

ANALYSIS OF OPTIMAL EXPERIENCE OF AYN RAND'S PROTAGONISTS

Abstract

The protagonists in Ayn Rand's works seem to have discovered the key to pleasure since their daily routines match the definition of a "flow experience", which is put forward by Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. This study's overarching goal is to determine what makes life worth living by examining how Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead's* protagonist, Howard Roark, experiences the euphoric "flow" condition. The goal of this research is to add to the existing body of literature by using Csikszentmihalyi's theory of optimal experience to analyse Ayn Rand's protagonists and antagonists in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of their motivations and the factors that contribute to the maturation of a healthy individual capable of experiencing "flow" on a regular basis.

Keywords: Euphoric, optimal, maturation, capable, protagonist.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Any literary, cinematic, musical, pictorial, sculptural, or dramatic work that motivates an individual to better himself or herself will likely be remembered for the rest of his or her life. People stop significant events in their life and keep repeating them in their brains, much as a scene from a movie, a remark from a character, or even a piece from a symphony may serve as an incredible motivator, altering the course of countless lives. Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* has a pivotal sequence that provides a lesson the world needs.

The protagonist, an architect named Howard Roark, finally gets his first contract after years of hard labour as he wanders around the first structure he is working on, issuing commands. Mike, a fellow construction worker and buddy, notices Roark's joy and says, "Control yourself, Red. You're open like a book. God, it's indecent to be so happy!" Roark watches as a vehicle packed to the gills with passengers on their way to a picnic drives past from atop the bluff. The car's occupants seem to be "enjoying a day of their existence; they were shrieking to the sky their release from the work and the burdens of the days behind them; they had worked and carried the burdens in order to reach the goal – and this was the goal." Roark realises as the automobile speeds away that there was some "important difference between the consciousness of this day in him and in them" and reminds himself that he "should try to grasp it." But he forgets as he looks at a truck "panting up the hill, loaded with a glittering mound of cut granite" (Rand, 1992, p. 135).

This image shows that most people work for money to get by and that most see their jobs as drudgery they have to endure until the weekend, holiday, or vacation. People only live from weekend to weekend, holiday to holiday, and vacation to vacation since work is boring. Only in the gaps do they exist. While most people drudge through their workdays because they feel they have no choice, Ayn Rand's ideal man views his job as something to be enjoyed rather than endured.

"I have, let's say, sixty years to live. Most of that time will be spent working. I've chosen the work I want to do. If I find no joy in it, then I'm only condemning myself to sixty years of torture. And I can find the joy only if I do my work in the best way possible to me . . ." (Ayn 24)

Roark, in the aforementioned scenario, is trying very hard to empathise with individuals who see labour not as something they like and take pride in doing well but as a "necessary evil" or a "punishment in the Garden of Eden" (Smith 206).

In his groundbreaking research on happiness, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi echoes Roark's thinking on the subject. The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times . . . The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits voluntarily to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile (Mihaly 3).

Throughout the book, Howard Roark has several thrilling experiences, reaching what Mihaly terms a "flow" state of awareness when one is fully immersed in an artistic endeavour. Flow, according to this psychologist, occurs when "a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that

people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (Mihaly. 4). For instance, Roark's customer and admirer Austen Heller is astounded by Roark's enthusiasm for his constructions: ". . . After all, it's only a building. It's not the combination of holy sacrament, Indian torture and sexual ecstasy that you seem to make of it." Roark replies, "Isn't it?" (Ayn. 252).

Csikszentmihalyi's theory is unique in its emphasis on the need for "mental and physical discipline" (Ryckman 453) in the pursuit of happiness rather than happiness itself being a sensation that relies on external circumstances. The pursuit of happiness is the goal of every living thing on Earth, so using psychologist Mihaly's theory as a starting point to analyse Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* is an intriguing project. Moreover, Mihaly claims anyone can achieve this "flow" state of consciousness under the right circumstances. However, before diving into an analysis of these requirements, it's vital to get a peek of Rand's philosophy to appreciate better why it is necessary to do so.

