

## The Great American Novel

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*The Fountainhead: An American Novel*

Douglas J. Den Uyl

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The publication of Douglas Den Uyl's reading of *The Fountainhead* is a signal event in the critical evolution of Ayn Rand studies. Whatever the content of *The Fountainhead: An American Novel*, the fact that this study of an Ayn Rand novel has been published as part of the Twayne Masterwork Studies series is, in and of itself, a landmark of sorts. *The Fountainhead* is in the company of volumes that focus on such universally acknowledged classics as Emily Brönte's *Wuthering Heights*, William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. This is an orthodox assembly by any standard, the canon, for all intents and purposes, and, if one cannot argue that this is de facto canonization, the very presence of *The Fountainhead* in the series is still recognition of some consequence. Twayne is not a university press, but this series is designed to aid in the study of classic literature and is targeted for academic use. Most university libraries carry numerous volumes from this and the individual author series. Furthermore, Den Uyl's study is the first book devoted exclusively to the study any of Rand's novels. Previous book-length studies have been either biographies or synoptic in scope.

It stands to reason then that there should be joy abroad in Objectivist circles, because if there is one paradoxical constant among Rand admirers, of myriad political persuasions and degrees of orthodoxy, it has been the loud and persistent complaining about the less than respectful treatment of Rand by the academy. Universities,

they argue, either reject Rand because of her political stances and anti-leftist themes or ignore her work because they do not categorize it as "serious" fiction, but as best sellers. At the same time, Rand admirers, like Rand herself, are highly critical of the academy and reject much that passes for standard practice there.

Notwithstanding, and no matter how disdainful Rand and her admirers may have been and are of university professors, it is hard not to think that she would have been pleased with her classification in a series such as this. If she believed in an afterlife, which she most certainly did not, it would be nice to imagine her in some Olympus of writers, taking her place in the ranks of this August assembly, right next to her adored, Victor Hugo. After all, he was one of the few authors she admired and whose work spoke to her sense of life. "I love the work of Victor Hugo," she wrote, "in a deeper sense than admiration for his superlative literary genius" (Rand 1971, 43). Enjolras in *Les Misérables* was one of her favorite characters in all of literature. It might be worth adding that she would not be as comfortable with the rest of the assemblage, although she did allow that Tolstoy was a good writer, even if his "philosophy and his sense of life are not merely mistaken, but evil" (43). So much for the very fact of the volume.

Let me digress a bit to explain that, for all the aforementioned complaints about Rand in the academy, I have never had difficulty teaching Ayn Rand in any of my classes or having work about her published in traditional academic journals. As far back as 1978, *College English*, the official journal of the National Council of Teachers of English, published my first article on Rand. In 1981, Greenwood Press came to me with the idea of doing an *Ayn Rand Companion*, which they published in 1984. The idea for the volume *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand* (1999) also came by invitation from a prestigious university press.

Still, it is undeniable that there is not an abundance of material about Rand published by university presses or in academic journals. And Den Uyl makes that telling point in his chapter about critical reception. After the paucity of reviews of the initial printing of *The Fountainhead*—the first of Rand's novels to bring her significant attention—that book, like much of Rand's fiction, continues to be "relatively neglected" (19). This, he concludes is due to the fact that

it is often difficult to separate what the critics think about *The Fountainhead* from what they think about the whole of Rand's corpus of work and often gets mixed in with reactions to her personality and politics.

Den Uyl's book is a welcome corrective to the dearth of critical attention to *The Fountainhead* and yields perceptive insights. Having read the novel a number of times in the course of my life, first as a high school student and then when I wrote my first book on Rand and then reading every piece of criticism I could find about it in order to write the relevant sections of *The Ayn Rand Companions*, original and new editions, I thought I knew the novel well. But Den Uyl's interpretation accomplishes what good criticism should. It made me see the work anew, discover things about it I had not thought about. It challenged some of my previous interpretations.

