10

Humor in *The Fountainhead*

Robert Mayhew

"Howard Roark laughed." These opening words of *The Fountainhead* might momentarily suggest to a first-time reader that the novel is comic and/or that humor is an important part of Roark's character. But neither is the case. As Ayn Rand stated emphatically humor does not play a major role in her novels nor in the lives of the heroes in them.[1] This is certainly true of *The Fountainhead*, her first presentation of an ideal man. Its theme and tone are serious; it is an earnest work of reverence for man the hero. And as one character in *The Fountainhead* puts it: "One doesn't reverence with a giggle" (636). Further, among the notes she made on Roark in preparing to write *The Fountainhead*, she wrote: "Laughs seldom. Does not joke. When he does—it is merely a quiet, indifferent kind of sarcasm."[2]

Nevertheless, there is a lot of humor in *The Fountainhead*, which is Ayn Rand's most satirical novel,[3] and the humor is directed at the unoriginal, the ugly, the non-heroic, the evil. Here are five examples: When Mrs. Keating informs Roark that the Dean has called, she adds, "The Dean himself through his secretary" (17). The Peabody Post Office "was the only structure anyone had ever known Professor Peterkin to have erected, before he sacrificed his practice to the responsibilities of teaching" (30). A similar humorous remark is made at the end of this description of one of Guy Francon's buildings:

> The Frink National Bank Building displayed the entire history of Roman art in well-chosen specimens; for a long time it had been considered the best building of the city, because no other structure could boast a single Classical item which it did not possess. It offered so many columns, pediments, friezes, tripods, gladiators, urns and volutes that it looked as if it had not been built of white marble, but squeezed out of a pastry tube. It was, however, built of white marble. . . . The Frink National Bank Building . . . was a great success. It had been so great a success that it was the last structure Guy Francon ever designed; its prestige spared him the bother from then on. (43)

Another architect has an entire paragraph devoted to his physical appearance:

> Ralston Holcombe had no visible neck, but his chin took care of that. His chin and jaws formed an unbroken arc, resting on his chest. His cheeks were pink, soft to the touch, with irresilient softness of age, like the skin of a peach that has been scalded. His rich hair rose over his forehead and fell to his shoulders in the sweep of a medieval mane. It left dandruff on the back of his collar. (113)

We are told that Eve Layton, the wife of multimillionaire Mitch Layton, "had the special faculty of making satin and perfume appear as modern as an aluminum table top. She was Venus rising out of a submarine hatch. . . . [She] believed that her mission in life was to be the vanguard—it did not matter of what" (555).

This is merely a sample. The aim of this essay is to examine (and further illustrate) the humor in *The Fountainhead.*

THE OPENING OF *THE FOUNTAINHEAD*, AND AYN RAND ON HUMOR

"Howard Roark laughed." At what was he laughing? A few paragraphs later, Ayn Rand tells us: "He laughed at the thing that had happened to him that morning and at the things which now lay ahead" (15). We later learn: "That morning he had been expelled from the Architectural School of the Stanton Institute of Technology." So he laughs at his expulsion. But then he stops laughing.

> He did not laugh as his eyes stopped in awareness of the earth around him. . . . He looked at the granite. To be cut, he thought, and made into walls. He looked at a tree. To be split and made into rafters. He looked at a streak of rust on the stone and thought of iron ore under the ground. To be melted and to emerge as girders against the sky. (15–16)

There are things an Ayn Rand hero will laugh at, and things he will not laugh at.

These lines from the opening chapter of *The Fountainhead* illustrate Ayn Rand's conviction that "Humor is the denial of metaphysical importance to that which you laugh at."[4] It involves the denial of that which contradicts what she calls one's metaphysical value-judgments—one's appraisal of reality and man's relationship to it.[5] Laughter comes (at least in part) from an awareness of that which does not fit your view of reality; it is the response that accompanies the recognition of the insignificance of something and the consequent dismissal of it.

This conception of humor becomes clearer when we consider the distinction Ayn Rand makes between the metaphysical and the man-made.

> It is the metaphysically given that must be accepted: it cannot be changed. It is the man-made that must never be accepted uncritically: it must be judged, then accepted or rejected and changed when necessary. Man is not omniscient or infallible: he can make innocent errors through lack of knowledge, or he can lie, cheat and fake. The man-made may be a product of genius, perceptiveness, ingenuity—or it may be a product of stupidity, deception, malice, evil.[6]

The metaphysically given is not to be evaluated but accepted. Since humor involves an evaluation, the metaphysically given is not what we laugh at. What we laugh at—what we negate the metaphysical importance of—must be man-made, i.e., certain human ideas, actions, creations, and institutions that contradict one's view of the nature of reality and man's relation to it. This is one reason why Roark, at the beginning of *The Fountainhead*, does *not* laugh at the earth around him. (Of course, another reason is his love for this earth.)[7]

Howard Roark can laugh at "the thing that had happened to him that morning and at the things which now lay ahead," because he regards his expulsion from the university, the dean and the "principle behind the dean," and the unpleasant experiences that most likely "lay ahead," as inconsequential. They are not metaphysically important. (This is especially true for Roark, who is particularly unaffected by other people and by evil.) But this earth—and most of all, what *he* can transform this earth into—are not to be laughed at.

