatuation," a kind of rebellious "Ayn Rand phase" young readers eventually grow out of.¹ One critic writes that the book's "sub-Nietzschean assertiveness" is appealing mainly to "somewhat eccentric youngsters."² Another cynically urges that *The Fountainhead* is "better read when one is young enough to miss the point." This same critic confesses to having missed the point herself by "skipping over all the pages about egotism and altruism," and thinking the book was about an architect and his love life. She recounts that she lost interest in the book when she went to college and learned that "architects were, for the most part, not like Howard Roark" and that "altruism was not bad in moderation."³

It is fascinating that the attitude embraced by these critics bears a striking resemblance to that of the *villains* in the very book they regard as so unrealistic. We can imagine Ellsworth Toohey himself scoffing at the ambitions of his niece, Catherine Halsey,

with much the same attitude. But, as we shall see, Toohey's influence does not correct foolish errors of the young—it works to destroy their ambitions and their happiness.

The critics may not always seek this destruction in the way that Toohey does, but even so their attitude results from the acceptance of Toohey's pernicious ideals. While these ideals are destructive of the spirit of youth, this spirit need not be destroyed—not so long as Roark's ideals exist as an alternative, especially not if Roark's ideals are understood explicitly.

ROARK'S EMBODIMENT OF THE SPIRIT OF YOUTH

Ayn Rand's most explicit statement about the spirit of youth was formulated in a nonfiction essay published a quarter-century after *The Fountainhead*: “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” which first appeared in *The Objectivist* in 1969. The essay is a commentary on a *New York Times* account of a sudden but limited outburst of political dissent in the Soviet Union in the wake of the “Prague spring” of 1968.⁴ Five young Russian dissidents had spoken out against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, in the face of certain prosecution and exile. Impressed by the strength of their conviction, she named three hallmarks of the spirit of youth: idealism, independence, and goodwill. I will draw on Ayn Rand's discussion of each of these hallmarks to show how the spirit of youth is exemplified by Roark. Each represents one of the important premises or values motivating Roark, which make him an ideal man.

Roark's Seriousness about Ideas

Ayn Rand states that the first trait, seriousness about ideas, explains the otherwise “inexplicable” willingness of the young dissidents to fight for their ideals in the face of the opposition they encountered:

There is a fundamental conviction which some people never acquire, some hold only in their youth, and a few hold to the end of their days—the conviction that *ideas matter*. . . . That ideas matter means that knowledge matters, that truth matters, that one's mind matters. And the radiance of that certainty, in the process of growing up, is the best aspect of youth.⁵

“Idealism” has long been associated with youth, but usually as a lofty, impractical naiveté. Ayn Rand, by contrast, characterizes idealism more precisely as “taking ideas seriously,” or “intending to live by, to *practice*, any idea you accept as true.”⁶

One of the first scenes in the novel, Roark’s meeting with the Dean, introduces the reader to his seriousness about ideas. Roark’s self-described “insubordination”—submitting assignments in his own style, rather than the assigned, conventional styles—has led to his expulsion from Stanton. The Dean offers to readmit Roark if he agrees to take a year off to “grow up,” but Roark declines and states his intention to find work in architecture on his own. When the Dean criticizes him for wishing to improve upon the standards of the past, Roark says that he has no concern for other people’s standards, but sets his own (23–24). Roark clearly treats knowledge, truth, and the judgment of his mind seriously, displaying the “radiance” of certainty that Ayn Rand describes as the “best aspect of youth.”

The Dean, of course, thinks Roark’s attitude is “childish,” “naive,” “silly,” and insists that because Roark is only twenty-two, he will “outgrow all that” (22–25). (He is the first negative character in *The Fountainhead* whom the critics will come to mimic.) Roark, of course, does *not* “outgrow all that.” Against the Dean’s advice, he goes to work for the unpopular Henry Cameron, only to lose the job after Cameron loses commissions and becomes ill. He is fired from the job he takes with Francon and Heyer when he refuses to design in a conventional style. He is fired again by John Erik Snyte when he breaks rank to reveal his unadulterated design for the Heller house. Roark even refuses the commission from the Manhattan Bank building—his last hope at keeping his office open—when he is told he must compromise his design to conform to classical sensibilities. Instead of taking the money and publicity the job might have brought, he opts to work as a day laborer in a quarry. So radiant is Roark’s certainty here that he is willing to stake his career on it.

