

FIRST PLACE



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Gail Wynand is a brilliant individual who rose out of the slums by means of his own talent and effort. But despite his reverence for man's noblest achievements, his newspaper, the *Banner*, presents the most lurid and loathsome values. Why does Wynand pander in this manner?

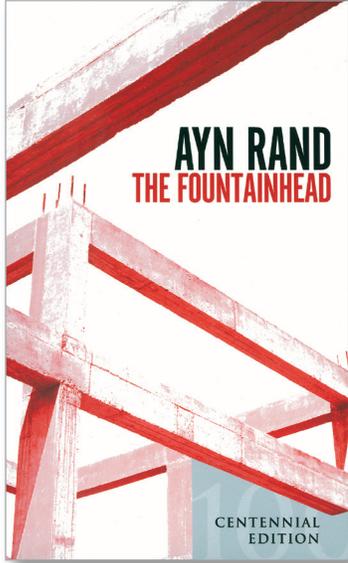
Disillusionment Shattered

Despite an ascent to the financial apex of society by means of his own brilliance, talent, and effort, Gail Wynand never truly escaped the slums. Nowhere is the lingering grasp of Hell's Kitchen more evident than in his newspaper, the *Banner*, which presents the most lurid and loathsome values. This apparent contradiction between the noble ideals in which Gail believes and the vulgar publications for which he has such contempt can be explained by Gail's willingness to pursue power at all costs. Such a desire, accumulated over numerous years of countless disappointments, drove him to conclude that the most efficient path to power over the crowd was to pander to the crowd. This realization led him to forgo his noble values so as to acquire an empty power that ultimately spelled his tragic downfall.

Gail Wynand had not been born to waste away with the masses in a mediocre existence. Despite the plethora of crimes on his part, never had the ultimate one been committed: he never lost the wonder that stems from existence itself, nor did he seek justification beyond his own ego; in his own words, "I was the use and meaning, I, Gail Wynand. That I lived and that I acted" (550). He had the inner strength, "life-force," and nobility of mind to be a hero on par with Howard Roark; yet, Gail died as the man who could have been.

To understand Gail and his rationale for the lurid contents of the *Banner*, it is essential to first examine his childhood, which gave rise to his pursuit of power. Hell's Kitchen is a dangerous and dynamic world in which one either ruled or was ruled. The daily fight to survive instilled in Gail a desire to conquer, a hunger for the day when he will run things instead of being ordered into submission. In a way, his entire life has been a struggle against Hell's Kitchen and the early humiliation to which he had been subject. When Gail voiced his opinion over the power structure of his childhood world, infuriation is evident: "Did you want to scream, when you were a child, seeing nothing but fat ineptitude around you, knowing how many things could be done and done so well, but having no power to do them? . . . Having to take orders—and that's bad enough—but to take orders from your inferiors! Did you drive the anger back inside of you, and store it, and decide to let yourself be torn to pieces if necessary, but reach the day when you'd rule those people and all people and everything around you?" (529).

Evident here is a revolt against his days as an underdog; it is this vengeance that drives Gail towards the heights of dominance, all the while keeping him in submission to this drive to power itself. Such is a situation where, instead of being completely internally



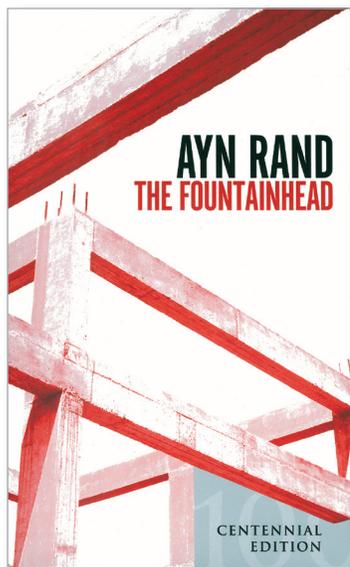
motivated, Gail responds to the external factor of power (as dictated by early hardship in Hell's Kitchen). Even the yacht of which he is so proud, *I Do*, is “an answer to people long since dead” who had often pointed out: “You don’t run things around here” (443). Decades later, Gail still has yet to escape the psychological clutches of Hell’s Kitchen.

However, this alone does not demonstrate why power was worth the price of integrity. The answers to this lie in subsequent life events, all of which lessened Gail’s respect for humanity. With the loss of this respect, Gail reasoned that integrity could only exist in an artistic realm and that a vulgar and disgusting human race deserved itself and nothing more. The initial disillusionment occurred during Gail’s first love; after offering his integrity, his potential, and his desire for mutual understanding in a noble proclamation to the girl, his illusions were instantly shattered by the girl’s petty and obscene reply of whether she was thought to be prettier than Maggie Kelly. This sudden transformation of the sacred to the vulgar was a new and massive blow to his estimation of humanity, as well as a further argument in support of how integrity could not possibly exist among humans.

