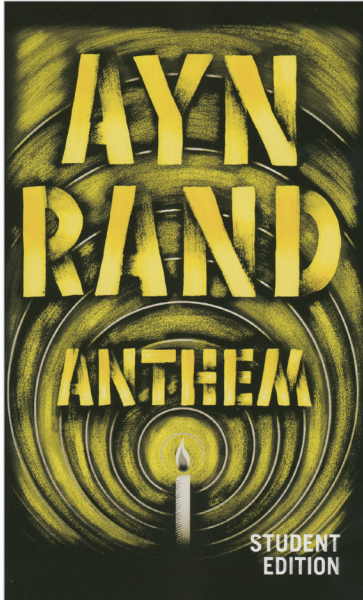


2020 ANTHEM WINNING ESSAY 11TH–12TH GRADE



FIRST PLACE



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What does Equality’s society regard as sinful or transgressive, and what does it regard as holy or sacred? How does Equality’s view of what is sinful and sacred come to change by the end of the story? How do you think his ultimate view of what is sacred differs from our own society’s view of the sacred?

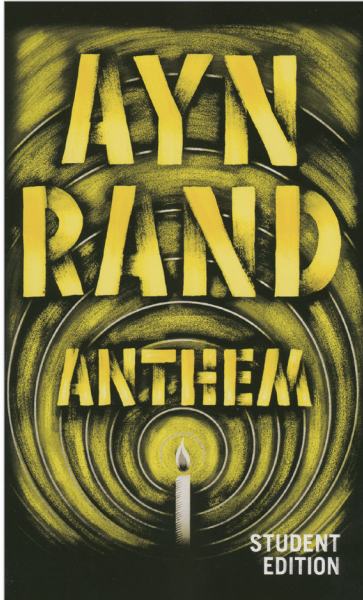
Collectivism and pure “selflessness”—these two concepts are the sacred doctrines that dictate Ayn Rand’s dystopian society in *Anthem*. These ideologies, which she abhors, impel citizens to sacrifice their desires, values, and well-being to serve their brothers and sisters; those who disobey these rules are classified as sinners. While most constituents in this world mindlessly abide by the Councils’ doctrines, some are inherently unable to do so. Equality 7-2521, one of the few born with an unquenchable desire for knowledge, tries to assimilate into this culture and foster a “selfless” mindset, but he struggles to do so as he yearns to pursue individual happiness. As he explored forbidden realms and rediscovered the past, Equality realizes the faults of collectivist ideology and ultimately champions the antithesis of his society’s beliefs—individualism.

Ever since the Great Rebirth, the Councils established collectivism as the supreme law citizens must abide by. This ideology disillusions civilians to believe that serving the State and others will bring one happiness. People repeat mantras like “We are one in all and all in one. There are no men but only the great WE” (19) to remind themselves that their existence alone is meaningless unless it is part of a uniform, societal body. The word “we” automatically confines the individual and prevents one from defining himself as an independent being. The Councils even obliterate words that contrast with their collectivist ideals, such as the Unspeakable Word, “I.” Ultimately, collectivism and equality are mechanisms used to shroud individuality, the most reprehensible crime. To discourage one from exercising his intellect and individual talents, the Councils explicitly state that “none among men may be alone, ever and at any time, for this is the great transgression and the root of all evil” (17). Even though the Councils declare many actions as evil, it is understandable why they would perceive solitude as the worst of sins. Solitude provides an ideal atmosphere for one to realize his self-potential and reconsider the practices of their collectivist society. Without the supervision of others, one might conceive of radical thoughts and realize that collectivism doesn’t produce the happiness they desire. This is the Councils’ deepest fear: if citizens were to discover their power as individuals, the homogenous world that they construct would shatter immediately.