From these examples, one might conclude that Roark’s idealism requires renunciation. Indeed, several characters in *The Fountainhead* get just this impression. The Dean characterizes Roark’s ambition as a kind of impractical childish rebelliousness. Weidler, the middleman for the Manhattan Bank commission, says Roark’s rejection of the bank job is “fanatical and selfless” (197). And Peter Keating wonders why Roark has to be “so damn serious”—even “so old” (!)—suggesting that Roark’s “fighting and renunciation” makes him surrender all that is “simple and pleasant” (89).

But this impression is false. Roark explains to the Dean that if he does not derive personal joy from his work, he will be

condemning himself to “sixty years of torture.” Responding to the claim that his rejection of the Manhattan Bank commission was “fanatical and selfless,” he tells Weidler that “that was the most selfish thing you’ve ever seen a man do” (197). Roark clearly *denies* that he is renouncing anything.

There is a basis for his denial. Responding to the Dean’s claim that adhering to personal standards would be “impractical,” Roark explains that *what* he intends to practice is building his own way (the way that allows him to take joy in the work itself), and that those clients who want his designs will come to him. And indeed they do. The Heller house serves as a beacon to attract Roark’s kind of men, such as Roger Enright. The Enright House then precipitates a series of commissions, culminating in Roark’s achievement of steady success after the Monadnock Valley affair.

Interestingly, *Keating’s* impression that Roark’s idealism involves renunciation is not simply a result of observing Roark’s initial struggle. What he means by renunciation is revealed in the following exchange:

“Oh, you’ll never renounce anything! You’d walk over corpses for what you want. But it’s what you’ve renounced by never wanting it.”

“That’s because you can’t want both.” (89)

Here Keating and the Dean exhibit profound agreement, even while they differ on the question of whether Roark seems too old or too childish. In their view, society’s standards of value—not one’s own—are the only standards worth considering, and one’s only choice is to accede to them in comfort, or to renounce them and fight a desperate and impractical battle.⁷

Roark’s youthful idealism, then, is far from the cliché of mindlessly embracing—and then outgrowing—some transient, hopeless cause. As Keating observes, all that Roark renounces is the need for social approval—by never wanting it in the first place. His attitude exhibits the second hallmark of youth: independence.

Roark’s Independence

Commenting on the *Times’s* claim that the Russian dissidents had rejected their society’s standards through “an inexplicable personal alchemy,” Ayn Rand writes that

Young persons who hold [the conviction of the supremacy of ideas, of truth] do not have to “throw off the leading conformity of the only society they have known.” They do not conform in the first place: they judge and evaluate; if they accept any

part of the prevalent social trends, it is through intellectual agreement (which may be mistaken), not through conformity.⁸

Just as serious young people do not conform in the first place, Roark has “renounced” social approval “by never wanting it” in the first place. Indeed all the previous examples of Roark’s seriousness about ideas are examples of his independence.⁹ Roark’s architectural standards are the products of his own thinking, not of tradition or fashion: “The buildings were not Classical, they were not Gothic, they were not Renaissance. They were only Howard Roark” (19). His pursuit of work in accordance with these standards is motivated by pursuit of his own joy, not by society’s approval through money or fame. As he tells the Dean, he doesn’t care about the opinions of men on the street or of the Dean (23, 26). In other words, his judgment and values are his own: he is *independent*.

Furthermore, those like the Dean and Keating who engage in pragmatic compromise are thereby dependent on the judgment of others. In a later conversation with Wynand, Roark observes that while most consider men like Keating to be selfish, Keating’s only aim has been to achieve “Greatness—in other people’s eyes” (605). Keating wants to be a great architect, not in order to build great buildings—but to be admired and envied by others. He wants money, not to support his own personal luxury, but to impress or stun others.

By ceding their independent judgment to others, these allegedly “practical” men come to embody actual selflessness. As Roark observes, second-handers like Keating lose all concern with what they desire and what they think is true: they literally lose their self, their ego. In a discussion with Wynand, Roark notes that it is impossible for men to achieve the altruistic goal of “absolute humility,” of surrendering every form of self-esteem. As a result, they accept altruism the only way they can: “By seeking self-esteem through others” (607). By substituting the desires of their neighbors for their own, it comes as no surprise that they complain of never finding happiness: “Every form of happiness is private,” says Roark (607).

