

The Fountainhead – Ayn Rand

by Yvette Nahmia

Has it ever happened to you that you keep coming across a particular name in conversations with different groups of people? Well, it's been a month now that Ayn Rand's name has been coming up in every other discussion I have. People usually refer to her as the representative of the theory which argues that individualism is a higher value to collectivism. The friends who introduced me to her theory made it sound very attractive. I decided I wanted to have a first hand contact with her writings and therefore got hold of her novel "The Fountainhead".

"The Fountainhead" tells the story of a highly efficient architect, an architect who believes that his buildings are great and refuses to erect buildings that are not perfect even at the cost of losing commissions that he needs badly.

Moreover, he doesn't make concessions over his work and is absolute on his ideas concerning his buildings. For the most part, he is looked down on by his contemporary architects not because he lacks the talent and skill but due to their mediocrity. In addition to that, only a few people can appreciate his talent and comply with his vision of a particular building. Roark, who is the main character, either erects a building as he wants it, or refuses to be in charge of it altogether, he only works on his own terms, he is the one who sets the standards at his job.

Through Roark, Rand's views appear. Rand believes that "Man's first duty is to himself", that one should not deny his desires and comply with society's wishes instead. Rand has Roark say:

"Look at everyone around us. You've wondered why they suffer, why they seek happiness and never find it. If any man stopped and asked himself whether he's ever held a truly personal desire he'd find the answer. He'd see that all his wishes, his efforts, his dreams, his ambitions are motivated by other men." (Rand 608)

Rand argues that one should not "seek" self respect through his fellow men but only through himself. Specifically, she writes:

"It's so hard to stand on one's own record. You can fake virtue for an audience. You can't fake it in your own eyes. Your ego is the strictest judge. They ran from it. They spend their lives running. It's easier to donate a few thousand of charity and think oneself noble than to base self respect on personal standards of personal achievement. It's simple to seek substitutes for competence such easy substitutes: love, charm, kindness, charity. But there is no substitute for competence." (Rand 607)

Self sacrifice is not an attribute to be admired by Rand. She actually rejects the notion of self sacrifice and suggests instead an ego that strives for competence.

"Self sacrifice, we drool, is the ultimate virtue. Let's stop and think for a moment, is sacrifice a virtue? Can a man sacrifice his integrity? His honor? His freedom? His ideal? His convictions? The honesty of his feelings? The independence of his thought? But these are man's supreme possessions. Anything he gives up for them is not a sacrifice but an easy bargain. They, however, are above sacrificing to any cause or consideration whatsoever. Should we not then stop preaching dangerous and vicious nonsense? Self sacrifice? But it is precisely the self that cannot and must not be sacrificed. It is the unsacrificed self that we must respect in man above all." (Rand 625)

I very much enjoyed "The Fountainhead". It is excellent food for one's brain. It stimulates thinking thoughts that might influence the course of one's life. Specifically, it argues that people should stop denying themselves and suggests that people should be self seekers and "self lovers". This book awakens the reader and advises him to first stop and think about his life- an act we rarely do- and then act out his thoughts and desires and not those proclaimed by society. You have my word, it is definitely worth reading.

Ayn Rand: The Fountainhead. Penguin. New York 1971 (Bibliography)

