

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand

## Book Information

Ayn Rand, The Fountainhead

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Book Level: 7.0

Interest Level: UG

A young architect has an explosive love affair with a beautiful woman who struggles to defeat him.

**Topics:** Careers, Architect; Classics, Classics (All); Community Life, Freedoms; Emotions, Love; Popular Groupings, College Bound

## Main Characters

Catherine Halsey Ellsworth Toohey's niece, a sweet and selfless girl who is rejected by Peter Keating and becomes an embittered social worker

Dominique Francon an exquisitely beautiful woman, who recognizes Roark's greatness and finally achieves what is necessary in herself to be with him

Ellsworth Toohey a self-proclaimed architectural expert and newspaper columnist, who uses his influence to promote mediocrity and dampen individualism

Gail Wynand a ruthless and powerful newspaper magnate, who meets Howard Roark, and who discovers the greatness within himself, but is unable to live up to it

Guy Francon a partner in Manhattan's most successful architectural firm

Henry Cameron the one architect whose work Roark most wants to emulate, who becomes Roark's mentor and friend

Howard Roark a visionary architect who is misunderstood by the public, vilified by his contemporaries, and deeply admired by a few individual

Peter Keating a successful Manhattan architect and contemporary of Roark's, who desires greatness in the eyes of others, but believes none of it himself

## Vocabulary

**altruism** unselfish concern for the welfare of others

**blackguard** a scoundrel or villain

**bromide** a trite saying or statement

**cartouche** a scroll-like ornament or architectural feature

**facade** the front part of a building, usually facing the street

**fenestration** the arrangement of windows and doors in a building

## Synopsis

As the story opens, architecture student Howard Roark is being thrown out of the prestigious Stanton Institute of Technology for designing buildings his own way. His classmate, Peter Keating, receives accolades for his assignments, which mostly involve rehashing designs from the various historical periods. While Keating lands a choice position with Guy Francon, Manhattan's leading architect, Roark seeks out Henry Cameron, a free-thinking architect whose work Roark seeks to emulate. Cameron immediately recognizes a kindred spirit in Roark, but warns him that the world will seek to destroy him.

As Keating begins his career, he perpetrates every ploy possible to get ahead. He cultivates the right contacts and practices architecture according to the lowest common denominator of public taste. He even eschews Catherine, the one person with whom he can be himself, for fear that she would hurt his image. Meanwhile, Roark and Cameron struggle to hold body and soul together.

After Cameron retires and Roark is forced to close his own short-lived office, he goes to work in Francon's Connecticut granite quarry. It is there that he meets Dominique Francon, and the two are instantly connected by mutual need and admiration. When they return separately to New York, Dominique vows to shake off Roark's inexplicable hold over her by sabotaging his commissions and marrying Peter Keating. Meanwhile, she maintains

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an intense but sporadic sexual relationship with Roark.

Roark loses commission after commission when he refuses to accommodate the common preferences of potential clients. On rare occasions, an individual will be strong enough to withstand public pressure and commission Roark to design a building. These few individualists recognize Roark's singular greatness and become lifelong friends. One commission involves a monument to religion called the Stoddard Temple. Roark's completed building is entirely misunderstood by the public, and he is sued by his former client for the cost of renovating the structure. The prime witness against him is Dominique Francon.

Ellsworth Toohey is a self-proclaimed architectural expert who uses his position in the press to mold public opinion. In his newspaper columns and work with various "associations" of artists, architects, and writers, he seeks to squelch individualism and promote the idea that no one person should be considered greater than any other. The reader comes to understand that Toohey is well aware of Roark's genius, and it is a great threat to him. He seeks to build up Keating's reputation as a comfortable counterpoint to Roark's greatness.

When Dominique Francon first meets newspaper magnate Gail Wynand, she is being used as a bribe to secure a commission for her husband. The two are surprised to discover a mutual respect, and it is soon decided that she will divorce Keating and marry Wynand. After realizing that both respect the work of such visionaries as Howard Roark and Steven Mallory, Wynand commissions Roark to design a home for himself and Dominique. Roark and Wynand become inseparable, and Dominique waits silently for Roark to allow her to come to him.

A crisis occurs after Roark strikes a bargain with a degraded Peter Keating to design a revolutionary housing complex called Cortlandt Homes. Roark agrees to do the design if Keating will promise not to allow any alterations. When Keating is unable to keep his promise, Roark destroys the building and is

put on trial for the crime. During this time, a personal crisis is occurring in the life of Gail Wynand. His defense of Roark in the pages of the *Banner* is killing circulation, and the point comes when a decision must be made between the newspaper and the visionary spirit he has discovered in himself since meeting Roark. After Wynand fails this test of will, Dominique divorces him and begins to openly ally herself with Roark.