The anticonformists of *The Fountainhead*—like Lois Cook, Ike the Genius, Gus Webb, and the other avant-garde artists Toohy collects in his various art councils—have also abandoned their independence. Since they define their standards in opposition to society’s, it is society that sets the terms. Some anticonformists are simply “exhibitionists trying to attract attention,” to use the Dean’s inapt description of Roark. Others gain a sense of nihilistic glee by defiling society’s standards, enjoying the recognition that

comes from *disapproval*. In either case, their motivation is social recognition of one kind or another.

But Roark knows that not all men are or need be second-handers. Waiting patiently to find his own “kind of people” (159), he projects a sense of goodwill toward men.

Roark’s Goodwill

Considering the peculiar fact that the Russian dissidents sought to debate political issues with an unlikely audience—the secret police—Ayn Rand observes that their willingness was a further consequence of their seriousness about ideas:

The dedication to ideas leads, in practice, to an almost involuntary goodwill toward men—or rather to something deeper and more important, which is the root of goodwill: *respect*. It leads to the attitude, in individual encounters, of treating men as rational beings, on the unstated premise that a man is innocent until proved guilty, that he is not evil until he has proved himself to be; “evil,” in terms of this attitude, means closed to the power of ideas, i.e., of reason.¹⁰

Like the Russian dissidents, Roark sometimes extends benevolence to those who do not deserve it (like Keating). But before discussing this, it is instructive to examine his benevolence toward friends and comrades.

Consider Roark’s first meeting with Mike Donnigan. Supervising the construction of a building for Francon and Heyer, Roark finds Mike installing conduits inefficiently and offers advice. Mike responds incredulously, objecting that a “punk” like Roark, one of the “college smarties,” has the audacity to give advice on how to do a man’s work (92). Roark doesn’t flinch but proceeds to demonstrate the task he has recommended, easily and with confidence. Mike is impressed and concedes victory, which Roark acknowledges with a good-natured smile. On their next encounter, Mike offers to buy Roark a beer, and he agrees. When they discover that they each worship competence and ability, a new friendship is born. Roark’s benevolence toward Mike has allowed him to find one of his kind of men.

Roark’s goodwill toward Mike is rooted in his other youthful traits. First and most importantly, Roark’s independent idealism leads him to a confidence in his own efficacy, demonstrated in this scene by his proficiency in demonstrating the skill. When relating with others, he experiences this confidence as a kind of overflowing of his own potential, from which he is happy

to see others benefit. We see the same quality in Roark's interaction with his staff in Clayton, Ohio, where Dominique observes a worker asking for advice. Roark responds with an easy competence ("That's easy"), and in the interaction, Dominique feels "the quality of Roark's relation to that man, to all the other men in that pit, and odd sense of loyalty and of brotherhood, but not the kind she had ever heard named by these words" (464).

Second, and as a consequence, Roark is happy to grant the benefit of his efficacy to any man when he recognizes the same efficacy (or the potential for it) in them. An earlier scene, also featuring Roark's staff, demonstrates that Roark related to them not by inquiring about their personal lives, but by responding to their creative capacity. If men demonstrate this capacity, Roark grants his benevolence "not as a gift, but as a debt . . . not as affection, but as recognition." This outlook "bred an immense feeling of self-respect within every man in the office" (309).

Roark's self-confidence is so profound—and the benevolence that results, so natural—that he extends his assistance even to those, like Peter Keating, who would not otherwise warrant it. Throughout college and his career, Roark helps Keating with assignments and design problems. Even toward the end, Roark agrees to design Cortlandt Homes for Keating. While Roark's primary motivation is the pleasure of solving the design problem involved in the project, he deals with Keating encouragingly. He understands that Keating's confession of reliance on Roark represents a moment of honesty and a chance to do "something wonderful," "starting from the beginning" and collaborating as partners in the authentic way (581). Keating is puzzled about why Roark is "the most egotistical and the kindest man" he knows. He does not realize that Roark is kind *because* he is "egotistical": his own supreme self-confidence precludes feeling threatened or aggrieved by others in any serious way.