Not all humor is morally equivalent. In "Bootleg Romanticism," Rand writes: "Humor is not an unconditional virtue; its moral character depends on its object. To laugh at the contemptible, is a virtue; to laugh at the good, is a hideous vice."[8] If one is rational and moral, she argues, one will laugh at what is absurd or (in some cases) what is evil; if one is irrational or immoral, one will laugh at what is good and rational.[9]

To illustrate the distinction between morally proper and improper humor—that is, between benevolent and malicious humor—she sometimes referred to this passage from *Atlas Shrugged*:[10]

> Watching them, Dagny thought suddenly of the difference between Francisco and her brother Jim. Both of them smiled derisively. But Francisco seemed to laugh at things because he saw something much greater. Jim laughed as if he wanted to let nothing remain great.[11]

Humor in *The Fountainhead* takes both forms: Ayn Rand employs the proper kind of humor, to laugh at the contemptible; and to characterize Ellsworth Toohey and other villains, she has them make use of the improper form. In what follows, I discuss both uses.

KILL BY LAUGHTER

Ellsworth Toohey, the archvillain of *The Fountainhead*, is an explicit advocate of selflessness—and in fact, as he describes himself to Peter Keating, "the most selfless man you've ever known" (638). But his advocacy of selflessness is a corollary of his hatred of all values. To complete her portrayal of this central aspect of Toohey's character, Ayn Rand makes him a master at the malicious kind of humor.

She once said that "The worst evil that you can do, psychologically, is to laugh at yourself. That means spitting in your own face."[12] So it is no surprise that Toohey should advocate precisely this. In *The Art of Fiction*, Rand says that "One of Ellsworth Toohey's most evil lines in *The Fountainhead* is his advice that 'we must be able to laugh at everything, particularly at ourselves.'"[13] In the novel itself, she writes: "People admired [Toohey's] sense of humor. He was, they said, a man who could laugh at himself" (307).

But Toohey does not merely or especially laugh at himself. He applies his malicious laughter to others, to undercut every person's sense of self. And Toohey does not merely laugh "as if he wanted to let nothing remain great." He is more calculated and methodical. As Ayn Rand described him in her notes for *The Fountainhead*:

> Sarcasm is his pet weapon—as natural to him as smell to the skunk—as a method of offense and defense. He is magnificently, maliciously catty. He does not fight his opponents by straight argument or logical refutation—he disqualifies them from the game, dismisses them by mockery.[14]

Towards the end of *The Fountainhead*, Toohey explains his recipe for achieving power (including political power) over others. One ingredient is laughter:

> Kill by laughter. Laughter is an instrument of human joy. Learn to use it as a weapon of destruction. Turn it into a sneer. It's simple. Tell them to laugh at everything. Tell them that a sense of humor is an unlimited virtue. 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. One doesn't reverence with a giggle. He'll obey and he'll set no limits to his obedience—anything goes—nothing is too serious. (636)

In contrast to Rand's conviction that humor is a conditional virtue, Toohey contends that one should laugh at everything, especially the good. Laughter directed at the good aims to wipe out, to deny the importance of, to "kill" anything serious, sacred, heroic, reverential.

Here's an instance of this. After Keating tells Toohey that he loves Catherine, Toohey replies:

> How pretty. . . . Young love. Spring and dawn and heaven and drugstore chocolates at a dollar and a quarter a box. The prerogative of the gods and the movies. . . . I understand. And I approve. I'm a realist. Man has always insisted on making an ass of himself. Oh, come now, we must never lose our sense of humor. Nothing's really sacred but a sense of humor. Still, I've always loved the tale of Tristan and Isolde. It's the most beautiful story ever told—next to that of Mickey and Minnie Mouse. (232)

A little later, Keating tells Toohey that he and Catherine met seven years ago. Toohey replies:

> "And it was love at first sight of course?" "Yes," said Keating and felt himself being ridiculous. "It must have been spring [said Toohey]. It usually is. There's always a dark movie theater, and two people lost to the world, their hands clasped together—but hands do perspire when held too long, don't they? Still, it's beautiful to be in love. The sweetest story ever told—and the tritest. Don't turn away like that, Catherine. We must never allow ourselves to lose our sense of humor." (236)

After leaving Toohey's place, Keating and Catherine are walking hand in hand. "Then [Peter] thought suddenly that hands did perspire when held too long, and he walked faster in irritation. He thought that they were walking there like Mickey and Minnie Mouse and that they probably appeared ridiculous to passers-by" (239).

Toohey killed by laughter: he killed this moment, and he contributed to killing Keating's relationship with Catherine—one of Keating's few genuine values.[15]

Ayn Rand once said: "If you're laughing at the evil in the world—provided you take it seriously but occasionally permit yourself to laugh at it—that's fine."[16] Malicious laughter is an essential feature of Toohey's evil, and Rand takes it seriously. But she gets the last laugh, for Toohey and his followers are also the objects of her laughter. (More on this shortly.)

LAUGHING AT THE CONTEMPTIBLE

In *The Fountainhead*, as I point out above, Ayn Rand makes use of proper humor. As an illustration, I focus in this section on two kinds of cases: her use of narrative that is sarcastic or ironic, and her humorous treatment of the members and fellow-travelers of the Council of American Writers.

Writing Like Dominique

At the beginning of *The Fountainhead*, Dominique Francon, the heroine of the novel, writes a regular newspaper column entitled "Your House." Here is a passage on the Ainsworth house.

