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Howard Roark: A New Adam

Mary Sarah Boulanger



*The Dana Thomas House.
Photo by Erich W. Zander.*

The best-selling novel of all time, the Bible, explains the existence of man and woman very simply: God created them. The first human beings, Adam and Eve, lived happily and innocently until Eve gave in to the pressures of society (seen here in the form of a snake) and broke the rules set by her creator. Adam and Eve were forced to leave the paradise they lived in as punishment for disobeying God. This story served as a prototype for literature to follow; man and woman start out wholly innocent and good, are pressured by society into "making the wrong choice," and spend eternity suffering while paying for that choice. Howard Roark, however, in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, breaks away from the genre of literary Adams; he starts out as an innocent and wholly good man, and although he encounters the evils of society, he doesn't give in, and remains a triumphant and empowered hero. Because Roark differentiates between right and wrong, because he does not allow the "rewards" of evil to determine his actions, and because he, no one else, sets the rules, he succeeds where the Biblical Adam failed. *The Fountainhead* presents the story of an Adam, inherently an American Adam, who fulfills not only the ideal for man first implied in the Bible, but also the American dream of self-reliance and self-fulfillment.

In *The American Adam*, R.W.B. Lewis suggests that because unsettled America resembled the Biblical paradise, the literature America produced would have its own version of the original Adam,

... an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources.¹

As *The Fountainhead* opens, Howard Roark is this Adam. Roark stands naked on a cliff, laughing and surveying the world around him, "so that the world seemed suspended in space, an island floating on nothing, anchored to the feet of the man on the cliff."² He has no ties to any other human beings: no parents, no friends, not even money. Like Adam, he molds the world around him to suit his own beliefs; Roark lives as an architect who rejects the power of any other architects before him and believes he is the first man to truly know how the earth should look. Lewis asserts though, that like the Biblical Adam, all subsequent Adams will be doomed to fail and that only the hope of a better future remains. Here, Howard Roark's resemblance to Adam stops; unlike the Bible's Adam, Roark succeeds. Perhaps the difference between the two men's fates can be explained by what truth each grounds himself in. The two men have radically different belief structures. While Adam was created to obey and glorify a god, Roark embodies Rand's philosophical theory that man should live to glorify himself as an individual being. Rand propagates the idea that man as an individual should aspire to live his life for himself and himself alone, asking nothing of others and expecting to do nothing in return. In *The Fountainhead*, Roark represents this ideal of a man who preserves his integrity at any cost. While the Bible emphasizes subservience to a superior being as the ultimate purpose of man, Rand believes that man is the superior being and owes no glory to anyone but himself. Rand indirectly suggests that Adam failed because he did not live his life for himself and instead acts as a servant to another being.

The Fountainhead glorifies Howard Roark and denigrates the society that rejects him. The storyline revolves around Roark's attempts to see his modern, nonconforming and highly individual architectural

designs implemented. The other architects in the book design buildings in the classical Greek and Roman traditions; each building looks like a copy of every other building ever built. While architect Peter Keating struggles to put Doric columns and Gothic vaulting on each and every building, Roark creates structures that are designed as individuals, meant specifically for the site on which each should stand, and never to be repeated again. Roark's designs are uniquely non-European and original—the "Americanness" of his ideas will lead to his eventual success. As with most non-conformists, Roark is not well-received by either his peers or by media critics; however, because Roark innately knows he is right, he continues to design even in the face of opposition and does not bow down to the pressures of these conformists. The climax of the novel comes when Roark dynamites a building that he had designed because the building's integrity was destroyed when his plans were cosmetically altered to make the structure look more "classical." When Roark stands in front of a judge and jury to justify his actions, his philosophical explanation of the unalienable rights of man to create and maintain creative control moves them to acquit him of any wrongdoing. Roark emerges from the scandal triumphant and respected, thus overcoming the obstacles put in the way of his pursuit of happiness—obstacles that the original Adam was never able to conquer because the justifications for his actions were wrong.