Initially, Equality revered the Council’s ideology and scorned his intellectual and physical differences. However, he was “born with a curse . . . [which] has always driven us to thoughts which are forbidden” (18), such as preferring one profession or person over another. He longed to be a Scholar so he could uncover the great truths of the

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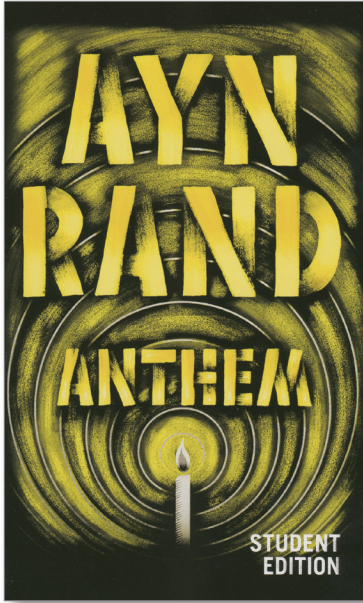
earth, but instead, the Councils assign him to be a Street Sweeper to prevent him from threatening the status quo. Equality readily accepts this verdict as punishment for his transgressions, convincing himself that he “would work for our brothers, gladly and willingly, and we would erase our sin against them” (26). But despite multiple attempts to behave like his brothers, his desire to grow intellectually was too strong to resist. Throughout the novel, Equality commits several crimes, such as uncovering underground tunnels and ancient manuscripts, and even rediscovering electricity; yet, instead of harboring guilt, he found unexplainable pleasure in his actions. These discoveries left such a profound impact on his mind that he decided to present his knowledge to the World Council so others could experience the elation he felt. But their reaction is not what he hoped for: not only are they horrified to see a Street Sweeper transgress his duties, but they are enraged to see that an individual has exercised such power against the laws of collectivism.

It was not until Equality escaped into the Uncharted Forest that he understood the individualist philosophy. Living in pure solitude and away from the cities, he could contemplate what it meant to live a meaningful, satisfactory life. For years, collectivism could never satisfy his innate desire to pursue true happiness, even though the Councils preached that the happiness of his brothers equals personal joy. The dramatic climax of *Anthem* and Equality’s internal struggle finally reach a resolution when he discovers what the Unspeakable Word is. This word alone made him weep “in deliverance and in pity for all mankind. . . . I understood why the best in me had been my sins and my transgressions” (98). This enlightening realization finally gave him the answers he sought for: no matter how much the Councils suppress the individual, they can never eradicate an inherent part of the human spirit. He makes the bold declaration that individuals are not indebted to serving one another and should take pride in making their own decisions. “Transgressions” are not sins; they are merely a testament to the individual’s raw potential and ability to dream and conceive of unprecedented ideas. By the end of the book, he rejects the corruption and misery caused by collectivism and chooses to worship “this god, this one word: ‘I’” (97).

To Equality, the individualist philosophy triumphs over collectivism and homogeneity. After suffering in a world that suppresses personal freedom, Equality strongly believes that one should be able to express his individuality and put himself first—or in simple terms, be selfish. Rather than forcing himself to love everyone, Equality realizes that men are born with free, independent minds, and they cannot be coerced to doing something against their own will. The perspective that Equality harbors at the end of the book ultimately reflects Rand’s personal beliefs. As someone who experienced the horrors of collectivism first-hand, she witnessed how this “selfless” mentality had reduced people to nothing more than insignificant pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle. With no freedom to think or pursue individual happiness, life felt meaningless and society ceased to progress. Although our modern, democratic society despises collectivism, like Rand, our world would scorn her radical views on selfishness. To modern viewers, selfishness and egocentrism equal insensitivity towards the poor and disadvantaged, and it feeds the machine

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of greed. We champion altruism and venerate people who travel great lengths to help those in need. Her definition of “selflessness” seems so preposterous that it has received biting criticism from the public for placing something so positive in a negative light. However, the message she delivers in *Anthem* is a crucial warning sign to future societies. If we continue to stifle our personal beliefs and happiness for society’s sake, this will inevitably lead to collectivism and destroy what we value most—our individuality.

Rand’s own pursuit of happiness and the meaning of life is personified in Equality’s journey to combat collectivism and emphasize individuality. For those who doubt their abilities and fall to societal pressures, she empowers them to embrace their identities despite their flaws and to not take freedom for granted. Even though she published her novella nearly a century ago, the precautionary message she sends transcends generations and continues to reverberate throughout modern society.