> You enter a magnificent lobby of golden marble and you think that this is the City Hall or the Main Post Office, but it isn't. It has, however, everything: the mezzanine with the Colonnade and the stairway with a goitre and the cartouches in the form of looped leather belts. Only it's not leather, it's marble. The dining room has a splendid bronze gate, placed by mistake on the ceiling, in the shape of a trellis entwined with fresh bronze grapes. There are dead ducks and rabbits hanging on the wall panels, in bouquets of carrots, petunias and string beans. I do not think these would have been very attractive if real, but since they are bad plaster imitations, it is all right. . . . (112)

Dominique is clearly employing sarcasm: she does not believe that the lobby is magnificent, the bronze gate splendid, the bad plaster imitations all right.[17] Dominique is also sarcastic in the interview she grants Sally Brent and (shortly thereafter) in the description she gives Gail Wynand of the critical praise received by Ike the Genius's play *No Skin Off Your Nose*.[18]

Ayn Rand wrote like this—i.e., sarcastically or ironically—in certain narrative passages in *The Fountainhead*.[19] There is one noteworthy difference, however, between Dominique's article and Ayn Rand's similar narrative: Dominique is mocking her readers as much as she is the Ainsworth house and its architect. But Ayn Rand's scorn or laughter is *not* directed at her audience.

Here are seven examples from the many instances of narrative sarcasm in *The Fountainhead*:

> It [the Stanton Institute of Technology] looked like a medieval fortress, with a Gothic cathedral grafted to its belly. The fortress was eminently suited to its purpose, with stout, brick walls, a few slits wide enough for sentries, ramparts behind which defending archers could hide, and corner turrets from which boiling oil could be poured upon the attacker—should such an emergency arise in an institute of learning. (20)

> When he [Keating] glanced at his [Stengel's] plans again, he noticed the flaws glaring at him from the masterpiece. (39)

> Pettingill was a cousin of the Bank president's wife and a famous authority on the ruins of Pompeii; the Bank president was an ardent admirer of Julius Caesar and

> had once, while in Rome, spent an hour and a quarter in reverent inspection of the Colosseum. (74)
>
> These things were permitted to him [Ralston Holcombe] because he was a genius. (113)
>
> They had discovered a boy genius; Cosmo-Slotnick adored boy geniuses; Mr. Slotnick was one himself, being only forty-three. (187)[20]
>
> That winter the annual costume Arts Ball was an event of greater brilliance and originality than usual. Athelstan Beasely, the leading spirit of its organization, had had what he called a stroke of genius: all the architects were invited to come dressed as their best buildings. It was a huge success. (322–23)
>
> Sixty-five children, their ages ranging from three to fifteen, were picked out by zealous ladies who were full of kindness and so made a point of rejecting [for placement into the Hopton Stoddard Home for Subnormal Children] those who could be cured and selecting only the hopeless cases. (385)

Ayn Rand did not believe that an armed attack could arise at an institute of learning; neither she nor Keating thought Stengel's plan was a masterpiece; she did not consider Ralston Holcombe or Mr. Slotnick to be geniuses (nor the latter a boy); in her view, the Arts Ball was not—according to any objective standard—a huge success; and finally, she did not consider these zealous ladies on the subnormal-children selection committee to be full of kindness.

Why then did she write this way? Did the fact that she made sarcasm Toohey's pet weapon suggest that this was something she should not have employed? No. It fits Toohey perfectly that sarcasm is his pet weapon, but that's because of the *amount* of sarcasm he uses, and at *what* he directs it: it is his normal way of dealing with people and the world, and he directs it at everything, especially the good. But as Ayn Rand would later state in *The Art of Nonfiction*:

> Sarcasm . . . should be used sparingly. The general principle is to prepare the ground for what you want to treat sarcastically. Make sure it is clear why you are making a sarcastic remark. . . . When you have prepared your ground . . . . a touch of sarcasm can be stylistically brilliant.[21]

The reason Ayn Rand added touches of sarcasm in her narrative is clear: she wished to mock, to criticize, to underscore the insignificance of the objects of her sarcasm, and she did this without overdoing her use of it. That the Stanton Institute of Technology was built to resemble a medieval fortress deserves criticism, but not a serious critique—at least not in *The Fountainhead*. The same is true of the annual costume Arts Ball, Mr. Slotnick's evaluation of himself as a boy genius, and so forth.

The Council of American Writers

> Ayn Rand continues the above passage from *The Art of Nonfiction* as follows:
>
> There are some subjects which one can discuss only sarcastically, e.g., the hippies or modern art. There the *subject* gives you the necessary ground. It is a caricature

> in itself, and therefore you cannot evaluate it except in sarcastic terms (though you *can* discuss its psychological and philosophical roots seriously).[22]

It is no surprise that in a novel in which an architect with integrity clashes with mediocrities and second-handers who draw solely on tradition in designing their buildings, the author would include comic presentations of some architectural works. We have seen some examples of that. But I think *The Fountainhead* is most satirical in its presentation of a group known as the Council of American Writers. This "Council" consists of writers who are even worse in their field than the bad architects of the novel are in theirs. They are modern artists and their fellow travelers, who can be treated only humorously or sarcastically, as their real-life counterparts are caricatures of themselves.

Ellsworth Toohey was the organizer (though not a member) of the Council of American Writers. Lois Cook was its chairman and "only famous member."