A final example of youthful benevolence is found in a minor but memorable character, who interacts with Roark but once: the boy on the bicycle. The scene, set in the woods outside of Roark's Monadnock Valley homes, provides Ayn Rand's entire view of youth in microcosm. The boy has just graduated from college and does not fully recognize that he has come to the woods to "decide whether life was worth living" (503). He thinks it must be if the earth can look as beautiful as it does—but that he only feels this way at present because he has "seen no sign of men for hours" (503). In particular he has found no inspiration in the message of service and self-sacrifice he has been taught in college. He is angry that he should find inspiration only by escaping from men, because he does not want to have to despise them. He wants

to “love and admire them”—but dreads the vulgarity he has come to expect from men (504). But he does not give up hope:

He had always wanted to write music, and he could give no other identity to the thing he sought. If you want to know what it is, he told himself, listen to the first phrases of Tchaikovsky’s *First Concerto*—or the last movements of Rachmaninoff’s *Second*. Men have not found the words for it nor the deed nor the thought, but they have found the music. Let me see that in one single act of man on earth. Let me see it made real. Let me see the answer to the promise of that music. Not servants nor those served; not altars and immolations; but the final, the fulfilled, innocent of pain. Don’t help me or serve me, but let me see it once, because I need it. Don’t work for my happiness, my brothers—show me yours—show me that it is possible—show me your achievement—and the knowledge will give me courage for mine. (503–4)

The boy on the bicycle symbolizes not only the spirit, but the *struggle* of youth surrounded by a world of mediocrity and evil. Like the Russian dissidents in “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” the boy’s ambitions are opposed by his elders. Like these dissidents, the boy also takes his elders’ ideals seriously, but is tortured in the attempt to practice them. And like the dissidents, who saw hope for man “abroad,” it is also true for the boy that “the mere knowledge that a nobler way of life is possible somewhere, redeems the human race in one’s mind.”¹¹ The boy finds this knowledge when he stumbles upon Monadnock Valley—and meets Roark, its creator. Through this encounter, he acquires “the courage to face a lifetime” (506).

The boy is not (yet) in Roark’s position. Still unsure of what he is to make of his life, he does not yet have Roark’s degree of self-confidence. Thus he needs Roark’s example in a way Roark doesn’t need from others. He wants to see the achievement of his brothers, to give him courage for his own. Without Roark’s inspiration, it is possible that the boy would be run down by society and the ideals of his elders. As Ayn Rand remarks in her Twenty-fifth Anniversary Introduction,

Some give up at the first touch of pressure; some sell out; some run down by imperceptible degrees and lose their fire, never knowing when or how they lost it. Then all of these vanish in the vast swamp of their elders who tell them persistently that maturity

consists of abandoning one's mind; security, of abandoning one's values; practicality, of losing self-esteem. (xi)

Roark, however, is the heroic exception, one of the few who "hold on and move on, knowing that that fire is not to be betrayed, learning how to give it shape, purpose and reality" (xi). His example inspires not only the boy, but Cameron, Mallory, Wynand, and most significantly, Dominique.¹²

Not every young person is fortunate enough to meet men like Roark. What happens when youth are deprived of such examples and presented ideals—like the ideals of selflessness offered by the boy's elders—which repudiate the very spirit of youth? To see the effects that they have on young people—and thus on man in general—we must now turn to Roark's antithesis, Ellsworth Toohey.

TOOHEY'S DESTRUCTION OF THE SPIRIT OF YOUTH

There is no point in detailing the variety of ways in which Toohey has abandoned the spirit of youth in his own soul. They are too obvious (and too uninspiring) to dwell on. Here we can follow Toohey's own advice: "Don't bother to examine a folly—ask yourself only what it accomplishes" (636). The example of Toohey's character is relevant for our purposes insofar as it sheds light on the nature of the ideals to which the boy on the bicycle is struggling to find an alternative.

Toohey is the foremost advocate in *The Fountainhead* of the ideal of a "life of service and self-sacrifice." Aside from being a prominent cultural critic who spreads these ideals publicly, Toohey dispenses vocational advice directly to the young. He counsels the "grown-up" renunciation of "hysterical" passions and the embrace of promiscuous lust. We can even imagine that it was the boy on the bicycle who received the following advice from Toohey:

No, I wouldn't advise you to continue with your music. The fact that it comes to you so easily is a sure sign that your talent is only a superficial one. That's just the trouble—that you love it. Don't you think that sounds like a childish reason? Give it up. Yes, even if it hurts like hell. (301–2)

Given advice like this, we are told that "some of his protégés did quite well, others failed. Only one committed suicide" (302).

