

Elizabeth Waters
Anthem Essay

“There is no transgression blacker than to do or think alone” (Chapter 1). Man cannot be man, for man must be one with his brothers. Society stands together in the extreme sense of the word. In fact, society condemns those who attempt to break from the pack – think, act, speak on their own – for fear of returning to the “Unmentionable Times” when man made his own decisions for his own benefit (Chapter 1). But when a singular man, Equality 7-2521, dares to diverge from this path of ultimate unity, he finds liberation in “self,” in the “I” that defines man, Ayn Rand’s basis for the entire novella that is *Anthem*.

In removing “I”, this unspeakable “I”, from the languages of mankind, the State removes all sense of identity from each and every man, teaching them that they “exist through, by and for [their] brothers who are the State;” there is only “we” (Chapter 1). All accept this, but the reality of the situation is complete and total oppression, something Equality realizes as he identifies that the State has claimed jurisdiction over his life in its entirety. He recognizes that there is something missing from the heart of each man around him, something the State has taken away from them: free will. This lack of freedom affects not only man each himself but has also kept society from advancing as it resorts to primitive technology, lacking all traces of modern society as we know it. With a candle as the most prominent invention of the time, Equality strives to discover what life was like during the Unmentionable Times, beginning with the unearthing of an ancient underground tunnel where he becomes what the State decided he would never be: a scholar. Here, Equality is his own man, experimenting with the world around him, for only here can he be safe from the conformity and oppression of the outside world. Here, he obtains free will. Here, he becomes an individual. Here, he discovers light and the “first peace [he has] known in twenty years” (Chapter 1).

In his experimentation, Equality stumbles upon a creation from the Unmentionable Times: a glass box with the thinnest piece of wire, that, when powered, glows with an effervescence more beautiful than anything he had ever seen. Through this box, his individuality and his intellect drive his spirit and determination to create and discover, despite knowing that his actions are a “great offense”; he feels pride in the light he finds (Chapter 1). Equality desires to share this creation with his brothers, believing he is helping mankind, but when rejected by the men officially deemed “scholars” by the State for creating something without the consent or contribution of his brothers, Equality comes to the realization that “the glass box in [his] arms is like a living heart that gives [him] strength. [He has] not built this box for the good of [his] brothers”; this creation is for himself as affirmation of his own personhood (Chapter 7). This box of light has become a piece of him, his identity. It symbolizes the antithesis of the society in which he lives, one of collectivism and altruism; the box is egoism, the “heart” of Equality. Discovering this light gives Equality hope in his own individuality, for the box is the one thing he has power over; the light is his strength. He wishes to please his brothers no more than he wants to lose the identity he finds within the box. This box of light holds not only his identity but also liberation greater than anything he has ever known, a freedom and peace beyond measure.

As Equality carries his box out of the collectivist society, breaking free of the chains binding him to conformity, he discovers true, complete freedom as he and his once-forbidden love Liberty escape the world of “we” guided by the little box of light. Believing he has finally found all he could hope for –

freedom, peace, love, and free will – Equality realizes he still lacks full possession of his words and thoughts: they are still dominated by the “we” he thought he had left behind, for he knows no other word that expresses a personal, individual ideal. Travelling on, he stumbles upon a foreign word – a singular letter, actually – that, upon utterance, clears all that had been previously questioned about his identity: “I”. With this word, Equality discovers his purpose, finally fully understanding what individuality means: “I wished to know the meaning of things. I am the meaning” (Chapter 11). This, Equality’s greatest epiphany, bears the most significance in his life from this point forward. He discerns why in all of his life he felt disconnected from the “we” of his brothers: because he *means* something outside of and apart from a collection of men forced to be equal. He is not like his brothers and his brothers are not like him, and for this he *means* something. He is his own man, the only one who should dictate his actions.

Equality sees that it is his intellect and individuality that carry him onward on his journey in his realization of self. His own ambitions are the most important thing in this journey. Equality gathers the idea that his responsibilities only extend to his own person, concluding, “I owe nothing to my brothers, nor do I gather debts from them” (Chapter 11). His brothers deserve nothing from him other than what he is willing to give them, and he need not expect anything more from his brothers. In Equality’s eyes, each man takes account for his own actions and should be the sole resolver of his own moral obligations; man has every right to exist for his own sake.

Equality’s thoughts and actions emphasize the theme of individualism Rand portrays. Discovering egoism to its fullest, Equality’s life transitions from one extreme to another: from selfless and altruistic to selfish and egotistical in the sense that he no longer exists for his brothers. Subjugation can no longer dominate his life, for he is worth something, he means something, he matters. The light he finds within the box becomes the sole light that burns bright within his heart, driving him to discover what it means to be man, one and individual.