> The rest included a woman who never used capitals in her books, and a man who never used commas; a youth who had written a thousand-page novel without a single letter o, and another who wrote poems that neither rhymed nor scanned; a man with a beard who was sophisticated and proved it by using every unprintable four-letter word in every ten pages of his manuscript; a woman who imitated Lois Cook, except that her style was less clear. . . . There was also a fierce young man known only as Ike the Genius, though nobody knew just what he had done. . . . The Council signed a declaration which stated that writers were servants of the proletariat. . . . (306)[23]

The critic Jules Fougler is a fellow-traveler, but not a member ("I am an individualist. . . . I don't believe in organizations" [468]), and foreign correspondent Lancelot Clokey is probably a member.

Lancelot Clokey's first book was an account of his adventures in foreign countries. Here is Fougler's description of Clokey's book:

> You've written a remarkable collection of bilge—yes, bilge—but morally justified. A clever book. World catastrophes used as a backdrop for your own nasty little personality. How Lancelot Clokey got drunk at an international conference. What beauties slept with Lancelot Clokey during an invasion. How Lancelot Clokey got dysentery in a land of famine. (470)

Lois Cook complains that Clokey's "life wasn't worth living, let alone recording" (470).

Note that Clokey represents a definite type of writer whom Ayn Rand had encountered. (Perhaps she included in this type the quasi-autobiographical novels of Ernest Hemingway.) In a letter to Channing Pollock dated June 8, 1941, she writes:

> I have read, appalled, the kind of autobiographies that are being published today. Autobiographies of nobodies full of nothing at all. Great big life stories of second-rate newspapermen *who use world events as a background for their nasty little personalities.* Like this: "And when I saw the fall of Vienna, it reminded me of a day seven years earlier when I met Jimmy Glutz in a dive in Singapore, and over a glass of absinthe I said: 'Jimmy, what is the meaning of life?' and Jimmy answered: 'Hell, who knows, you old bastard?'" You see what I mean? Is there

> any point, reason or excuse for this sort of thing? Yet it is being published every day and blown up into bestsellers.[24]

Ayn Rand made use of the description of these "second-rate newspapermen" in *The Fountainhead*: "world events as a background for their nasty little personalities" became "World catastrophes used as a backdrop for your own nasty little personality."

Lois Cook was based not only on a *type* of writer, but on one particular "novelist." Ellsworth Toohey describes her as "the greatest literary genius since Goethe." She writes, he says, "not exactly novels . . . No, not collections of stories either . . . that's just it, just Lois Cook—a new form of literature entirely" (232).[25] Ayn Rand's journals make it clear that her model for Lois Cook was Gertrude Stein. In the notes she made while writing *The Fountainhead*, Lois Cook's name was originally Gertrude, and at one point Ayn Rand refers to Stein explicitly.[26] The Cook-Stein connection is evident in a passage she gives us from Lois Cook's *Clouds and Shrouds*, "a record of Miss Cook's travels around the world": "toothbrush in the jaw toothbrush brush brush tooth jaw foam dome in the foam Roman dome come home home in the jaw Rome dome tooth toothbrush toothpick pickpocket socket rocket" (233). Here is a line from "Americans," an "essay" from Gertrude Stein's *Geography and Plays* (1922): "Never sink, never sink sinker, never sink sinker sunk, sink sink sinker sink."[27]

Ayn Rand would certainly regard this kind of "literature" as a subject that could be treated only sarcastically. She would claim, not that the writing of Lois Cook is a parody of Stein, but that Stein's writing is itself a joke (at whose expense, we shall see shortly). It is irrational and unintelligible, and as such incapable of evoking any genuine esthetic response, only boredom and disgust.

I do not know if Ayn Rand had anyone in particular in mind in creating the character Ike the Genius, but no doubt he represents some aspect of the absurdist avant-garde theatre that was fashionable in the twenties and thirties.

We discover that Ike the Genius is a playwright who, at 26, had written eleven plays, though none of them had been produced. In one scene, he's reading his newest play to his friends from the Council of American Writers, and their consensus is: "it's awful." Ike responds: "If Ibsen can write plays, why can't I? . . . He's good and I'm lousy, but that's not a sufficient reason." Against the general consensus, however, there is a dissenting voice: "'This is a great play,' said [Jules Fougler]. . . . He wore a suit, beautifully tailored, of a color to which he referred as '*merde d'oie*.'[28] He kept his gloves on at all times and he carried a cane. He was an eminent drama critic" (467–68). Ike the Genius says: "To write a good play and to have it praised is nothing. Anybody can do that. Anyone with talent—and talent is only a glandular accident. But to write a piece of crap and have it praised—well, you match that." Jules Fougler adds, in the same spirit: "What achievement is there for a critic in praising a good play? None whatever. . . . I have a right to wish to impress my own personality upon people." Shortly thereafter, we discover the title of this play in a humorous exchange between Fougler and Ike—a vulgar bit of wordplay in the spirit of Abbott and Costello's famous "Who's on First?" skit:[29]

> "Therefore, I shall make a hit out of—what's the name of your play, Ike?"
>
> "No skin off your ass," said Ike.
>
> "I beg your pardon?"
>
> "That's the title."