The record of Toohey's attempted destruction is too vast to catalogue here. Most obviously, he seeks to destroy Roark by pitting Dominique against him. But Roark's heroic ability and idealism enable him to prevail over Toohey. Toohey's niece, Catherine Halsey, does not possess Roark's ability and does not fare so well. The example of Toohey's destruction of her thus illustrates the normal consequences of his ideals.

When we first meet the young Catherine, stepping off the train in New York, her face projects a momentary beauty suggesting that

. . . the future were opening before her and its glow were already upon her forehead, as if she were eager and proud and ready to meet it. It was one of those rare moments when the humblest person knows suddenly what it means to feel as the center of the universe, and is made beautiful by the knowledge, and the world—in the eyes of witnesses—looks like a better place for having such a center. (303)

Toohey had not planned on keeping Catherine at his home after the death of her mother, but when he sees her for the first time, projecting this attitude, he changes his mind. He will not have anyone feeling as the center of the universe. Catherine is to be another of his victims.

Toohey's measures against Catherine range from short-term tactics to long-range strategy. Tactically, he slowly chips away at her life's ambitions—both professional and romantic—through subtle disparagement and overt humor. Strategically, he teaches Catherine altruistic ideals.

From early on, Toohey discourages Catherine from getting her own job or going to college. When she insists on a job, he reluctantly pays her for menial work to be done at home. Later when he does arrange a job for her, it is as a social worker, a career which soon leads to her frustration, as we shall see momentarily.

Likewise, Toohey belittles Catherine's open affection for Keating, calling him her "T-square Romeo" (60). Reacting to Keating's delay of their wedding and recalling how "Uncle Ellsworth laughed so much" at the prospect of the marriage, she suggests that perhaps Toohey was correct: "perhaps we were being foolish, we're both so young" (157). Toohey keeps on laughing in the presence of both Catherine and Keating, mocking the idea of marriage as mundane and domestic, child-rearing as a "nuisance" (235), and stories of young love as the "tritest" ever told (236).

Meanwhile, Toohey revels in subtle jokes that diminish Catherine's looks and manners. His sense of humor is used

unsparingly against *any* manifestations of serious reverence: “Kill reverence and you’ve killed the hero in man,” he later says to Peter Keating (636).¹³

Catherine might have withstood her uncle’s disparagement. She might have overcome even the obstacles he had erected to her career and romance, especially if Keating had gone through with their wedding. But Toohey’s long-term strategy of instilling altruistic ideals made overcoming these obstacles exceedingly difficult. He knows that with this strategy, he can harness Catherine’s own idealism and use it against her. As he tells Keating, no man has achieved or will ever achieve the ideal of altruism, and preaching it as an ideal instills in a man a sense “of guilt, of sin, of his own unworthiness.” Because the ideal cannot be achieved, one therefore “gives up eventually all ideals, all aspiration, all sense of his personal value” (635).

Having been taught selflessness for years—and without any idea of an alternative moral code or the genius to discover one for herself—Catherine *does* begin to give up her sense of idealism, and the resulting decline is noticeable. Earlier in the story, Keating had observed that Catherine, at the time almost twenty, “looked no older than she had looked at seventeen” (83). Later, after years of social work and Toohey, we are told that at twenty-six “she looked like a woman trying to hide the fact of being over thirty” (359).

At the age of twenty-six, Catherine presents Toohey with the very dilemma he had intended altruism to engender in her. She says that from an early age, she had always “wanted to do right,” while acknowledging that it might look “terribly childish” to Toohey (361). She observes that the question of *what* is right is one that is too big for her to answer, but that her uncle and men for centuries have been claiming that the ideal is selflessness (361–62). So she strove for this ideal, but now finds that she is unhappy. She finds that she wants to be thanked for her service to the poor, that she only likes the poor who are servile toward her. She resents those who find lives for themselves, as they remind her of her own abandoned college ambitions. Even in her devotion to selfless ideals, there is still this mangled remnant of her self-esteem (362–63).