The story climaxes at Roark's trial for destruction of Cortlandt Homes. He delivers an impassioned speech in which he explains the need for individual vision and the dangers of the crowd mentality. He is acquitted of the crime.

In the final scene, Roark is pictured at the site of the Wynand building, which Wynand asked him to "build for the spirit which is yours ... and which could have been mine." Roark is seen as a transcendent figure, rising above the city, even above the steeples of the churches. "In the end, there was only the ocean and the sky and the figure of Howard Roark."

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

After Gail Wynand meets Howard Roark, the two develop a deep friendship. Dominique inquires about Wynand's feelings for Roark, asking, "What is he to you, Gail? In the nature of a shrine?" "No," replied her husband, "in the nature of a hair shirt." A hair shirt was an uncomfortable garment worn as a penance by religious ascetics of the Middle Ages. In this context, what is the meaning of Wynand's remark?

*In referring to Roark as his "hair shirt," Wynand is admitting a sense of guilt and remorse over the life he has led. In Roark, he sees and recognizes the greatness of spirit that could have been his. Roark's presence in his life likely gives him hope that it is not too late to throw off the past and fulfill a greater destiny.*

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## Literary Analysis

Catherine Halsey is a minor character, but she provides an interesting illustration of the author's attitude toward "selflessness" and altruism. How does the author use the life of this character to make a point about these topics?

*Early in the story, Katie is almost ridiculously "selfless" when it comes to her relationship with Peter Keating, allowing him to set all the terms of their romantic relationship. Later, she comes under the influence of her uncle, Ellsworth Toohey, and learns that selflessness is the ultimate ideal of mankind. After Peter rejects her to marry Dominique, she turns to a life as a social worker, but discovers unpleasant truths about herself and others of her profession--they are becoming demanding and embittered, insisting on abject gratitude from those they serve. This helps to illustrate the author's point that altruism is practiced by people who are "selfless" in the worst sense of the word--people who do not trust the greatness within themselves, who rely not on their own power and view of what is right, but on the collective opinions of others. Catherine's life shows us that the denial of the self leads only to frustration and bitterness.*

## Inferential Comprehension

What is it about Ellsworth Toohey that makes him the most despicable of all the characters in the book?

*Many characters in the book struggle with the idea of individual greatness and what to do about it. Some, like many of the architects who are Roark's and Keating's contemporaries, simply do not recognize it when they see it. Keating understands the talent and value of a visionary like Roark, but is too weak to live up to such principles in his own life. Gail Wynand seeks to attain greatness in the manner of Roark, but finds himself unequal to a challenge to his resolve. Toohey understands very well that men like Roark and Mallory are "creators," but far from glorifying them, he perpetrates many devices to repress them as individuals and maintain the "lowest common denominator" in literature, art, and architecture. He molds public opinion through his newspaper column, makes speeches at labor rallies, and promotes the idea of "associations" of artists and writers. By the end of the book, Toohey admits that his motivation in all this is power, and that he wishes to break the souls of men so they can be ruled.*

## Constructing Meaning

When the Dean of the Stanton Institute is expelling an "insubordinate" Howard Roark, he points to a picture of the Parthenon as the ultimate in architectural achievement. Roark is unable to hide his contempt. In your own words, summarize Roark's views on the use of classical styles and devices in modern architecture.

*Roark complains that modern architects fail to create new forms to serve the needs of a new age. He believes that each building must be totally unique and be designed in accordance with the materials available, the site, and the purpose of each. He decries the practice of "borrowing" bits and pieces of ornamentation from the past, declaring that "a building doesn't borrow hunks of its soul. Its maker gives it the soul...."*

## Teachable Skills

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**Understanding Literary Features** The major theme of *The Fountainhead* is the value of the individual genius and the folly of altruists who distrust the idea of the glorification of the self. Stage a classroom debate on the value of altruism versus that of individualism.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** While reading *The Fountainhead*, students may have found an interest sparked in the subject of modern architecture. As a class assignment, research the topic "Philosophy of Modern Architecture" in books, encyclopedias, or the Internet. What is the thinking of today's architects about the use of classical design in modern buildings?

**Responding to Literature** Ellsworth Toohey sets himself up as an expert in many fields, and his influence in molding the minds of the public is significant. In modern American life, we are exposed to "experts," pundits, and specialists who affect our own view of the world. As a class writing assignment, ask students to identify some of today's "Tooheys," what they do, and how they shape our ideas about the world in which we live.

**Understanding the Main Idea** At his Cortlandt Homes trial, Roark explains that there are two types of people in the world, the "creators" and the "second handers." The creators are those visionaries in any field who flout public tastes and opinion to create according to their own criteria. Second handers receive their glory only from the admiration and approval of others. Conduct a class discussion on the "creators" that exist in our own world and those who have achieved greatness in the past. Assemble a blackboard list of the students' choices for ten greatest "creators" of all time.