Within the novel, three men who represent intellectual obstacles to Roark and ultimately society's pursuit of happiness, Peter Keating, Ellsworth Toohey and Gail Wynand, are juxtaposed against Roark's "rightness." Rand created these four men, named each of the four parts of the book after them, and uses them to symbolize Roark's movement toward inevitable success. Peter Keating, a young architect who considers Roark a friend, creates mediocre classical and traditional

architectural designs, really believing they are best; he is philosophically wrong but doesn't know it. Ellsworth Toohey, a popular newspaper columnist and self-proclaimed know-it-all, feels threatened by Roark's strong ideals and fights to see Roark fail even though deep inside him he knows Roark is right; he is philosophically wrong and fully aware of it. Gail Wynand, a newspaper mogul who built his empire from nothing by sacrificing his integrity, befriends Roark because he sees that Roark has the strength to do what he (Wynand) knows is right, but was too weak to do himself; Wynand is philosophically right but chooses not to act accordingly. The characters and actions of these three men not only make Roark's fight harder and his triumph greater, but serve to show the audience just how "right" Roark really is.

Peter Keating commits one of the worst possible sins; he is egotistical without reason. To Ayn Rand, egoism is justified, even expected, when a person lives and thinks in a philosophically correct manner. She expects Howard Roark to be unconsciously egotistical simply because he is right. Peter Keating, on the other hand, has no reason to be self-aggrandizing; he is a parasite. Keating graduates at the top of his class, goes to work at the top architectural firm in the country, and yet still comes to see Roark late at night for help with his designs. Keating submits Roark's design for a low-income housing project (with Roark's permission) and wins world-wide acclaim for the design; later Roark blows up this building because Keating was unable to force the builders to stick to Roark's original design. Because Keating's insecurity forces him to need confirmation of his presumed perfection, and because he realizes that Roark does not care about public opinion, Keating talks Roark into letting him submit the winning design in his name. In public Keating struts pretentiously; alone with Roark, he whines and bleats. Keating fails because he allows public opinion to

determine his own self-worth. The juxtaposition of this parasite with Roark raises the audience's opinion of Roark in a way that simple description of Roark's virtues would not do.

Although Peter employs the wrong values, he means well and is at least a partially sympathetic character. Ellsworth Toohey, however, inspires only revulsion. Beyond all other characters in *The Fountainhead*, Toohey represents the malicious evil to which a society is capable of condescending. Like the snake in Eden, Toohey has no good intentions; he wants only to see Roark fail. Before he is fired, Toohey writes a column for Wynand's newspaper. He spends his time manipulating the feelings of the public; an unfavorable review in Toohey's column costs many people their careers. His favorite aunt once said "You're a maggot, Elsie... You feed on other people's sores." "Then I'll never starve"³ was his answer. Toohey, because he is aware of this power, is more despicable than any other character, as well as more representative of Rand's view that society is an evil force working against the glorification of the human race.

Gail Wynand becomes one of Rand's most tragic characters because he starts out as innocent and right as Roark, but chooses not to act upon his beliefs. If the American dream is to rise out of nothing and become a self-made man, then Wynand has achieved this dream; but because he earns his place in society in a philosophically incorrect manner, Rand does not allow him to be happy. Wynand's attempt to overcome his poverty-stricken upbringing in Hell's Kitchen was admirable in theory, but detestable in method. Rather than stick to his ideals and fight for what he felt was right (as Roark does), Wynand recognized the public's love of scandal and capitalized on it by starting a chain of sleazy, sensationalistic newspapers. He realizes his failure to maintain his own integrity and in spite, responds by trying to destroy people who

possess it. Eventually even his ill-gotten power makes him unhappy, and he tries to commit suicide but is stopped by a symbol of Roark. He attempts to regain his integrity and peace of mind by helping Roark, but is only marginally able to do so. He and Roark become friends because Roark recognizes the spark of "rightness" within him; after Roark's trial, Wynand exiles himself in shame because he sees his past actions for what they really were. Wynand had the potential to be a hero, an Adam, but he allowed the evils of his environment to infiltrate his good intentions and failed. The fact that a man with so much potential failed makes Roark's success more pronounced.