Toohey responds to Catherine’s dilemma by announcing that her problem is that she is practicing the ideal of altruism as if *it* were a selfish goal. Her problem is *wanting* to be virtuous. Instead, “she must stop wanting *anything*” (364)—in effect, she must stop pursuing ideals of any kind. As a further bit of fictitious rationalization, Toohey again plays on the idea that the pursuit of ambitions—even *moral* ambitions—is childish. He says that even her sense of guilt is an expression of egoistic concern for her own virtue, that these feelings are “growing pains,” but that “[a]ll

growth demands destruction” (364–65). Only when Catherine cares no more, when she has lost her self-identity, will she paradoxically “know the kind of happiness” or “spiritual grandeur” that Toohey has promised (365).

Even after this onslaught, Catherine retains an element of her original dignity. When Keating finally proposes that they elope together, she reasserts herself against Toohey, declaring that she is not afraid of him (368). But at this point the odds are stacked against her. Almost immediately Keating leaves Catherine to marry Dominique (in no small part because of Toohey’s own scheming). Catherine is now at the peak of her vulnerability—and at the mercy of Toohey. She surrenders to him, and her decline is precipitous.

The death knell sounds for Catherine’s spirit when she is put in charge of occupational therapy at the Stoddard Home for Subnormal Children. When the most hopeless of the subnormal children achieves some ordinary task, Catherine reveals how much she has lost by confessing to what she now regards as valuable “self-expression”:

Isn’t it wonderful and moving! There’s no telling
how far the child will go with proper
encouragement. Think of what happens to their little
souls if they are frustrated in their creative instincts!
It’s so important not to deny them a chance for self-
expression. (386–87)

This revelation is ironic on several levels. Catherine is celebrating the “self-expression” of the lowest of the subnormal children—while slum children with agile bodies and intelligent eyes “gaze wistfully” at the facilities of the Stoddard Home—while Steven Mallory is relegated once again to poverty—while Roark’s Stoddard Temple has been defiled—and, of course, while Catherine *herself* has now quelled her last gasp of self-expression.

This irony reminds us of a passage from “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” in which Ayn Rand condemns advocates of selflessness who claim to be motivated by “compassion,” noting the fate of the young idealistic men of ability who never benefit from any such compassion:

They perish gradually, giving up, extinguishing
their minds before they have a chance to grasp the
nature of the evil they are facing. In lonely agony,
they go from confident eagerness to bewilderment
to indignation to resignation—to obscurity. And
while their elders putter about, conserving redwood
forests and building sanctuaries for mallard ducks,

nobody notices those youths as they drop out of sight one by one, like sparks vanishing in limitless black space; nobody builds sanctuaries for the best of the human species.¹⁴

When we last see Catherine, in her final meeting with Keating, she has morphed into a miniature, humorless version of her uncle. When Keating expresses his sorrow for how he treated Catherine, she confesses that of course she suffered. Now, however, she says this was “foolish,” and that now that she and Keating are “grown-up, rational people, nothing is too serious” (597–98). “Nothing is too serious” is Toohey’s expression to the letter (636). Catherine *has* forgotten her identity and the name of her soul—only no gates of spiritual grandeur seem to have opened. Such is the dead end of the ideal of selflessness.

Fortunately, no one needs to share in Catherine’s fate. The popularity of *The Fountainhead* bears witness to the possibility of an alternative.

UNCHANGING YOUTH

We are now in a position to understand fully *The Fountainhead*’s enduring popularity.

In the above, I have shown how Roark’s character embodies youthful idealism, independence, and benevolence. Ayn Rand described the spirit of youth, the view with which most men start out in life, as “a sense of enormous expectation, the sense that one’s life is important, that great achievements are within one’s capacity, and that great things lie ahead.” We can now see that the reason men hold this view is that their independent idealism gives them confidence in their own capacity—and the resulting benevolence gives them an expectation to find it in others. This is why they believe great things lie ahead.

But why do young readers so desperately want to see a fictional character who displays these traits? The answer is: to experience what the boy on the bicycle experiences by seeing Monadnock Valley and meeting Roark. Whereas it is primarily the architectural beauty of Monadnock that inspires the boy, it is Roark himself who inspires the young reader. And, whereas architectural beauty has universal esthetic appeal, the contemplation of Roark is particularly relevant to a young reader, because Roark’s story is *about* the very struggle the young reader undergoes on a daily basis: the struggle with elders and a society that enshrines mediocrity at the expense of excellence.