1. Rand's Philosophy: In response to a question about whether she saw herself mainly as a novelist or a philosopher, Rand said in a televised interview that she did. She explained that presenting a tangible vision of the ideal person fascinates her most about literature and philosophy. As she continued her studies in philosophy, she realised that she fundamentally disagreed with every significant philosophical system, particularly its moral precepts. Therefore, she had to develop her philosophical framework to produce the ideal human being (Podritske & Schwartz, 2009, pp. 179–180). The desire to provide an idealised portrait of the human condition inspired her to study philosophy and write novels. The core belief of Ayn Rand's "Objectivism" ideology is: "The purpose of morality is to teach you, not to suffer and die, but to enjoy life and live" (Ayn 928).

In his book *Loving Life*, Craig Biddle discusses why Ayn Rand's philosophy is optimistic and inspiring. Even though most people seek institutions like religion and society for advice on living a fulfilled life, author Biddle argues in his article "Religion Versus Subjectivism" that the two have much in common, namely the idea of self-sacrifice. Whether it's a higher power in religion or the mass of people in social subjectivism, the message is the same: sacrifice yourself for the greater good. No one can establish a reasonable explanation for self-sacrifice, and no one can be genuinely happy by following either (Podritske & Schwartz . 1-49); hence Ayn Rand's philosophy of self-interest was received with excitement since it is entirely consistent with true pleasure.

There are three main similarities between Mihaly's "flow" theory and Ayn Rand's philosophy: both romanticise the human condition, place a premium on the individual's liberty, and both see happiness as a mental state that requires self-control.

2. Rand's Fiction: Unlike other philosophers, who are happy to express the issue, Rand, as a novelist-philosopher, not only conveys the problem but also strives to deliver a practical solution via her fiction. It is reasonable to infer that when the protagonist of one of Ayn Rand's novels, *We the Living*, *Anthem*, *The Fountainhead*, or *Atlas Shrugged* comments, he echoes Rand's own beliefs. As the following paragraphs will illustrate, not only has Ayn Rand's theory been the topic of debate, but also her books, which remain bestsellers even now.

Tore Boeckmann considers *The Fountainhead* a romantic book since the author depicts man as a free-willed entity and strives to bring out the best in him. Boeckmann utilises Aristotle's *Poetics* in another article to argue that fiction is more important than history because, unlike history, which must recount the past as it was, fiction may anticipate a better future (using, for example, Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* as an example). Maybe that's why John Bayer chimed in on the book for promoting the "spirit of youth": seeing a fictional character start a life full of idealism and spirit and then persevere through adversity and struggle to achieve success inspires readers to believe that their dreams are possible. In her research study, Shoshana Milgram tries to figure out where Rand got the idea to create a man of Roark's size. She finds Rand's description of the "ideal man" so compelling that she wants to learn more about her inspiration for the notion.

While many reviewers have dissected Rand's books in terms of narrative, character development, and writing style, it is the works' central themes that generated the most attention. When discussing the struggle between good and evil in Rand's universe, Onkar Ghate emphasises the need to understand the essence of evil in order to triumph. In another article, Tara Smith argues that Howard Roark is the only delighted and at peace person in *The Fountainhead*. This mindset renders him impervious to pain and receptive to pleasure, whether in his interpersonal connections, at work, or when faced with adversity. The opinions expressed in "Reflections on Happiness" by Dr Nathaniel Branden, an avid supporter of the author and philosopher Ayn Rand, appear to be similar. Branden is confident that one's viewpoint, rather than circumstances, define one's degree of pleasure; the real issue is how a decent person processes his experiences to the point where he can find joy even amidst hardship. While this outlook is relevant in many areas of life, the researcher advises zeroing in on the workplace since an individual's output has far-reaching consequences for not just his or her employer but also for the community, nation, and planet.

The researcher has found that the character analysis by Tara Smith and the article by Nathaniel Branden entitled "Happiness" are the two research articles by different critics that come closest to the issue that the researcher has selected to explore. Branden adds that happiness is a state of mind or an attitude that must be cultivated, and all Tara Smith does is compare Roark to the other people in the story. Branden, like Rand, does not use any psychological theories to explore what it takes to become a "happy" person, but unlike Rand, he does not use Rand's fiction as a case study to bolster his point. The academic wants to make an impact, so she looks to Csikszentmihalyi's psychological theory to help her better comprehend Rand's portrayal and defend her arguments.