> "Oh, I see. Therefore, I shall make a hit out of *No Skin Off Your Ass*." (469)

Later, we discover that the play *is* a success. Jules Fougler says to Keating:

> It is the kind of play that depends upon what members of the audience are capable of bringing with them into the theater. If you are one of those literal-minded people, with a dry soul and a limited imagination, it is not for you. But if you are a real human being with a big, big heart full of laughter. . . , you will find it an unforgettable experience. (473)

What kind of laughter does Jules Fougler expect this play to evoke? Malicious laughter. Ayn Rand's humorous presentation of the nature of avant-garde literature also serves as an illustration of the malicious kind of humor discussed in the previous section. Artists and critics such as Lois Cook, Jules Fougler, and Ellsworth Toohey do not take themselves or anything else seriously. They laugh at all values. To paraphrase the line about James Taggart quoted earlier, they laugh as if they wanted to let no art remain great. This becomes clearer in another literary project Toohey is promoting:

> I'm pushing the autobiography of a dentist who's really a remarkable person—because there's not a single remarkable day in his life nor sentence in his book. . . . Can you imagine a solid bromide undressing his soul as if it were a revelation? . . . When the fact that one is a total nonentity who's done nothing more outstanding than eating, sleeping and chatting with neighbors becomes a fact worthy of pride, of announcement to the world and of diligent study by millions of readers—the fact that one has built a cathedral becomes unrecordable and unannounceable. A matter of perspective and relativity. The distance permissible between the extremes of any particular capacity is limited. The sound perception of an ant does not include thunder. (471)

In a sense, Toohey is dead serious. But in another sense everything here is said tongue in cheek. There is laughter behind his words. We see this again in another part of the same scene, in a conversation between Toohey and Ike the Genius.

> "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 whatever 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. . . . And then it wouldn't matter what they went to see at all. Then nothing would matter—neither the writers nor those for whom they write. . . . (472)

Ike the Genius's play is Toohey's (and Ike's) joke on Ibsen, the theater, and theater-goers. Toohey has a very conscious purpose: he "kills by laughter." This is malicious laughter—the laughter of *modernism.* As Louis Sass puts it in *Madness and Modernism*, "it is only in the modernist era that we find artworks whose most central attitude is not to communicate or to celebrate, but to pour scornful laughter on the whole of existence."[30]

We have come full circle. In laughing at modern *avant-garde* literature (and its major advocate in the novel, Ellsworth Toohey), Ayn Rand laughs at malicious laughter. Further,

laughing at modern literature, besides being unavoidable, serves to remind us that the universe is benevolent, that in the end, the evil and the insipid do not matter; what matters is great art—which, of course, has the central place in *The Fountainhead.*

CONCLUSION

I have shown that *The Fountainhead* is in some respects a satirical novel, and discussed the nature of its satire. In conclusion, I want to examine why Ayn Rand chose to write *The Fountainhead* in this way, but not *Atlas Shrugged*. Why is there much more humor and sarcasm in the former than in the latter?[31]

One reason may be that in writing *The Fountainhead,* Ayn Rand was influenced to some degree by Sinclair Lewis (somewhat in the way, and to the extent, that she was influenced by Victor Hugo in writing *We the Living*[32]), and that no such influence was exerted on her when she wrote *Atlas Shrugged*. In 1936, completing a questionnaire for Macmillan's publicity campaign for *We the Living*, beside the heading "Favorite Author" she wrote "Sinclair Lewis"—which I take to mean that he was at that time her current favorite.[33]

Sinclair Lewis's novels are full of the kind of sarcasm found (with less frequency) in *The Fountainhead*. Here are a couple of examples, from *Elmer Gantry* (1927):[34]

> He [Elmer] had, in fact, got everything from the church and Sunday School, except, perhaps, any longing whatever for decency and kindness and reason. (34)

> There had been some difficulty over his [Frank Shallard's] ordination, for he had been shaky about even so clear and proven a fact as the virgin birth. (154)

Here are another two, which resemble passages from *The Fountainhead*. First, in *Elmer Gantry*, a minor character is described as follows: "he was sixty-eight, to the dean's boyish sixty" (73). This is similar to the *Fountainhead* passage about Mr. Slotnick, who was called a boy genius, "being only forty-three" (187). Finally, here's a passage that bears comparing to the description of the Bank president who admired Julius Caesar and "had once, while in Rome, spent an hour and a quarter in reverent inspection of the Colosseum" (74):

> The bishop and his lady were fond of travel. They had made a six months' inspection of missions in Japan, Korea, China, India, Borneo, Java, and the Philippines, which gave the bishop an authoritative knowledge of all Oriental governments, religions, psychology, commerce, and hotels. But besides that, six several summers they had gone to Europe. . . . Once they had spent three solid weeks seeing nothing but London—with side-trips to Oxford, Canterbury, and Stratford. (246)

It is possible, and even likely, that the novels of Sinclair Lewis did exert some influence on the form the satire took in *The Fountainhead*. But that alone cannot explain why *The Fountainhead* was satirical, while *Atlas Shrugged* was not. For every essential in an Ayn Rand novel is determined ultimately by the purpose for which the novel is written.

