

Ayn Rand's Anthem as a defender of Individualism

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Abstract

Imagine a world where the individual has been repressed to the point that the word "I" no longer exists. Now, as hellish as that sounds, imagine that you are the only one who has the capability to break free from the iron fists that are choking you and your brothers. This is the life of Equality 7-2521, the principal character and narrator of Ayn Rand's Anthem. Anthem takes place in the dark ages of the future, in a totally collectivized world. This culture has regressed to conditions reminiscent of Ancient Greece and the European Dark Ages. In the midst of fear and subordination, one man stands alone. Equality 7-2521 is not like his brothers. He is able to think, create and defy. This makes him extremely dangerous. He holds the threat of change in his hands and his government will stop at nothing to take it from him. Equality's society represses him because they are afraid of those that threaten the established order. The paper attempts to bring out the classic strife between the individual genius and the collective repression predominant in our society.

Keywords: Repression, Intelligence, Equality, Transgression, Creativity, Utopia, Dystopia

Introduction

One major catalyst for change is intelligence. Equality displays evidence of genius at a young age. "We, Equality 7-2521, were not happy...in the Home of the Students. It was not that the learning was too hard for us. It was too easy" (Rand 16). In Equality's society, it is evil to be different from one's brothers, let alone to be better than they are. He is taught at an early age to be ashamed of his intellectual superiority. "This is a sin, to be born with a head which is too quick" (Rand 16). This device of suppression by means of shame was used in an attempt to stifle geniuses and, hence, pacify his society's fear of change. As Equality grew, he confirmed their fears. During his lifetime he made many revelations and discoveries. His most profound breakthrough was his re-invention of electricity. "We, Equality 7-2521, have discovered a new power of nature." (Rand 54). He produced a primitive light bulb. He wanted to use his invention to better his world. To the misfortune of his society, they loathed this new power. If they had accepted his ideas Equality would have been "...the literal and figurative bringer of light" (Gladstein 43). Unfortunately for Equality, as well as his society, his discovery met violent opposition and his brothers were not able to benefit from his intelligence. Genius has historically been repressed. Geniuses of our past have been ostracized, punished, and martyred for presenting ideas that eventually bettered their societies. Equality is no different. "Equality 7-2521 is a creator and inventor in the tradition of Galileo, Edison, and Einstein" (Gladstein 27). These real-life geniuses dared to violate their society's norms and eventually their ideas were accepted. Like in Equality's fictional culture, real-life societies have tended to ignore the ideas of solitary geniuses

(McDonald 2). His ideas were swept aside violently, and his society remained unchanged. Self-interest leads to the defiance of unjust restrictions. Equality's government prohibits individual action. No one is allowed to do anything on their own". There is no transgression blacker than to think or do alone"(Rand 11). Equality's defiance of his government's laws set him apart from his brothers. The condition of the Palace of Corrective Detention is demonstrative of the unquestioning obedience of his brothers. "It is easy to escape...there are no guards...There is no reason to have guards, for men have never defied the Councils so far as to escape from whatever place they were ordered to be" (Rand 73). Unlike his brothers, Equality had the individual strength to disobey the laws of his government. By questioning authority he took an interest in himself and was liberated. "The noblest human purpose is to pursue enlightened self-interest and only those the follow that course can emerge as...champions..." (McDonald 2). Equality's government had tried to contain him from day one. Authorities cannot control him because he has an independent mind. "...This totally collectivized society has no power [over]...the individual..."(Branden 112). His self-interest allows him to act as independently as his surroundings would permit. Although he is enlightened by his self-interest, he is never free from the shackles of guilt his society has placed upon him. No matter how freethinking Equality is, his nature is still shaped by his society (Kelly 1). However this guilt did not stop him from acting independently and constantly challenging the laws of his culture. Creativity isa main staple needed in order for change to take place. Equality has somehow been able to escape the suppression of creativity that is so deeply ingrained in his culture. Equality is not the only person who is able to transgress in order to create. One of his brothers, International 4-8818, is a natural artist and is punished in an attempt to stifle his talents. "They were not liked because they...drew pictures... and they...made men laugh" (Rand 27). Their government strictly prohibits this sort of creativity. "...It is only our brothers in the Home of the Artists who are permitted to draw pictures..."(Rand 27). Even though both men, Equality and International, are very talented and intelligent, they are both assigned to be street sweepers among "pale boy[s] with half a brain"(Rand 17). These men were kept from sharing their gifts with their society. Their society feels that those talents need to be suppressed in order to preserve the established state of their society. They are correct in that assumption. Creativity and individualism inevitably lead to change. "Individualism was the creative power revolutionizing the world" (Branden 12). Repression of creativity and individualism are a perfect way to inhibit social change. Without creativity Equality's society will not be improved because only the self-creative can enrich society (Kavanagh 1). A collectivized society cannot benefit "...from that which only the independent mind can create..." (Branden 112). Unless a society can accept and embrace creativity,it will remain unchanged. Equality's society is extremely afraid of inquiry. They are petrified of anyone that is able to question and challenge what theyare taught. "Equality 7-2521 is perceived as a threat to the established order" (Gladstein 35). Equality was ostracized, punished, and nearly killed for presenting an idea to the Council of Scholars. His interest in the scientific world had led him to a monumental discovery: electricity. He was able, through experimentation, to understand this new force, and he eventually constructed a primitive light bulb. Equality had convinced himself that his discovery was so great that if he were to present it to the Council of Scholars, all his transgressions would be forgiven and his invention would be embraced. He presents it to the council only to arouse fear and hatred in the hearts of the scholars. "...The wire glowed. But terror struck the men of the Council"(Rand 78). This intense fear of new ideas had led the Council of Scholars to take measures to

prevent these types of discoveries to be made by the common man. Children were taught at a young age not to question their surroundings. "...The Council of Scholars has said that there are no mysteries"(Rand 18-19). This type of repression causes the society to avoid the reality of their situation (O'Neill 85). Contrary to his upbringing and the laws of his government, Equality is able to question. He is able to think with some degree of freedom. "He is able to move beyond the shackles of his limited education"(Gladstein 27). Because he was born with superior intelligence, he was able to break free and be his own man. In conclusion, Equality 7-2521 is feared because he has the capability to make major social change. This ability lies in his supreme intelligence, self-interest, defiance, and the ability to question. Fear is the underlying cause of all of Equality's hardships. His society is afraid of change and they know that he is capable of revolutionizing their world as they know it. This results in Equality being feared and perceived as a threat. Their fear evolves into hate and they want to shut Equality down. Their intense fear of Equality nearly leads to his death. However, Equality also had the strength to break free from the chains that had bound him his whole life. He risked his dignity, his safety, and his life and was rewarded with freedom. "Many words have been granted to me, and some are wise, and some are false, but only three are holy: 'I will it!'"(Rand 109).

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