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## James M. Frankel '13 – Core

### *The Fountainhead Of Modernity*

One book that the Core Program at Colgate University would benefit from requiring in “The Challenges Of Modernity” is *The Fountainhead*, by Ayn Rand. *The Fountainhead* is a philosophical text centered around a young architect, Howard Roark, who chooses to struggle in obscurity rather than compromise his modernistic architectural designs. In the context of Roark, the book encompasses many themes covered this semester in our coursework. Our class has covered the emergence of individualism, rationalism, and free thought, and Roark comes across as a manifestation of these themes, as an ideal modern character. After surviving as an individualist in a world heading towards collectivism and intellectual codependence, Roark parallels both Freud and Marx by eventually explaining his own thoughts on why society causes discontentment. Like Freud, Roark believes that restraining egocentric urges ultimately suppresses human emotion, and consequently Roark advocates for selfishness and resents altruistic thought. As an adamant individualist, Roark also shows a similar understanding of enlightenment as Kant, who believes that maturity is a product of one’s ability to think for oneself. However, Roark’s foil, Ellsworth Toohey, advocates for collectivism and for the empowerment of the masses, which are similar to Karl Marx’s themes in *The Communist Manifesto*. Ultimately, Rand argues that the principles of modernity are those that allow the individual to be protected from the masses through the freedoms modernity offers.

Firstly, it is important to understand how our class has defined modernity. Kant establishes a conception of modernity through maturity, which he describes as “the ability to use one's understanding without guidance from another” (Kant). He elaborates by saying that this immaturity “is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another” (Kant). This perception of enlightenment as independent thinking has laid the foundation of our understanding of modernity. Freud furthers this individualist mindset by attacking civilization itself, suggesting that society’s expectations and suppression of our natural erotic and aggressive instincts has made the civilized man neurotic and prone to guilt (Freud, 70). The pressures that society places on each individual indirectly cause man to be discontented, and an “abolition or reduction of those demands would result in a return to possibilities of happiness” (39). To Freud, a healthy ego aided by the fulfillment of personal desires is the key to contentment. Marx adds another dimension to modernity by attacking the individualization that capitalism promotes and advocating for a communist revolution. Marx suggests that there is a correlation between social class and discontentment, and says that capitalism encourages worse wages and exploitation of women and children (Marx, 49-50). In Marx’s eyes, private property rests on the abuse of the working class, and thus “undermines freedom” for a large amount of the population (61). Collectively, these bold thinkers guide the world to an understanding of modernity as a balance between newfound freedoms, rationality, and individualism, resulting in widespread discontentment.

Throughout *The Fountainhead*, Howard Roark exists as a paradigm of modern rationalism and individualism, stressing the importance of Freudian egocentricity and encouraging the selfishness it entails. From the beginning of the novel, Roark asserts himself as an individual, a rational mind independent of external influence. In the opening pages of the

book, Roark has a meeting with the dean after being expelled from Stanton Institute. When Mrs. Keating, his landlady, asks what the meeting could be about, he says he doesn't know. But "she had heard distinctly: 'I don't give a damn.' She stared at him incredulously" (Rand, 18). Roark gives little consideration to others' opinions, disallowing external expectations to penetrate his mind. Once Roark enters the Dean's office, the Dean lectures Roark on the importance of adhering to tradition, and explains that architecture is a collective effort where each man "subordinates himself to the standards of the majority" (24). Roark refutes this collectivist mentality, saying, "I set my own standards. I inherit nothing. I stand at the end of no tradition. I may, perhaps, stand at the beginning of one" (24-25). Even in his final monologue, Roark takes advantage of having a crowd to propound the individual's natural entitlement to "the function of his reasoning brain" (679). Clearly, Roark believes in individualism, in rationality, and in the independent thought that results.

Importantly, for Roark being an individual becomes somewhat synonymous with being egotistical. When Peter Keating, an old acquaintance from Stanton Institute, asks Roark, "Can't you ever be comfortable – and unimportant?" (89), Peter is highlighting Roark's relentless ego, suggesting that Roark always feels an exaggerated sense of self-worth. Later, when Gail Wynand, a fellow individualist, suggests that Roark should have erected a statue of himself in one of his prior works, Roark announces, "I don't wish to be a symbol of anything. I'm only myself" (602). Roark's ego is further evident when, on several occasions, Roark is fired for his abrasive refusal to compromise on his designs (94, 127). Roark's individualistic outlook leads him to see the benefits of his ego and consequently encourages selfishness. Late in Peter's career, Peter asks Roark to save him from failure. Roark acquiesces but discourages the gratitude he quickly receives; "Don't thank me. If I do it, I'll have my own purpose. I'll expect to gain as much as you will. Probably more" (576). Roark explains that he is led by "a private, personal, selfish, egotistical motivation. That's the only way I function. That's all I am" (580). Roark is unashamed of his ego's inherent selfishness. Roark's convictions are clear; man is his own ego, and is therefore inherently selfish. To deny one's selfishness is to deny one's own self. Surely Freud and Kant, as proponents of independent thought and satiating one's ego, respectively, would see the merit of Roark's approach to life.