As I claimed in the introductory section, *The Fountainhead* offers hungry readers a commodity in short supply: the sense of

uplift that comes from contemplating an ideal man. We have now seen that what makes Roark ideal is independent adherence *to* his ideals. But why does the contemplation of such a man provide a sense of uplift? The answer derives from the particular nature of the literary art.

Ayn Rand discusses the role of Romantic literature in a young person's development in her essay "Art and Moral Treason." In particular, she notes that a child cannot learn the concept of moral values from the "chaotic, bewildering, contradictory evidence offered by the adults in his day-by-day experience," as he lacks the ability to sift through this evidence and abstract the good from the bad. Therefore the child's major "source and demonstration" of morality is Romantic art, especially literature. This literature provides not moral rules, but "the image of a moral *person*—i.e., the *concretized abstraction* of a moral ideal, . . . a concrete, directly perceivable answer to the very abstract question which a child senses, but cannot yet conceptualize: What kind of person is moral and what kind of life does he lead?"¹⁵

The sense of uplift derived from contemplating the character of Roark is not a result of being swept away in some emotional torrent. Instead the reader is presented with a specific image, selected for its role in presenting the essence of certain moral values. In this way, the child learns not abstractions, but "the pre-condition and the incentive for the later understanding of such principles: the emotional experience of admiration for man's highest potential, the experience of *looking up* to a hero."¹⁶ The reader does not necessarily know that he is examining the traits of idealism, independence, and benevolence, but his attention is drawn to actions that in fact express them and make their nature accessible. The emotional response is a consequence of the reader's *own* conviction that his life and ideas are important—and the rare opportunity of seeing these values clarified so crisply, when he is otherwise offered only the "chaotic, bewildering, contradictory evidence" of the rest of the world. Perhaps the reader shares the same sense that the young photographer in *The Fountainhead* experiences when *he* sees Roark:

[H]e had always wondered why the sensations one felt in dreams were so much more intense than anything one could experience in waking reality . . . and what was that extra quality which could never be recaptured afterward. . . . He thought of that because he saw that extra quality for the first time in waking existence, he saw it in Roark's face lifted to the building. (307–8)

Roark's story is particularly inspiring to the young reader because it helps to demonstrate that this dreamlike quality can be made real—that the struggles of youth can be *won*. Presented with Roark's idealism, and the impotence of the second-handers who oppose him, the reader is shown that youthful ideals do not need to be abandoned, that man's youthful state is his natural and proper state. Steven Mallory sees this when he says of Roark that

I often think that he's the only one of us who's achieved immortality. . . . I think he is what the conception really means. You know how people long to be eternal. But they die with every day that passes. When you meet them, they're not what you met last. In any given hour, they kill some part of themselves. They change, they deny, they contradict—and they call it growth. At the end there's nothing left, nothing unreversed or unbetrayed. . . . But Howard—one can imagine him existing forever. (452)

Even Keating realizes this, when he realizes in a moment of honesty that Roark is “a creature glad to be alive.” It is in the same moment that he recants his original criticism of Roark and says, “You're . . . so young, Howard. . . . You're so young. . . . Once I reproached you for being too old and serious” (581).

Who is it that, in Mallory's words, calls denial and contradiction “growth”? The same people who think idealism is foolish—the same critics who think the readers who respond to the idealism of *The Fountainhead* are going through a “phase.” They share the same attitude—and error—of the compromisers and villains of *The Fountainhead*. It is Toohey who says that “all growth demands destruction.” The Dean and Keating do not speak so self-consciously, but they concede society's (Toohey's) standard of maturity and of the morally ideal. Earlier, Keating sees Roark as too old and serious because he associates the seriousness of his idealism with *renunciation*—the same ideal encouraged by the conventional morality of selflessness. But Roark's ideals are not conventional—or selfless. The Dean sees Roark precisely as critics see readers of *The Fountainhead*, as foolish or childish. He *also* must associate idealism with renunciation, except that, being older and “wiser,” he sees the ideal of selflessness as impossible to achieve. But Roark is not selfless, so neither he, nor readers of *The Fountainhead*, are embracing an impossible ideal. There is no reason to accuse them of foolishness. The accusation is merely a confession of the Dean's and the Dean-like critics' own foolish surrender to conventional standards.