Gail did not see the purpose of treating with integrity a world containing no integrity—instead, to avoid succumbing to the vulgarity and once again being ruled by inept superiors, it became of paramount importance to rule at any cost. As stated by Gail himself, “You can’t escape human depravity . . . I have no ideals—but I don’t beg.” In a dog-eat-dog world like this one, Gail learned to use people strategically for desires like owning the *Gazette*. While it is likely that in an environment as violent and volatile as Hell’s Kitchen, choosing to neither rule nor be ruled is rarely an option, Gail fails to realize that in a broader societal context, it is indeed possible to live completely by one’s own standards. Unlike Roark, Gail treated the whole world as Hell’s Kitchen.

When the pursuit of power is paired with a contempt for humanity that strips away moral qualms about integrity, it becomes logical for Gail to take a “the end justifies the means” approach to acquiring power. Through experience, Gail learned that the masses prefer maudlin bromides to truth, that they would rather help a chambermaid with emotional grievances than aid in the advancement of science, and that to satisfy a public “alike in their vices,” all that is required are stories about “fallen girls, society divorces, foundling asylums, red-light districts, [and] charity hospitals” (408). This proof that pandering to the crowd leads to financial success was the catalyst which determined the content of the *Banner* for decades to come.

Simultaneously, Gail continually tried to justify to himself that although his own integrity and values were blatantly ravaged by the *Banner*, such was acceptable since integrity did not exist in any human being. This motive, in tandem with the pursuit of power, drove Gail to corrupt and destroy victims that all “had a single attribute in common: their immaculate integrity” (414). With each conquest, Gail placated his conscience and any potential guilt from the lurid contents of the *Banner* by cheerfully reassuring himself that “if lightning strikes a rotten tree and it collapses, it’s not the fault of the lightning . . . [and] healthy trees don’t exist” (415). Until Roark entered his life, Gail was convinced that in a deplorable world where individuals could not possibly live up to the noble ideals of individualism and integrity, power over the crowd, even at the cost of one’s honor, was the only way to avoid being dominated. As he points out, “[He had] paid with [his] honor for the privilege of



holding a position where [he] can amuse [himself] by observing how honor operates in other men” (442).

In essence, although Gail does not actually respect the contents covered by the *Banner* (which so enralls the masses), he has no qualms about using this as a strategic tool by which to obtain power. Even if Gail still revered his original values of strength, beauty, truth, integrity, competence and individualism, he allowed himself to be ruled by the mob. He made himself “a barometer subject to the pressure of the whole world” and “collected a fortune in the process”; he “took automobiles, silk pyjamas, a penthouse, and gave the world [his] soul in exchange” (603)—such is the price of the type of power Gail chose. Tragically, despite all of his brilliance and potential, he became “the worst second-hander of all—the man who goes after power” (608).

The ostensible contradiction between the noble values in which Gail believes and the lurid content of publications he authorizes is, thus, not so much a paradox as it is a fatal flaw leading to a terrible downfall. Stemming from his rough childhood in a world where one ruled or was ruled, Gail single-mindedly pursued the drive to power at the cost of his honor and integrity. When the countless instances in which humanity has proved disappointing are taken into consideration, it is perhaps not so surprising that he chose to reflect back the vulgarity.

Gail’s fatal mistake lay in his assumption that integrity was impossible, and that a middle ground could exist between egoism and pandering to the crowd. Such is impossible. Gail gave up his potential and became a second-hander because of this mistaken assumption. Roark proved that true integrity can exist in its purest forms, even in human beings, that one can avoid being crushed by this vulgar and deplorable world, and that there is not a single precarious ladder on which everyone dwells, either above or below each other: it is possible to pave one’s own road in this wonderful existence to be exalted, not pitied.

In the end, Gail finally understood this. He was unable to forgive himself for failing to live up to this greatness, after having spent decades accruing power, running the lurid publications on the *Banner*, and seeking to prove to himself that integrity couldn’t exist outside of art. Ultimately, when Roark finally shattered the disillusionment upon which Gail’s life was based in favor of a greatness that Gail once took to be an illusion, Gail himself shattered as well. Then there was only the memory of the second-hander beneath an oceanic regret of “could have been.”

Bibliography:

Rand, Ayn. *The Fountainhead*. New York: Signet, 1968. Print.