In her book *The Fountainhead*, Ayn Rand depicted the narrative of an architect named Howard Roark, who is in a permanent state of pleasure despite facing obstacles in his career. Through her rational philosophy, which is consistent with the conditions for attaining Mihaly's "flow" state, Rand demonstrates how anybody may learn this skill. This paper's approach is based on an analysis of Mihaly's proposed prerequisites for achieving the "flow" experience concerning Rand's fictional book, *The Fountainhead*. Mihaly proposes that the first necessary requirement is the freedom to choose one's own path in life.

II. CHOOSING TO ACT ON ONE'S OWN

Having a successful career is a desire shared by all humans. However, Mihaly argues that the work required to achieve this objective really begins much earlier, when a kid first begins to exercise agency over his or her own life. Mihaly's theory that those who experience the highest levels of flow are those who have clearly defined objectives is shown by an interaction between Howard Roark and architect Henry Cameron in Roark's first job interview in *The Fountainhead* (Henry 88-89).

"When did you decide to become an architect?" "When I was ten years old."
... Why did you decide to be an architect?"
"I didn't know it then. But it's because I've never believed in God." "Come on, talk sense."
"Because I love this earth. That's all I love. I don't like the shape of things on this earth. I want to change them" (Ayn 51).

Despite the risks and difficulties, a person who follows his true calling will experience unparalleled happiness and fulfilment. Peter Keating, another literary protagonist, gives up his painting ambitions and lets his mother guide him into a more suitable career path. "Architecture," she had said, "is such a respectable profession. Besides, you meet the best people in it." Keating's mother encourages him to become an architect, and he accepts her encouragement since he thinks architects have "brilliant careers" (Ayn 31). In contrast to Roark, Keating is constantly reluctant to make decisions independently and would rather have them made for him by others. He seeks advice from Roark, his college junior, on whether to take a scholarship for further education or to enter the workforce once he graduates.

"It's about my scholarship. The Paris prize I got." "Yes?"
"It's for four years. But, on the other hand, Guy Francon offered me a job with him some time ago. Today he said it's still open. And I don't know which to take."
Roark looked at him; Roark's fingers moved in slow rotation, beating against the steps.
"If you want my advice, Peter," he said at last, "you've made a mistake already. By asking me. By asking anyone. Never ask people. Not about your work. Don't you know what you want? How can you stand it, not to know?"
"You see, that's what I admire about you, Howard. You always know." (Ayn 33)

While Roark finds it strange that a person needs other people to decide on his work, for Peter, it is what drives him in life. By following Peter Keating's career, which starts with flair but ends in failure, Rand depicts the repercussions of decisions individuals make without independent thought. Csikszentmihalyi explains that this is why so many people experience "boredom, depression, and anxiety" at work, and he suggests that people develop the ability to be "independent of their social environment," thereby suggesting that one cannot find fulfilment in life by allowing oneself to be a passive bystander (Ayn 454). A person's level of contentment in life is significantly influenced by the factors that led them to choose a specific line of work.

III. THE DRIVING FORCE

In her book, Ayn Rand contrasts two types of individuals: a neurotic whose driving force is "people" can only lead an unhappy life and an individual whose driving force is "work" who can live in a continual state of "flow" and appreciate living. Howard Roark, the successful and content individualist in *The Fountainhead*, lives his life with little regard for the opinions of others and no need to worry about what others think of him. Early in the story, Roark is expelled from Stanton University due to his extreme beliefs. His last interaction with the university dean before entering the workforce indicates his work ethic. The Dean starts out the talk by telling Roark he shouldn't be so idealistic.

"There's the practical side of an architect's career to think about. An architect is not an end in himself. He is only a small part of a great social whole. Co-operation is the key word to our modern world and to the profession of architecture in particular. Have you thought of your potential clients?"

"Yes," said Roark.

"The Client," said the Dean. "The Client. Think of that above all. He's the one to live in the house you build. Your only purpose is to serve him. You must aspire to give the proper artistic expression to his wishes. Isn't that all one can say on the subject?"