Before I had read Den Uyl's study, I wondered at the wisdom of Twayne's assigning this work about a novel to a philosopher instead of a literary critic. After all, literature professors, not philosophers, are usually called upon when the work in question is fiction. I wondered how Den Uyl's approach might suffer from the differences in the disciplines.<sup>1</sup> My concerns were unwarranted. Not only was I pleasantly surprised at Den Uyl's adroitness as a literary critic, but actually a bit envious. I wish I had said or thought these things first.

*The Fountainhead: An American Novel* is divided into two parts. The first provides literary and historical context. The second is titled "A Reading" and furnishes the heart of the interpretation. It all begins in Chapter One of the first part with a presentation of historical context; the chapter also contains sections on literary context and the facts of Rand's life. This part of the book is brief and succinct, in the service of creating a general sense of the times and the author. Those interested in a more detailed presentation of historical, literary, or biographical data have any number of other works they can consult and Den Uyl's bibliography provides an adequate listing to get the reader started. This volume is not an exhaustive study of Rand, her philosophy, or her works. It is a study of one novel, geared to the general reader and undergraduate student, who are interested either for personal reasons, or to provide a resource for basic study.

Following the general paradigm of the series, the next chapter

considers the "importance of the work." In a way, the task of Chapter Two is to present justification for the placement of *The Fountainhead* in this series. Den Uyl explores the problems inherent in judging *The Fountainhead* in its own right, of "moving it out from under the shadow of Rand's magnum opus, *Atlas Shrugged*, and from Rand's later nonfiction writing and reputation" (13). Surprisingly, Den Uyl ignores those few critics who have valued *The Fountainhead* and might help him make his case. He does not cite Ronald Merrill (1991, 45) whose evaluation was that, "judged purely as a piece of literature, *The Fountainhead* is Ayn Rand's best work"; neither does he note my earlier and similar evaluation that, from a strictly literary perspective, *The Fountainhead* is a better novel than *Atlas Shrugged* (Gladstein 1984, 36). Even James T. Baker, whose assessments of Rand's merits as a writer are generally severe, calls *The Fountainhead* "quite a novel, perhaps the best Ayn Rand wrote" and "more important than its detractors think" (Baker 1987, 57). This is a puzzling omission as Baker's assessment came in his volume for Twayne's United States Author Series, a parallel series to the one this book is in.

Instead, Den Uyl contends that both Rand and her admirers want her works to be viewed as a seamless whole and that is what he defines as an impediment to analysis of this single work. He argues that one way of understanding the importance of *The Fountainhead* is to ignore what Rand was to write after 1945 so as to evaluate the work in terms of its own period. This is key to his subsequent argument about Rand giving voice to values like individualism "that were not then getting expression elsewhere in the literary, artistic, or political world" (14). Quoting Crèvecoeur and Dean Alfange's "The American Creed," Den Uyl situates *The Fountainhead* among these presentations of the uncommon character that defines the common man in America.

It is in this chapter that Den Uyl presents his thesis, one amply supported throughout the volume: "*The Fountainhead* is the quintessential presentation of American individualism, American optimism, and the promise that is America" (14). The emphasis on the American qualifier for individualism, optimism and promise piqued my interest. I had always thought of Rand's theme as universal.<sup>2</sup> Why Den Uyl should see this novel as presenting them as

quintessentially American did not strike me immediately. Den Uyl's thesis was provocative and it was incumbent upon him to prove it. This he does in a methodical, step-by-step process that exemplifies paradigmatic thesis development, the deductive process at work. But, it does not all come together until the concluding chapter.

Before Den Uyl begins to build his careful and incremental case, there is an intervening chapter with a brief discussion of the critical reception, or should I say, lack of critical attention accorded *The Fountainhead*. The chapter is necessarily short, as there is not much to fill it, but Den Uyl does note two significant themes that have attracted some critical attention, themes that have their foundation in *The Fountainhead*. These are individualism and feminism. Noting a tension between them, particularly in terms of Rand studies, Den Uyl first details the historical and contemporary feminist critiques of Rand, culminating in the recently published *Feminist Interpretations of Ayn Rand*. This anthology has a number of essays that address various aspects of Rand's novel from a feminist perspective, but Den Uyl's descriptions of them are minimal.