I think the primary reason that *The Fountainhead* is more satirical is that, *in a sense,* it is more naturalistic. T*he Fountainhead* is set in the world as it was around the time that Ayn Rand wrote it. As we have seen, she even had some real-life villains in mind (e.g., Gertrude Stein), and

though Howard Roark is certainly not Frank Lloyd Wright, Roark's struggles with Classicism were modeled after Wright's actual struggles.[35] And there are many more naturalistic touches. Take for instance Gordon Prescott's testimony at the Stoddard trial:

> The correlation of the transcendental to the purely spatial in the building under discussion is entirely screwy. . . . If we take the horizontal as the one dimensional, the vertical as the two-dimensional, the diagonal as the three-dimensional, and the inter-penetration of spaces as the fourth-dimensional—architecture being a fourth-dimensional art—we can see quite simply that this building is homaloidal, or—in the language of the layman—flat. The flowing life which comes from the sense of order in chaos, or, if you prefer, from unity in diversity, as well as vice versa, which is the realization of the contradiction inherent in architecture, is here absolutely absent. I am really trying to express myself as clearly as I can, but it is impossible to present a dialectic state by covering it up with an old fig leaf of logic just for the sake of the mentally lazy layman. (354)[36]

Compare this to the following passage from an article by Kurt Jonas, in *South African Architectural Record*, which Rand copied down in her notes for *The Fountainhead*:

> Here we find, indeed, a four-dimensional composition of space enclosed by solids. Especially the north and north-west aspect of the house shows a dynamic balance of forms, such as it would be hard to surpass. At the same time, it is not lacking in that interpenetration of spaces which brings out the hollow character, full of fluctuating life, which is the expression of architecture as compared with sculpture. . . .
>
> The sphere of architecture is space. We must define space. But we cannot. For space is defined by movement. And movement presupposes time. Therefore we should speak more correctly of spacetime. Architecture is four-dimensional art. . . .
>
> [T]his is a contradiction not due to the [average] man's poor logic, but to the higher logic, the dialectics of all life and art. To emphasize this I started that essay, *Towards a Philosophy of Architecture,* with the statement: "Modern Architecture is the realization of a contradiction in itself."
>
> That not all things are so simple as some people believe, that there are inherent contradictions in life and in art, is no fault of mine. It is the task of the writer to show and to express this dialectic state, not to cover it with a torn fig leaf of simplifying logical construction, all for the sake of a mentally lazy layman.[37]

Clearly, Gordon Prescott is serving the same function in architecture that Lois Cook serves in literature. And as with Lois Cook, Ayn Rand borrowed directly from reality to create him.

What kind of world is presented in *The Fountainhead*? The United States was a relatively free society but one in grave danger of becoming much worse through an orgy of altruism and an ominous growth in collectivism. The theme of *The Fountainhead* is individualism versus collectivism *within a man's soul.* The focus is not primarily on the deteriorating culture. Further, against whom is Roark struggling? This is an Ayn Rand novel, so his biggest struggles are against other heroes—in this case, Dominique and Wynand. But what about the villains? Toohey of course is pure evil; but as early as the end of Part 2, he is revealed to be no threat to Roark. Further, much of Roark's conflict—if you can even call it that—is against mediocre

conventionalists, like Peter Keating and Ralston Holcombe. And they don't stand a chance against him. In this context, there is much more room for humor.

Incidentally, this is related to the Sinclair Lewis connection. In writing *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand could feel free to be influenced by someone like Lewis (whose novels were fully naturalistic), which is something that would not (and did not) happen in the case of *Atlas Shrugged.*

In contrast to *The Fountainhead*, consider the society depicted in *Atlas Shrugged.* The novel is set in the not-so-distant future, when the United States is close to dictatorship and Western civilization is collapsing. Outside of the United States, dictatorship has already taken over everywhere. This cultural context is much graver than *The Fountainhead*'s—it provides much less opportunity for humor. And consistent with the universe of the novel, the villains are much higher abstractions of different types of evil, which makes them much less easy to laugh at (though in some cases they are laughable). Finally, the main conflict philosophically is between life and death—or rather, between those who worship life and those who worship death. Again, in such a context, too much humor—even the level of satire found in *The Fountainhead*—would have been inappropriate.

None of this makes *Atlas Shrugged* a less benevolent novel. On the contrary, humor is by its nature destructive—it underscores the evil and irrational and inconsequential as it dismisses them. That *The Fountainhead* is more satirical might arguably give it—if not less benevolence—a touch of bitterness that *Atlas Shrugged* lacks. Given the cultural context of *The Fountainhead*, however, a more satirical approach was and is not only appropriate, but desirable.[38]

NOTES

1. See Robert Mayhew, ed., *Ayn Rand Answers: The Best of Her Q&A* (New York: New American Library, 2005), 141.

2. David Harriman, ed., *Journals of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1997), 97. This is not the only kind of laughter Roark is capable of. Recall the description of the nights Mike Donnigan, Steven Mallory, Dominique, and Roark spent together in Mallory's shack, when the Stoddard Temple was being built:

> They did not speak about their work. Mallory told outrageous stories and Dominique laughed like a child. They talked about nothing in particular, sentences that had meaning only in the sound of the voices, in the warm gaiety, in the ease of complete relaxation. They were simply four people who liked being there together. . . . Roark laughed as Dominique had never seen him laugh anywhere else, his mouth loose and young. (336)

There is a similar kind of laughter in two scenes in which Roark is talking to Peter Keating, who is being honest (33, 581).