"Well, I could say that I must aspire to build for my client the most comfortable, the most logical, the most beautiful house that can be built. I could say that I must try to sell him the best I have and also teach him to know the best. I could say it, but I won't because I don't intend to build to serve or help anyone. I don't intend to build in order to have clients. I intend to have clients in order to build." (Ayn p. 26)

Roark's statement exemplifies his lack of altruistic motivation; he cares more about his advancement than the welfare of others. Roark's character is a homage to everyone who makes the world a better place through their dedication to professional achievement. Austen Heller, a customer of Roark's who is obviously impressed by and knowledgeable about his work, says, "Your house is made by its own needs. The others are made by the need to impress. The determining motive of your house is in the house. The determining motive of the others is in the audience" (Rand, 1992, p. 136). Rand contrasts "first-handers" like Roark and his fellow individualists to "second-handers" like Peter Keating, whose attention and drive are directed towards helping others. Keating doesn't want to really construct anything—he only wants to "be admired as a builder" (Ayn 605).

Keating despises "every girder of that building" even "before it was born" (Ayn, 1992, p. 172), and when he joins a competition, he cares more about who could answer the issue better and win the competition than he does about the picture at hand. As a result, self-doubt and envy undermine his confidence and negatively impact his output. This corroborates another of Mihaly's central points: that being fully present in the moment is essential in entering a "flow" state (Ryckman 454).

IV. EMBRACING THE NOW

While Peter Keating aspires to wealth, power, and social advancement, he will never be able to catch up to Roark because he is always looking forward and focusing on the fruits

of his labour rather than the labour itself. According to Mihaly, "whether a job provides enjoyment or not" depends on the "person's approach to it" rather than the "external working circumstances" (1990, p. 161). Exciting work may be found in even the most mundane of occupations. Roark's buddy Mike is a construction worker, which, at first glance, seems to be a mindless, physically demanding profession in *The Fountainhead*. Mike has turned a task that most people would consider tedious into an opportunity to hone a talent he has developed. He is proud of his knowledge and skills and enjoys his work immensely. "His view of the world was simple: there were the able, and there were the incompetent; he was not concerned with the latter" (Ayn 93). Similarly, Roark does not allow his situation to discourage him when he is forced to work as a manual labourer in a granite quarry because he will not compromise his beliefs.

He liked the work. He felt at times as if it were a match of wrestling between his muscles and the granite. He was exhausted at night. He liked the emptiness of his body's exhaustion. (Ayn 201)

Despite the lack of customers, Roark is contented even in this desolate setting since he is working towards an end. He's putting this time to good use by reading up on relevant topics, picking up a new skill, and saving up cash for when he's ready to open his practice. Minor setbacks don't bother him since his head is full of novel ideas to improve the world, and he plans to construct new buildings. Roark enjoys life in the present by working on his task with the utmost efficiency. Csikszentmihalyi's findings suggest that persons (like Roark) who can maintain their sense of calm within even when their surroundings aren't ideal are more likely to be mentally well and to enter a "flow" condition. Confirming Aristotle's position that "happiness cannot be identified with pleasure" (Aristotle 129), the idea of "flow" has crucial implications.

V. HOW JOY IS DIFFERENT FROM PLEASURE

Leonard Peikoff, an admirer of Ayn Rand's "Objectivist Philosophy," believes that Rand's idea of happiness is unique from two common approaches: the first regards happiness as analogous to pleasure, while the second considers pleasure as "animalistic, unspiritual, immoral". A state of mind that is entirely moral and difficult to acquire, happiness, in Randian thought, is not the same as pleasure. People on a picnic enjoy a momentary high but in a way that cannot be classified as "flow" in the study paper's opening description. Like Aristotle and Rand, Roark experiences a profound sense of "happiness" when he is engaged in an activity over which he has perfect control.

In contrast to those who have a creative goal and find happiness in the productive use of their brain, those who wait till the end of the workday to relax by numbing their minds with beer, television, or a movie are feeling a fundamentally different form of pleasure. To paraphrase Nathaniel Branden: "his enjoyment is fed by his unceasing concern to grow in knowledge and ability – to think, to achieve, to move forward, to meet new challenges and overcome them . . ." In *The Fountainhead*, Rand responds to the universal question, "What's the point of it all?" via a dialogue between Roark and Gail Wynand, the editor of the newspaper.