In "Looking Through a Paradigm Darkly," Wendy McElroy (1999, 167) argues that Dominique is a model of strength, intelligence and independence, "an ideal woman whose true fulfillment depends on being ravished by an ideal man." This is because, according to McElroy, who speaks as an individualist feminist, Rand's conception of sexuality occupies a psychological and cultural universe antagonistic to that of radical or collectivist feminists. *The Fountainhead* also plays a key role in Barry Vacker's argument that reads the character of Howard Roark as the expression of Rand's theme of artistic and spiritual integrity.

Unaccountably, Den Uyl does not even mention the essays of the two literary critics in the anthology. This is regrettable because Judith Wilt and Melissa Jane Hardie are representative of mainstream academia, professors at prestigious universities.<sup>3</sup> As such, they represent exactly that kind of scholar whom Objectivists accuse of ignoring Rand; both publish in areas other than Rand studies. Wilt's essay "The Romances of Ayn Rand" contains a singular analysis of *The Fountainhead*, which, among other things, discusses the theme of Romantic triangles, and the apocalyptic tenor of Rand's works, what Wilt calls "a Lawrentian environment of earth ritual and sacramental

violence" (1999b, 182). Hardie's iconoclastic essay, "Rereading Rand's Camp Feminist Aesthetics," invokes such theorists as Umberto Eco, Susan Sontag, and Andrew Ross to reinterpret Rand through a refreshingly provocative camp perspective (Hardie 1999). After all, a woman such as Rand whose tastes ran to Mickey Spillane and "Charlie's Angels," showed decided inclinations to just such an aesthetic. Den Uyl gives only a passing nod to a few of the writers and critical essays that focus on *The Fountainhead*, less than two pages, moving quickly to a slightly lengthier discussion about the issue of individualism.

For Den Uyl, "Rand's individualism . . . lends ambiguity to her feminism" (23). But, he explains, just as there is argument among feminists as to whether Rand does or does not meet the requirements of that category, so there is also question about her particular type of individualism. He enumerates the critics that line up in support of or in opposition to Rand's consistency as an individualist. His listing is not meant to be exhaustive; there are many attackers and defenders who are not named. Still, just as in the case of the writers left out of his discussion of the feminist critics, I was sorry not to see listed among those questioning Rand's brand of individualism such writers as Michael Shermer (1993) or Nora Sayre (1966). But, I quibble. The critics one chooses to note are often a matter of personal preference. In toto, the introductory material is brief—three chapters that add up to some 22 pages. Den Uyl then turns to his own reading of Rand's novel.

The first section of the reading identifies *The Fountainhead* as "A Philosophical Novel," more specifically "a novel about ideas." And though *The Fountainhead* may have inspired a number of people to aspire to careers as architects, Den Uyl stresses that architecture is only the subject chosen in order for Rand to express her ideas. It is an apt subject, for, as he points out, "[a]rchitecture blends nicely the artistic on the one hand and the scientific or technological on the other" (30). What he does make clear in this chapter is the importance of the characters as the sum and substance of the ideas Rand wishes to convey, in particular the character of Howard Roark as the embodiment of individualism. For the reader who is neither a philosopher nor a literary critic, Den Uyl explains in a deceptively uncomplicated manner why *The Fountainhead* is a philosophical novel

and how that means "both that it is a novel about ideas of a philosophical nature and that it offers a philosophy about those ideas" (32).