3. Note that the tone of some of her early short stories—especially "Good Copy," "Escort," and "Her Second Career"—*is* light and humorous. These were all first published in Leonard Peikoff, ed., *The Early Ayn Rand: A Selection from Her Unpublished Fiction* (New York: New American Library, 1984; paperback edition, Signet, 1986; revised edition, Signet, 2005). On humor in her first novel, *We the Living*, *see* Robert Mayhew, "Kira Argounova Laughed: Humor and Joy in *We the Living*," in Robert Mayhew, ed., *Essays on Ayn Rand's "We the Living"* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004).

4. See Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 140–42, which contains Rand's most extensive discussion of humor. Similar statements can be found in Ayn Rand, *The Art of Fiction: A Guide for Writers and Readers*, ed. Tore Boeckmann (New York: Plume, 2000), 165, and in Ayn Rand, *The Art of Nonfiction: A*

Guide for Writers and Readers, ed. Robert Mayhew (New York: Plume, 2001), 126. For a lengthier discussion of Ayn Rand's conception of humor, see Robert Mayhew, "Ayn Rand Laughed: Ayn Rand on the Role of Humor in Literature and Life," *The Intellectual Activist* 16, no. 1 (January 2002).

5. See Harry Binswanger, ed., *The Ayn Rand Lexicon: Objectivism from A to Z* (New York: New American Library, 1986; Meridian paperback edition, 1988), s.v. Metaphysical Value-Judgments.

6. Ayn Rand, "The Metaphysical Versus the Man-Made," *Philosophy: Who Needs It* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1982; Signet paperback edition, 1984), 27.

7. In literature, exceptions can be used to great effect. For instance, in *The Fountainhead*, after the Cortlandt explosion and its injury to her, Dominique, losing consciousness, is described as "laughing at the law of gravity" (616).

8. Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*, revised edition (New York: Signet, 1975), 133.

9. Rand does not believe it is appropriate to laugh at *all* evil. In the *Art of Nonfiction*, she writes:

> When I say it is proper to laugh at evil, I do not mean all evil. It is improper . . . to write humorously about tragic and painful events or issues—about death, cemeteries, torture chambers, concentration camps, executions, etc. This is called "sick humor," and the designation is correct, because although it is possible to laugh at such things, one should not consider them funny. For example, take comedies about the Nazis. I have a strong aversion to war comedies. War *per se* is bad enough, but war and dictatorship combined are *a fortiori* not a subject for comedy. (126)

She provides an example of the kind of evil that *is* a proper object of laughter:

> Take the passage on Hegel in the title essay of *For the New Intellectual.* Describing Hegel's philosophy, I write that "omniscience about the physical universe . . . is to be derived, not from observations of the facts, but from the contemplation of (the) Idea's triple somersaults inside his, Hegel's, mind." The reference to triple somersaults is meant to be light or humorous. I am not denying the seriousness of the subject (the history of philosophy), but I am indicating that I do not take Hegel seriously and that we need not worry about this particular monster. (126–27)

10. See Rand, *Art of Fiction*, 166, and Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 141.

11. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Random House, 1957; Signet thirty-fifth anniversary paperback edition, 1992), 96.

12. Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 141.

13. Rand, *Art of Fiction*, 166; cf. *The Fountainhead*, 362.

14. Harriman, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 109.

15. In a letter of June 3, 1944, Rand wrote: "As to Keating—no, he didn't love anybody. Catherine is the nearest he ever came to it—but even then it wasn't much, because—being actually selfless—he was not capable of any real and complete emotion." Michael S. Berliner, ed., *Letters of Ayn Rand* (New York: Dutton, 1995), 137–38.

16. Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 141.

17. *The Oxford Pocket Dictionary and Thesaurus*, American Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), defines "sarcasm": "1. bitter or wounding remark. 2. taunt, esp. one ironically worded." Its entry under "irony" includes: "humorous or sarcastic use of language of a different or opposite meaning."

18. This is from the interview she grants Sally Brent:

> Oh yes, Miss Brent, I'm very happy. I open my eyes in the morning and I say to myself, it can't be true, it's not poor little me who's become the wife of the great Gail Wynand who had all the glamorous beauties of the world to choose from. You see, I've been in

> love with him for years. He was just a dream to me, a beautiful, impossible dream. And now it's like a dream come true. . . . Please, Miss Brent, take this message from me to the women of America: Patience is always rewarded and romance is just around the corner. (488)

And this is from her description of the praise for *No Skin Off Your Nose*:

> Why, Gail, it's the biggest hit in town. Your own critic, Jules Fougler . . . said it was the greatest play of our age. Ellsworth Toohey said it was the fresh voice of the coming new world. Alvah Scarret said it was not written in ink, but in the milk of human kindness. Sally Brent—before you fired her—said it made her laugh with a lump in her throat. Why, it's the godchild of the *Banner*. I thought you would certainly want to see it. (490–91)

19. She could also write like this in private, when confronted with something she regarded as contemptible. For example, see her architectural research notes on David Gray's *Thomas Hastings, Architect*, which she called "The most disgusting book that I have read to date." (Her notes on this book are dated July 12, 1937, and are found in Harriman, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 135–42.) She copied out a story about Hastings (part of which I quote here):

> Shaking with laughter, Hastings went on to explain to [his female guest] that no dentist could have the anxieties of an architect; that when he was a beginner he was always afraid that his houses were going to fall down but now when he saw them again he was afraid that they weren't.

Her comment—"Such wit!"—is clearly sarcastic. (See also the following note.)