"Look, Gail." Roark got up, reached out, tore a thick branch off a tree, and held it in both hands, one fist closed at each end; then, his wrists and knuckles tensed against the resistance, he bent the branch slowly into an arc. "Now I can make what I want of it: abow, a spear, a cane, a railing. That's the meaning of life."

"Your strength?"

"Your work." He tossed the branch aside. "The material the Earth offers you and what you make of it.... (551)

Rand's most significant achievement as a writer was demonstrating, via her characters' actions, how one's commitment to one's career may give that person a feeling of purpose, an identity, and a significant increase in pleasure. The world as a whole benefits from each person's growth since he or she can contribute to society and increase national and international progress. Therefore, this is not only a matter of personal pride but of the very survival of the human race.

If "flow" is a state obtained by those prepared to put in the work, then the issue becomes the function of the majority, who have never experienced flow. In response, Rand argues that those who are incapable of personal accomplishment promote the idea of social service while also denigrating achievers.

VI. PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS AND VOLUNTEERISM

Evidence from the past shows that nations, where creative men are undervalued, tend to have achieved relatively few advancements. Throughout history, we see many examples of how society has rejected and mocked exceptional minds. Andrew Bernstein (2008, 61) argues that freethinkers like Galileo and Socrates are responsible for improving society.

According to Rand, many individuals have innate abilities but lack the discipline to pursue them; they need affirmation but aren't prepared to commit to the rigorous lifestyle that success demands. As a result, it is in their nature to want to stop anybody who succeeds beyond his or her wildest dreams. Ellsworth Toohey, a newspaperman who writes a piece intended to ruin Roark, shows Ayn Rand's logic. Toohey is ashamed of guys like Roark, so he advises others who come to him not to follow their passions. Toohey knows that this is the only path to happiness and autonomy for most people, two things he will never experience. He knows how to employ his oratory abilities when the time is right and does so to destroy their will to live and succeed effectively.

No. I would not go in for law if I were you. You are much too tense and passionate about it. A hysterical devotion to one's career does not make for happiness or success. Selecting a profession about which you can be calm, sane and matter-of-fact is wiser. Yes, even if you hate it. It makes for down-to-earthiness. (Ayn 301)

According to him, everyone ought to stop worrying about themselves and start working for the greater good of all of mankind. Author and philosopher Ayn Rand places a premium on individual success; she writes that people who value societal service are the ones who are unable to value it for themselves. Contrary to popular belief, society has benefited more from the contributions of self-respecting men than those who profess to have given their lives for the greater good. In such context, Rand warns against being too reliant on other people for your pleasure; doing so, she argues, will lead to misery.

VII. CONCLUSION

The age-old query "What is the purpose of life?" was posed to Ayn Rand on a radio broadcast. She responded, "there is no such thing as 'the purpose of life' because life is an end in itself. *Life* is the purpose of life. And nature has given us a perfect way of knowing whether we are spending our lives properly or not – namely, whether we are happy or not" (Podritske and Schwartz 246-247). To paraphrase the novelist-philosopher: "Happiness is not a destination that one strives to achieve; it is a journey that can make life exciting and adventurous. Stop complaining that you don't know the meaning of life and stop looking for some higher purpose or stop yearning for an afterlife that may not even exist."

Given that most people's waking hours will be spent in their careers, it makes sense for them to choose careers they not only like, but also excel in. Once he makes his decision, the only way he'll be able to be happy is if he accepts full responsibility for his actions and gives 110% to his work. Not doing so would make him unhappy, but it would also waste human skill and resources that, if used for good, might have improved the world for the better.

Because of his belief that people who often experience a state he calls "flow" are more likely to be mentally healthy, Csikszentmihalyi's thesis was chosen for this article. In a time when more and more individuals seem to be struggling with mental health issues, including depression, suicidal thoughts, and behavioural problems, it's crucial that we learn how to avert these tragedies. The greatest way to avoid such disease is to establish an atmosphere that can only result in happy feelings, so Howard Roark's fictitious world of Rand perfectly fits him. Thus, the positive psychology subfield known as "flow" theory may play a pivotal role in creating conditions that benefit the mental health of a nation as a whole. When applied to both "romantic" and "realistic" works of fiction, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" theory paints a clear picture of what makes a person neurotic and how that person can become self-sufficient by following the guidelines suggested by the author.

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