Den Uyl's reading does not avoid unfavorable criticisms that have been leveled at Rand's writing, although he does not spend a great deal of time on them. "The validity of Rand's philosophy of art is not, in any case, our concern here," he explains (42). He takes a similar position on the issue of Rand's understanding of Plato and her often-stated antipathy to him. For Den Uyl, whatever her statements, Rand's view of philosophy is "socratic" (36). A good portion of this chapter is spent explaining this position. He begins his explanation with the argument that "Socrates' whole project of questioning, suggests that philosophy is first of all an intellectual activity in the service of human life—that is, of living well . . . [and] because of this contribution to human life, essentially a moral enterprise" (36). He then cites a number of sources, such as letters, writings and Rand's introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The Fountainhead* to prove that Rand's works are essentially socratic. Rand's words, that her purpose is the "portrayal of a moral ideal," illustrate for Den Uyl, her "unique way of integrating the philosophical and the aesthetic" (37). Den Uyl also situates Rand's writing within the context of the perfectionism of socratic philosophy and its individualism. Although he does not want to argue the issue of Rand's Romanticism, he does provide the reader with enough explication to position *The Fountainhead* within the framework of Rand's purpose as a "Romantic realist," particularly in "romanticism's inherent identification with human potential and moral choice" (42).

Den Uyl also fits Rand's "sense of life" in the context of Socratic philosophy in that it holds that the pursuit of perfection is conducive to human well being. He touches on the issues of whether or not Rand is overly optimistic and idealistic, of whether her projection of the possible is realistic, and identifies these as questions worthy of consideration. His contention, however, is that Rand's fiction is so "radically normative" that all aspects of it serve to project values and principles. He concludes that Rand's novels are "a literary expression of philosophy and art conjoined in human action" (45).

Chapter 5, "Characters as Ideas," opens with some preliminary comments about Rand's choice to name the four sections of the book

after four of the five main characters. It is then subdivided into sections on those individuals, Peter Keating, Ellsworth Toohey, Gail Wynand, and Howard Roark. Discussion of Dominique, who does not have a section of the book named for her, is reserved for the subsequent chapter. Den Uyl interprets Peter Keating as a character who begins the novel as someone who is easy to identify with, one whose incremental corruption could be the reader's. In the development of Keating's character as a second-hander who cuts corners, Den Uyl explains, Rand illustrates how "the little compromises of our integrity we make along the way . . . are the steps by which the voids left in our integrity get filled by the opinions or approval of others" (49). Keating's corruption, while not excusable, is understandable. With this reading, because he is more pathetic than evil, we can feel sorry for Keating in the end.

Toohey, by contrast, is a thoroughgoing villain. He knows what he is doing, even defines himself as one who wants to collect human souls and use his power for destruction of what is good. There is nothing groundbreaking or surprising about this analysis. It follows most readings of the novel. This is not a criticism of Den Uyl's execution. The purpose of this book is to present the general reader with clear and solid readings, not challenges to standard interpretations except for good reason. This Den Uyl does in the next chapter.

Maybe the most distinctive aspect of Den Uyl's interpretation of the novel is his development of the thesis that Dominique is the central character in the novel. He makes the point and argues it well, that though she does not represent the ideal, she pervades all the sections of the novel, the sections devoted to the men. He explains: "Though the novel is not written from Dominique's perspective, it is nonetheless through her eyes that the reader sees its world" (63). This hypothesis is not unique with Den Uyl, and, in fact, he cites Merrill (1991) who wrote, in *The Ideas of Ayn Rand*, that Dominique is the real protagonist of *The Fountainhead*. However, Merrill did not spend much time developing this thesis. Den Uyl accomplishes what Merrill did not, devoting an entire chapter to the working out of this opinion.

A key to Den Uyl's construal of Dominique's centrality in the novel is his location of her as both representative of the author and the reader. He cites Rand's oft quoted remark that Dominique was

herself "in a bad mood." But he also argues that Dominique is a representation of the reader's bad mood, more specifically the reader's discouragement with the state of the world. Dominique is, in Den Uyl's characterization, "the hyperbolic literary expression of that discouragement" (70). The reader thus moves through the events of the novel with Dominique, gaining insight and encouragement, as she does, through her relationship with Howard Roark and his triumph. As Dominique learns, so do we. This is not to say that Den Uyl is insensitive to the stumbling block Dominique's extreme behavior puts in the way of our identification with her. This works to the good in his opinion, because in the process of both identifying with and recognizing the differences between Dominique and us, readers are helped in clarifying the values of self-respect, integrity, and productive work.