By contrast, Ellsworth Toohey, the powerful antagonist of the story, fronts a character who believes in collectivism and altruism, openly demonizing the individual's ego and contradicting the principles Roark represents. We are introduced to Toohey at a labor union rally, where he says, "This is the time for every man to renounce the thoughts of his petty little problems of gain, of comfort, of self-gratification..."(109). This is clearly the type of suppression that Freud associates with discontentment, and it is completely contrary to the message Roark sends through his display of ego and selfishness. However, Toohey's attitude of protecting the majority from the minority aligns closely with Marx's support for the proletariat. When commenting on the strength of the masses, Toohey says, "History, my friends, does not ask questions or acquiescence. It is irrevocable, as the voice of the masses that determine it" (109). Toohey is advocating for the people's collective power by asserting that the masses have often altered history.

However, Toohey's acts are not limited to public speaking. Seeking to crush individualism, Toohey intentionally counsels men to be promiscuous and avoid relationships. In his words, "Let us be modern" (301). When a boy confesses to feeling ashamed after committing an "unsavory sexual act," Toohey advises he calm down because sex and degradation are good

experiences; the feeling of “personal superiority” and the reverence for sexual acts are immature (301). When advising a student hoping to pursue architecture, Toohey says:

When you thought of architecture, it was a purely selfish choice, wasn't it? Have you considered anything but your own egotistical satisfaction? Yet a man's career concerns all society. The question of where you could be most useful to your fellow men comes first. (302)

Throughout these passages, Toohey demonstrates not just the power he has over the intellectually dependent masses, but also an emphasis on collectivist spirit. When Toohey's niece, Catherine, shares her guilt caused by her developing apathy and resentment for the ungrateful people she helps as a social worker, Toohey says to her, “What have you been complaining about? About the fact that you are unhappy. About Katie Halsey and nothing else” (364). He continues by calling her egotistical, again directing his tirade towards the individual spirit. Toohey opts to destroy her ego, and consequently she becomes massively depressed. This, if anything, is the most direct evidence of Ayn Rand's partiality towards Freudian theory; that emotional suppression of a human will inhibit his or her happiness. Toohey's devotion to a collectivist ideal is astounding, and screams of an approach to humanity that aligns with Marx's view, yet would disgust Kant and stifle Freud.

Rand's deeper philosophy is revealed in the final chapters as Roark and his companion, Gail Wynand, deliver expansive monologues highlighting their beliefs about society's contemporary flaws. Surprisingly, Toohey maintains the same understanding of human discontentment as Roark and Wynand, and he reveals that he simply intended to use the knowledge to gain power. Roark believes that “[man] can survive in only one of two ways – by the independent work of his own mind or as a parasite fed by the minds of others” (682). Toohey agrees, admitting to be a parasite himself (567). Roark and Wynand establish that Peter, too, is a parasite, and his constant need for validation, fame, and power is selfless because it is fundamentally based on measuring success through others (605). Wynand states, “A truly selfish man cannot be affected by the approval of others. He doesn't need it” (606). Roark begins referring to people whom, like Peter, value ostentation over self-respect as “second-handers” (606). Wynand then says, “Look at everyone around us. You've wondered why they suffer, why they seek happiness and never find it...” (607). Men who are always constrained by an unnatural guilt and a pledge to constant servitude cannot be happy. The freedoms afforded the individual by society are useless when altruism survives as a force that demands the destruction of the self. Importantly, when Roark decides he will take the Cortlandt construction project secretly for Peter, he looks at Peter and says:

You'll get everything that society can give a man. You'll keep all the money. You'll take any fame or honor anyone might want to rant. You'll accept such gratitude as the tenants might feel. And I – I'll take what nobody can give a man, except himself. I will have built Cortlandt. (581)

Roark is showing that society can only grant someone so much, if any, happiness. When Peter responds, “You're getting more than I am Howard” (581), he confirms that personal, internal happiness triumphs over anything that civilization can offer. Thus Rand's statement is unveiled; civilization can be a factor in human happiness, but cannot be the source because happiness

comes from within. In spite of societal restrictions, Roark still finds happiness through his individuality. Roark ends his final monologue by reconfirming the basic function of civilization in the first place, explaining that, “Civilization is the process of setting man free from men” (683). As Freud points out, civilization exists to protect man from one another. Building society into an initiative of altruism would crush individualism, the only source of true contentment.

Essentially, through Kant’s “Essay on Enlightenment,” Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto*, and Freud’s *Society and its Discontents*, modernity has become understood as the emergence of individuality, rationality, and intellectual independence from external influences. Howard Roark is the accumulation of these freedoms, and a symbol of modernity itself. It is important, however, to note that although Rand’s book is an excellent novel and conveys powerful modernistic ideas, people could certainly find issues with the book’s content. For example, Roark and Toohey are both unreal characters, mere simplifications of the argument they represent. Rand has reduced a highly complex social dilemma to the difference between an idealized Roark and a sinister Toohey. Regardless, the book is a highly relevant and thought-provoking text that could help many of the terms we have learned in Core 152 find context and clarity, as well as stir up heated class discussion. And ultimately, this encouragement to fight for our thoughts is the foundation to a modern education.

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