Of course it is impossible to appreciate the possibility and practicality of enduring youthful idealism unless one examines the ideals that make it possible, the ideals that offer an alternative to conventional ideals of selflessness. One must, as Ayn Rand puts it in “Art and Moral Treason,” *translate* one’s sense of life “into adult, conceptual terms.”¹⁷ Ayn Rand held that a sense of life was a preconceptual grasp of life’s deepest questions about the nature of man and the universe, i.e., an implicit *philosophy*. To translate the man-worshiping sense of life into conceptual terms, therefore, is to validate Man’s life as the standard of value, philosophically. For this, readers of *The Fountainhead* are encouraged to consult *Atlas Shrugged*.

But even after one acquires a philosophic understanding, one still requires a concretization of one’s ideals. The appeal of Romantic art, and of *The Fountainhead*, is therefore truly *enduring*. Youth of every new generation will continue to read and find inspiration in it—and those originally inspired by it (such as this author) will continue to re-read it, again and again: “If man is to gain and keep a moral stature, he needs an image of the ideal, from the first thinking day of his life to the last.”¹⁸

Or, as Ayn Rand writes in *Atlas Shrugged*, “To hold an unchanging youth is to reach, at the end, the vision with which one started.”¹⁹

NOTES

1. Phil Kloer, “Author’s philosophy, influence still hold weight with masses,” *Cox News Service*, 1 February 2005.

2. Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 62–63.

3. Nora Ephron, “A Strange Kind of Simplicity,” *New York Times Book Review*, 5 May 1968, BR8.

4. Henry Kamm, “‘For Three Minutes I Felt Free,’” *New York Times*, 13 October 1968, E7. Reprinted with Ayn Rand, “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” in Ayn Rand, *Return of the Primitive: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, ed. Peter Schwartz (New York: Plume, 1999), 119–21.

5. Ayn Rand, “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” 122.

6. Ayn Rand, “Philosophical Detection,” *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Signet, 1982), 16.

7. Throughout the novel, Roark is concerned to answer the question of *why* the Dean and Keating adhere so slavishly to society’s standards. He works to learn the “principle behind the Dean,” the “central impulse” in other men that accounts for “some important difference between his actions and theirs” (27), the difference between the “creator” and the “second-hander.” This shows that his seriousness

about ideas is not only an ambition to abide by his architectural standards, but also the commitment to evaluate the ideas that make men like the Dean and Keating possible.

8. Ayn Rand, “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” 123.

9. It is not an accident that the examples of Roark’s seriousness about ideas are the same as the examples of his independence. The two traits are closely related. Being serious about ideas means the willingness to *act* on one’s own best judgment; independence means acting on *one’s own* best judgment. So seriousness and independence refer to the same character traits, but from a different perspective.

10. Ayn Rand, “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” 124.

11. Ayn Rand, “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” 126.

12. Of course Wynand—unlike the others listed here—does not succeed in following Roark’s lead to the end. He gives in to the board of the *Banner* and ceases his defense of Roark. But even after giving in, Wynand realizes Roark was right after he is acquitted in the Cortlandt trial.

13. See Robert Mayhew, “Humor in *The Fountainhead*,” in the present volume.

14. Ayn Rand, “The ‘Inexplicable Personal Alchemy,’” 128.

15. Ayn Rand, “Art and Moral Treason,” *The Romantic Manifesto*, revised edition (New York: Signet 1971), 146.

16. Ayn Rand, “Art and Moral Treason,” 146.

17. Ayn Rand, “Art and Moral Treason,” 147.

18. Ayn Rand, “Art and Moral Treason,” 147.

19. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 35th anniversary edition, (New York: Signet, 1996), 669. I wish to acknowledge the kind assistance of the following individuals: Robert Mayhew, for offering invaluable advice on how to transform an extremely rough idea into a serious paper; Greg Salmieri, for advice on the execution of Robert’s idea, and for offering insightful commentary on both philosophic content and on the clarity and accuracy of my writing; and Marc Baer, whose keen editorial eye helped to exorcise numerous devils from my details.