This argument made me rethink my reaction to the character, a reaction that is often less than sympathetic. Dominique's willful self-flagellation makes me want to replicate one of my favorite scenes from *Moonstruck*. In it, the Cher character's reaction to the Nicolas Cage character, as he whines about how he cannot live without her, is to slap him and say: "Get over it!" I often think of that scene when faced with people who wallow in their own pain and self-pity or persist in neurotic behaviors.

Den Uyl acknowledges that there are good reasons why Dominique's character presents problems for the reader—she is little else but Roark's lover and would-be destroyer, not independently productive—but he argues that she functions more successfully than has sometimes been claimed. It strikes me that another critical approach to the roles of Dominique and Roark as they represent the working out of Rand's "sense of life" would be to see them as Hemingway critics identify two kinds of key characters in Hemingway novels. Just as Rand's philosophy is projected through her characters, so what has come to be called the "Hemingway Code," is projected through his. Characters are judged by how much or how little they exemplify that code. Often, the plot involves a Hemingway hero—the protagonist usually—who is trying to learn, as Jake Barnes puts it, "how to live in it." Just as the protagonist or Hemingway hero is trying to learn the values, there is also what critics identify as the Code Hero, one who already knows the values. Like Hemingway

heroes, Dominique and, to a lesser extent, Dagny in *Atlas Shrugged*, learn the values from Rand's Code Heroes, Roark and Galt, who exemplify them.

In the next chapter, on sympathy and judgment, Den Uyl again addresses this issue of our ability to enter sympathetically into the actions and lives of Rand's characters. To explain how Rand achieves her purposes, he analyzes the primary literary devices she uses. Den Uyl chooses a scene between Henry Cameron and Howard Roark to illustrate how Rand gains overall sympathy for her positive characters as competent underdogs, "victims of injustice." Then he uses narrative passages describing Peter Keating's reactions to his mother to explain how Rand deconstructs and recomposes our ordinary responses so as to encourage us to use judgment rather than our first emotional reaction. In particular, he explains how Rand overturns "general positive connotations associated with such terms as *altruism*, *selflessness*, and *equality*" (78).

Den Uyl identifies the "rape" scene as the "most notorious example of readers having trouble sympathizing with the characters in the text" (80). He points out the difficulties in reconciling the language of the text about the act as one of scorn, defilement and submission, devoid of tenderness, and the justifications—with the rationalizations of it, including Rand's—that if it is rape it is rape by engraved invitation. The "rape scene"—in fact, the repeated character of Rand's privileging of violent sex—has certainly drawn its share of critical comment. There are apologists, such as Robert Sheaffer, who explain that to read the scene as rape is "to misunderstand the subtleties of sex" (Sheaffer 1999, 304). Or there are those who contextualize Roark's brutal "sexual encounter," within a larger framework of symbolic acts. In this same reading, Roark's abandonment of Dominique is represented as "Rand's belief in the complete independence and self-responsibility of the individual" (Cox 1993, 20). No such explanations work for Susan Love Brown, who sees Rand's portrayal of the "the initiation of sex and love as an act of sadomasochism and of feminine subordination and passivity" (Brown 1999, 289). Den Uyl posits a number of conclusions, among them that the scene may be "idiosyncratic" in that it may be more "Rand's idea of romance than ours." He also questions how someone like Dominique would "not know that the pleasure she feels would have

to be in response to some real value" (81).

