

FIRST PLACE



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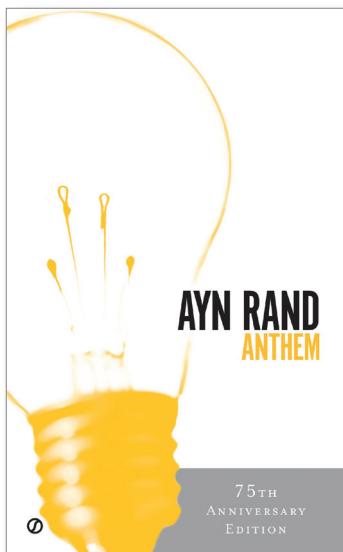
“It is a sin to write this.” So begins *Anthem*. What is the significance of this opening line to the story and to the meaning of the novel? What view of morality does it embody? What is Equality 7-2521’s eventual assessment of his sin and why? Explain.

Similar to other dystopian novels such as George Orwell’s *1984*, Ayn Rand’s *Anthem* paints a grim picture of a collectivist world fraught with terror and oppression. Yet Rand’s vision stands in stark contrast to those that shape most portrayals of dystopias that boast technological and scientific prowess. Technology in *1984* is sophisticated and used to enforce thought control over the masses. This chronology is reversed in *Anthem*, where prohibition of free thinking creates a medieval, technologically backward society. Inversely, independent thought and action set the conditions for scientific and technological development, ultimately revealing the nature of science.

The Councils implement two measures to deter citizens from thinking independently and bar the path to investigation. They first reduce men into unthinking, unfeeling cogs of society by robbing their sense of individuality. In possession of the sole authority to name people and things, the state claims ownership over individuals by tagging them with variations of collectivist slogans and codes. There are not even the words to express or acknowledge oneself as an individual due to the extirpation of first-person references. Secondly, the Council criminalises and morally debases independent thinking. “[T]here is no transgression blacker than to do or think alone” (17), and the punishment that ensues dissuades individuals from doing so. Men are additionally inculcated with the belief that “[i]t is a sin to think words no others think” (17), so that when they do, they are compelled to suppress their evil ways themselves. Discouraged from utilising their conceptual faculties, individuals possess neither the ability to form questions nor the critical thinking skills required to initiate and motivate scientific research.

However, the Councils fail to subjugate Equality’s self and mind, leaving Equality free to delve into scientific exploration. In the Home of the Students, notwithstanding the state’s attempts to steal his individuality and Transgression of Preference, Equality displays a strong sense of self by developing an interest in the Science of Things. His awareness of personal values enables him to follow his interests by “[asking] so many questions that the Teachers forbade it” (23). Unable to subdue and threatened by Equality’s keen intellect, the Council of Vocations relegates him to a Street Sweeper to discontinue his education and weaken his drive for learning. Yet Equality’s mind refuses to lie dormant. He continues to hold questions for the natural world, “[looking] too long at the stars at night, and at the trees and the earth” (29), questions he strives to answer when he discovers a hidden tunnel left from the Unmentionable Times where he can study to his heart’s content. Having become free to pursue his studies, Equality quickly advances from ignorance to enlightenment. “[I]n . . . two years, [he] . . . learns more than he had learned in the ten years of the Home of the Students” (36). The years of intellectual toil come to fruition at Equality’s rediscovery of the lightbulb, marking a technological watershed in a society where technology is limited to candles and glass windowpanes. It is by virtue of his indomitable freedom of thought that

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Equality is able to retain his unflagging curiosity and make strides in his quest for knowledge. Society's condemnation of independent thinking is not the only chain that shackles the mind and inhibits scientific progress—so is the individual's will. Despite the Councils' powerful thought control, citizens are never forced into subservience. They are not deprived, blackmailed, or drugged. Nor are their hands tied up by law enforcement. There are not even guards patrolling the streets, since “men have never defied the Councils so far as to escape from whatever place they were ordered to be” (67). Furthermore, individuals can still, albeit with difficulty, think independently because it is impossible to entirely suppress one's private thoughts. Yet fear of societal rejection prevents them from applying their minds to research and innovation: “Fear walks through the City, fear without name, without shape” (46). Their cowardice shrinks them into passive beings who blindly accept the dogma meted out by the Councils in return for security and stability, allowing an intellectually and hence technologically stagnant society to emerge.

Equality's undaunted will to learn facilitates scientific progress even as he risks execution. When Equality discovers the forbidden tunnel, he declares, “[t]his place belongs to us, Equality 7-2521, and to no other men on earth.” Equality's claim to ownership is unthinkable in a society that decries individualism. From this defiant act, Equality gains a secret laboratory where his intellect and creativity are given free rein. Equality continues to thwart the collective by stealing supplies and “[sitting] in the tunnel for three hours each night and [studying]” (35). Although Equality acknowledges the risks his actions carry, any fear or hesitation dissipates in the tunnel, and the “three hours give [him] strength for [his] hours above the ground” (46). His staunch will empowers Equality to persist in his research and make a technological breakthrough.

The collectivist government's impotence in taking action dooms the state into technological stagnancy. For new technology to be authorized, all Councils must give their collective approval. Since unanimous agreement seldom occurs, the Councils fall into inaction. Even simple inventions such as the candle “[may take] fifty years to secure the approval of all the Councils” (74). Equality's lightbulb, despite its potential, is therefore rejected by the World Council of Scholars. Moreover, a society threatened by independent thinking and discord can only feel intimidated by the prospect of change. An invention as novel and significant as Equality's lightbulb could trigger debate and even dissonance. Thus, when Equality presents his innovation, “terror [strikes] the men of the Council” (70). The Councils' need for absolute consensus and antipathy towards change makes progress impossible.

For a society to make headway in scientific knowledge and technology, individuals must be left free to inquire and reflect, and actively engage in experimentation and innovation. Society must also readily embrace the change that inevitably arises from technological breakthroughs. What, then, can we conclude about the nature of science? Science is the product of one's unrestrained creativity and the unrelenting pursuit of knowledge, nor can it ever truly be stifled. Events in *Anthem* establish that no matter how hard society may try to withhold the free mind, independent, determined thinkers like Equality will always rise up against oppression and push for scientific advancement.

Bibliography:

Rand, Ayn. *Anthem*. New York; Dutton, 1995. Print.