20. Cf. the passage in her essay "The Left: Old and New," in which she refers to Buckminster Fuller as "a bright young man of 75," calls Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin "Another youthful authority," and writes: "The youngest of these rebels and trend-setters for youth is Marshall McLuhan, aged 59." Ayn Rand, *Return of the Primitive: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, ed. Peter Schwartz (New York: Meridian, 1999), 163.

21. Rand, *Art of Nonfiction*, 125.

22. Rand, *Art of Nonfiction*, 125.

23. Compare her description of the Council of American Artists:

> The Council of American Artists had, as chairman, a cadaverous youth who painted what he saw in his nightly dreams. There was a boy who used no canvas, but did something with bird cages and metronomes, and another who discovered a new technique of painting: he blackened a sheet of paper and then painted with a rubber eraser. There was a stout middle-aged lady who drew subconsciously, claiming that she never looked at her hand and had no idea of what the hand was doing: her hand, she said, was guided by the spirit of the departed lover whom she had never met on earth. Here they did not talk so much about the proletariat, but merely rebelled against the tyranny of reality and of the objective. (306)

24. Berliner, *Ayn Rand Letters*, 49 (emphasis added).

25. Compare this description of Howard Roark's work early in the novel: "The buildings were not Classical, they were not Gothic, they were not Renaissance. They were only Howard Roark" (19).

26. Harriman, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 210–11. For more on Rand's view of Stein, see *Art of Fiction*, 11–12; *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 44, 107, 153; and Berliner, *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 50.

27. Gertrude Stein, *Geography and Plays* (Boston: Four Seas Company, 1922), 45.

28. According to the *Dictionnaire de L'Académie française* (6th ed., 1835), s.v. *merde, merde d'oie* (i.e., "goose shit") is a color "*entre le vert et le jaune*"—between green and yellow.

Cf. Schiller's *Intrigue and Love,* act 1, sc. 6, in which the Chamberlain says: "His Highness is wearing a *merde d'oye* coat today." (Trans. Charles E. Passage, in Friedrich Schiller, *Plays*, Walter Hinderer, ed. [New York: Continuum, 1983], 17.) The line has the following editor's footnote: "Goosedung green (*merde d'oye*) was the fashionable color of the 1782 Paris season, as Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*, published that year, shows." My thanks to Tore Boeckmann for bringing this to my attention.

29. I learned from Leonard Peikoff that Ayn Rand did know of the "Who's on First?" skit.

30. Louis Sass, *Madness and Modernism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 36.

31. The kind of sarcasm found in *The Fountainhead* is rare in *Atlas Shrugged.* I have come up with merely four (possible) examples:

1. Mrs. Vail is described as "a lady of noble breeding and unusual loveliness" (*Atlas Shrugged,* 71); it's possible that "unusual loveliness" is not an accurate description.
2. The "disinterested" in the last line of the following is somewhat sarcastic: "A group that called itself 'Committee of Disinterested Citizens' collected signatures on a petition demanding a year's study of the John Galt Line by government experts before the first train was allowed to run. . . . The consideration it received was respectful, because it came from people who were disinterested" (214–15).
3. The use of "bright" in this line, and in the next example, may be sarcastic: "a new profession practiced by bright young boys just out of college, who called themselves 'defreezers'" (327).
4. "a bright young boy just out of college had been sent to him [Rearden] from Washington, as Deputy Director of Distribution" (336).

Although it is not narrative, this line from Eddie Willers is worth mentioning: "Clifton Locey [is] a bright, progressive young man of forty-seven" (524). On the sarcasm of "young man of forty-seven," see p. 215 (and n. 20) above.

32. See Shoshana Milgram, "*We the Living* and Victor Hugo: Ayn Rand's First Novel and the Novelist She Ranked First," in Mayhew, *Essays on Ayn Rand's "We the Living."*

33. See Jeff Britting, *Ayn Rand* (New York: Overlook, 2004), 48.

34. Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry* (New York: Harcourt, 1927). Pagination refers to the 1967 Signet Classic edition. I want to thank Tore Boeckmann for not only providing me with a couple of the examples from Sinclair Lewis, but also for insisting that I consider Lewis in connection with the satirical nature of *The Fountainhead.*

35. On the naturalistic elements in *The Fountainhead,* see Tore Boeckmann, "*The Fountainhead* as Romantic Novel," in the present collection, 128–33, and Mayhew, *Ayn Rand Answers*, 200. On Roark's struggles with Classicism being modeled after Wright's struggles, see Michael S. Berliner, "Howard Roark and Frank Lloyd Wright," in the present collection, 51.

36. See also Prescott's speech at a meeting of the Council of American Builders (292–93).

37. Harriman, *Journals of Ayn Rand*, 152–53 (ellipses and brackets in the original).

38. Some of this material appeared earlier in "Ayn Rand Laughed: Ayn Rand on the Role of Humor in Literature and Life," *Intellectual Activist* 16, no. 1 (January 2002). I would like to thank Rob Tracinski, the editor of *The Intellectual Activist,* for his comments on an earlier version of that essay. I also want to thank my fellow participants in the March 2005 Anthem Foundation Consultancy at the University of Texas, Austin (Harry Binswanger, Allan Gotthelf, and Tara Smith) for discussion of this paper, which led to many improvements. I am also grateful to Tore Boeckmann and Greg Salmieri for their comments on a later draft.