

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016
Massachusetts Center for the Book
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Level III Honors Award

Dear Ayn Rand,

How does a sports team perform well? I used to think the answer was absolute unity. After all, from a distance, a team looks like a simultaneous unit, even wearing the same uniforms. But when the game begins, the team diverges into individuals, each expressing themselves with different plays. I used to wonder at the individuality portrayed. However, *Anthem* helped me realize: without this sort of uniqueness, society cannot function.

As long as I have known, I have been obsessed with soccer. Once I enter a game, I enter a new world: the fresh grass crunching under my feet, the sun blinding my eyes, until I overheard from the sidelines: "Why is HE playing soccer? He's ASIAN". As an Asian soccer player, my ethnicity has often hindered my genuine love of the sport. Society expects Asians to veer away from athletics and focus on studying. I began to lose my passion for playing soccer, until one day, it was all gone. I surrendered to the stereotypes others expected of me, putting away my soccer ball and drawing out textbooks. Finally, nobody criticized me, since I blended into the crowd. However, it didn't take me long to realize I felt no fun from my activities, even if nobody bothered me for doing them. And so my dilemma began: was I doing the right thing?

Your novel *Anthem* provided me with a solution to this dilemma. I felt Prometheus and I were one as we discovered the word "Ego" for the first time. My previous knowledge of this word had been limited to narcissism and selfishness. *Anthem* introduced me to a whole new perspective of "Ego". It is the word for expressing one's thoughts, feelings, and desires, and grants uniqueness to humanity. Ultimately, it is an authentic personality. By giving up one of the most important parts of my identity, I had forgotten about individual meaning. Fortunately, Prometheus' fight to regain his identity from the conformity dictated by the Council demonstrated that no "Ego" can ever be taken away. I realized I could similarly regain my own "Ego" – my love of soccer. Thus, I returned to the soccer pitch once more, and found that I could finally ignore those obstructive spectators. After all, I knew that no matter how hard they tried, my personality, my "Ego", cannot be taken away. Reassured, I redeemed my joy of soccer thanks to *Anthem*.

Still reflecting on *Anthem*, I absorbed the full shock of the Paris attacks. In the aftermath, leading politicians opposed the entry of Syrian refugees. I discovered that these refugees were in a similar situation as myself. The politicians were the spectators who discouraged me from playing soccer because of my race. They collectively defined the Syrian refugees as "terrorists" instead of seeing them as individuals with their own hopes and dreams. These politicians had to recognize each refugee's "Ego" for these refugees to have the chance at a personality, individuality, and life.

Thank you for teaching me the necessity of an "Ego". Without *Anthem*, I may have become just another spectator on the sidelines, futilely attempting to do away with one's identity. But more importantly, I may never have realized the dire situation of the Syrian refugees. Thank you once more, and now I know: the sports team that wins is the one that allows the most uniqueness among its members.

Sincerely,

Ethan

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Grade 9