Den Uyl then turns from the rape issue to conclude the chapter with a clarification of what he calls the Randian literary device of "sense of life." For him, Rand's idea of "sense of life" and its contribution to art is "one of the most insightful and intriguing of [her] philosophical notions" (85). Nevertheless, Den Uyl also points out the problems with the concept as presented in Rand's work. Among these is the issue of whether one can develop that sense and what the developmental and procedural aspects are that go into making up a "sense of life." Furthermore, Den Uyl notes that there are "very few signs of intellectual development in Rand's heroes" (85). For them, there is no process the reader can follow to see how they developed the ideal characters they have. He sees Rand as trying to make up for this problem with the long, philosophical speeches she has her heroes deliver, but is not convinced that this resolves inherent difficulties in the process. Still, though Den Uyl does not shy from advancing a number of questions about the efficacy of Rand's technique, he concludes with the statement that the "moral hazards" of Rand's art do not "undermine the tremendous magnitude of that achievement" (87).

In the next chapter, appropriately titled "Individualism," the reader finds much of the heart of Den Uyl's reading of *The Fountainhead* as a quintessentially American novel. He begins with the statement: "If nothing else, *The Fountainhead* is a novel that depicts the meaning of individualism" (88). Den Uyl, the philosopher, shines forth in crucial discussions about the distinctions between individualism as a social or political doctrine and as a state of character or approach to life. He begins by focusing on Roark's speech at the end of the novel. Rand describes Roark as "a man totally innocent of fear" and for the purposes of clarifying how Rand's art distills this complex abstraction into an emotion, Den Uyl questions the nature of that "innocence." He concludes that "innocence" as it characterizes Howard Roark, is the state of not being corrupted, which is, not letting emotion substitute for judgment. Independence of mind is an essential characteristic of the individualist. The rest of the chapter grapples with issues raised by the literal, personal and metaphysical components of Rand's optimism, focusing chiefly on Roark's self-defense at his trial. It is here that Den Uyl returns to his thesis,

making the specific case that were it not for the fact that the members of the jury were Americans, it could be argued that they would have done to Roark what he said previous groups had always done to innovators.

Rand has written the "great American novel." This is Den Uyl's conclusion. He acknowledges Stephen Cox for identifying the peculiarly "American" quality of the novel, but he criticizes Cox for qualifying the opinion by adding the caveat that Rand is imagining America from a point outside conventional American opinion.<sup>4</sup> Den Uyl argues that Rand, through Roark, is not so much asking readers to reimagine as she is asking them to recapture the individualism essential to the building of America. He quotes Roark's speech—"This, our country. The noblest country in the history of men"—and sees this as a call to return to the intrinsic principles upon which America was built. "Individualism is essential to, and at the core of America," Den Uyl concludes, and, therefore, "in and of itself . . . very much a perspective from the inside" (105).

However, Den Uyl grants that there is a form of reimagining in the novel, one central to Roark and America. That is a kind of transformation and ascension of the status quo. It is embodied in the final scene of the novel, which Den Uyl reads as a transcending of the symbols of current civilization, a move to open frontier and untrammelled space. "Roark stands before all that is wide open, just as America is said to have unlimited possibilities," Den Uyl reminds us. The final sentence in the novel ends with the solitary figure of Howard Roark, standing alone in that high place of open space, "an image of individualism." For Den Uyl, "if individualism really is central to Americanism, then *The Fountainhead* is the quintessential American novel" (108). He makes a good case.

## Notes

1. My prejudice stemmed, in part, from an experience I had once when I team-taught a course with a colleague in the philosophy department. Although the course went well and it was an exhilarating experience for the most part, at one point we spent a half-hour arguing about a question on the final exam, only to find out that our problem was a semantic one. What he called formalism in philosophy was a very different thing from what we call formalism in literary criticism. We both wanted the students to do the same thing, but we were fighting because we were not speaking the same language.

2. Stephen Cox (1993) explicates the peculiarly American characteristics of the novel in the monograph *The Fountainhead: A Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration*. However, as the monograph is an in-house publication for The Objectivist Center (formerly the Institute for Objectivist Studies) and is a reprint of speeches given at a celebration of the novel, it has not had the same circulation as something published by an independent press.

3. Wilt, who chaired the English Department at Boston College for many years, also wrote a response to my 1978 *College English* article. See Wilt 1999a for a reprint of this article.

4. Cox argues his thesis about the importance of Rand's retention of the "outsider's perspective" again in Cox 1999.

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