That all three other possible types of men can exist at the same time and in the same place with Roark is a sad comment on the state of Rand's world. Keating, Toohey and Wynand, as representatives of mankind, all have the basic makings of a "right" man; they just fail to achieve their potential. Howard Roark has the "right stuff" to be the man to overcome all evils. Not only does Roark have the right philosophical ideals, but he and his ideas exist in a mutual harmony with the land around him. Roark, like the Biblical Adam realized that the earth was created for his use and as long as his purpose is to glorify rather than soil its image, he would be at one with his environment. Before his death, Roark's mentor commented "Architecture is not a business, not a career, but a crusade and consecration to a joy that justifies the existence of earth."⁴ Rather than destroy the beauty of the earth, Roark intends to alter it and make it even more beautiful, more beautiful because he had touched it.⁵

He looked at the granite. To be cut, he thought, and made into walls. He looked at tree. To be split and made into rafters. He looked at a streak of rust on the stone and thought of the iron ore under the ground. To be melted and to emerge as girders against the sky. These rocks, he

thought, are here for me; waiting for the drill, the dynamite and my voice; waiting to be split, ripped, pounded, reborn; waiting for the shape my hands will give them.⁶

For Howard Roark, the land was a new Eden on which he could build and glorify man by glorifying the land he lived on.

To Ayn Rand and to Howard Roark, integrity and the pursuit of excellence were all that mattered, so the belief that preservation of the land's as well as man's integrity was important to them should not be a surprise. Roark commented to a client "A house can have integrity, just like a person....and just as seldom."⁷ The houses and other buildings Roark designed had integrity because they meshed with the land on which they were built.

The house on the sketches, had been designed not by Roark, but by the cliff on which it stood. It was as if the cliff had grown and completed itself and proclaimed the purpose for which it had been waiting. The house was broken into many levels, following the ledges of the rock, rising as it rose, in gradual masses, in planes flowing together up into one consummate harmony. The walls, of the same granite as the rock, continued its vertical lines upward; the wide, projecting terraces of concrete, silver as the sea, followed the line of the waves, of the straight horizon.⁸

Roark, in theory, designed houses. In reality, he allowed the land to live up to its full potential without harnessing it with the worn-out and "traditional" trappings the Peter Keatings and Ellsworth Tooheys of his misguided world found so attractive.

The climactic end to the book works to preserve the integrity of both Howard Roark and the buildings (Cortlandt Homes) he destroyed, as well as finally defeating Keating, Toohey and Wynand. Earlier within the book, when Roark refuses a million dollar commission because "stylistic changes" in his design were requested, he calls his refusal "the most selfish thing you'll ever see a man do."⁹ It does not

come as a surprise then, that Roark should dynamite Cortlandt Homes because the owners requested a few Doric columns and Ionic freezes and that he should feel completely justified in his actions. The legal battle that ensues serves to define the future simply because the winner will, in effect, have control of it. If Roark should lose in this situation, it is clear his battle against the single-minded, evil society can never be won. Alternately, if Keating and Toohey should lose, the architectural profession and public attitudes could never be the same. The battle parallels the Biblical dilemma, "to eat or not to eat"—the outcome of each determines more than just a single action.

Roark's acquittal and triumph are a promise for the future of architecture and the integrity of man. Keating retreats into a shell, never to be heard from again. Toohey continues to feed on other people's sores, but without the old vim and vigor. Wynand exiles himself in shame, but recognizes that a new generation of men with integrity is coming. While Adam, in paradise, followed what he was told was true and ultimately failed; Howard Roark, in a new paradise, acted upon what he knew to be true and brought a promise for a better future with him. Rand's suggestion that men are doomed to fail unless they place their own ideals above any other beings is proven in other literary figure's, such as Adam's, failure and in the success of Howard Roark. The Biblical story of Adam ends with a defeated Adam's exile from paradise and a vague promise for a better future. *The Fountainhead* ends with exhilarated Howard Roark elevated to god-like stature, implying that to follow his own ideals will be man's greatest triumph. "Then there was only the ocean and the sky and the figure of Howard Roark."¹⁰ Howard Roark is Ayn Rand's version of "the word made flesh."

NOTES

¹ Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p.5.

² Rand, Ayn. *The Fountainhead*. (New York: Signet Books, 1943), p. 15.

³ Rand, p. 298.

⁴ Rand, p. 81.

⁵ Rand admitted that the architectural styles Roark employs are based on the Prairie Home style created by modern American Architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Branden, Barbara. *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1986), p. 140.

⁶ Rand, p.16.

⁷ Rand, p. 136.

⁸ Rand, p. 125.

⁹ Rand, p. 198.

¹⁰ Rand, p. 695.

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