

FIRST PLACE



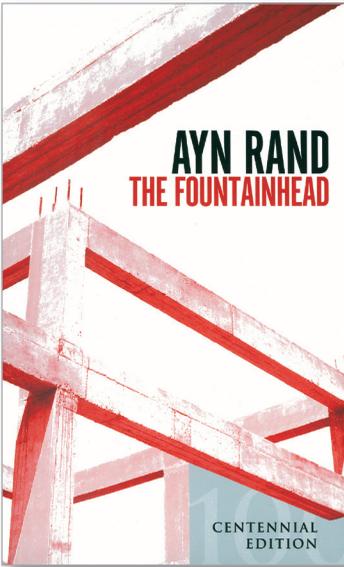
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In the characters of Dominique Francon and Howard Roark, *The Fountainhead* offers an uncompromising approach to life. Do you think this approach to life is practical? Why or why not? Judging both from the novel and from what Rand writes in her short essay “Doesn’t Life Require Compromise?” do you think Rand thinks the approach is practical? Explain.

By pleading with Roark to compromise, instead of “wasting what [he has] on an ideal that [he’ll] never reach” (53), Cameron reveals the truly evil nature of compromise. He incorrectly assumes that Roark’s architectural artistry and his ideals are independent of one another. Roark has nothing to gain from sacrificing his ideals for this envisaged practicality. The compromise that Cameron suggests is entirely impractical; it requires the complete subversion of Roark’s principles and the abandonment of his reason to a “vague, fat, blind inertia” (163), mirroring Rand’s definition of compromise as the “betrayal of one’s principles.” Roark knows that anything requiring him to completely surrender his individuality and subvert himself to the whims of others will only deliver him to gradual enslavement. He must remain resolute and incorruptible by never renouncing his ideals. Just like his structures, “if one smallest part committed treason to that idea—the thing or the creature was dead” (195). There can be no balancing act between Roark’s ideals and the garbled expectations of society.

For me, being practical amounts to having the optimal approach to achieving one’s goals. Adapting or abandoning one’s goals may seem more appealing than continuous struggle and hardship but it is not practical; all purpose and reason is nullified upon surrendering the original goal. Accepting the lesser achievement by opting for the less strenuous “practical” course of action cannot be considered a success. Therefore, practicality should not be measured in terms of the comfort and ease with which a task can be completed. In this way, Howard and Dominique are not impractical—the alternative to their uncompromising approach to life would only result in them being smothered by the irrational demands of society in “a stretch of tortured years spent in progressive self-destruction.” Standing firm against the fear of “wasting what [they’ve] got on an ideal that [they’ll] never reach” (53) is certainly preferable to having neither ideals nor ambition.

Roark tolerates hardship not to prove that he is a man of ideals but because standing by his ideals is the sole way for him to live. He is not impractical—his years of suffering “an unspeakable penance for an unspeakable crime” (207) were unavoidable because ideals are not a commodity that can be bartered with. He unashamedly defies our conventional understanding of practicality by insisting, through his actions, that one cannot be practical with regards to basic principles. He pays for the alterations to the Sanborn House, demonstrating that the logic and beauty of his structures takes precedent over any excruciating expense. The fact that this “cost him more than the fee he received” (168)

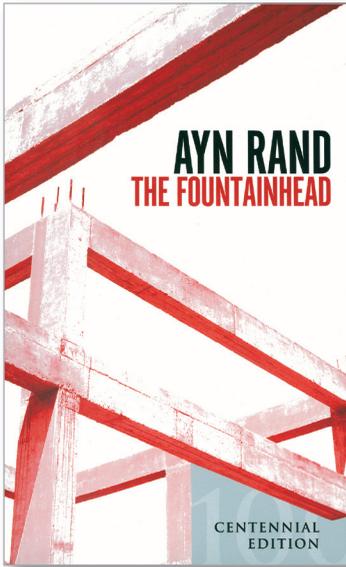


for his efforts is indicative of Rand's standpoint on the matter: ideals cannot be exchanged for some convoluted notion of practicality. The seemingly dire consequences of Roark's uncompromising approach may be inescapable but the only recognizable alternative is unthinkable self-immolation. Keating embodies this ghastly alternative in that he would do practically anything for the sake of some envisaged practicality. This is what he imagines to be the painless and straightforward way to conform with the expectations of society. His idea of practicality involves spending the night in a public library learning about old porcelain so that he may acquire another fabricated friendship. Keating ultimately becomes a parasite whose very existence depends on his fellow man. His needless self-destruction is not practical because the very thing he fed off is what destroys him in the end. His deservedly wretched fate serves as a lesson to all those who consider emulating him. Keating's form of practicality only leads him "to hate, to hate blindly, to hate patiently, to hate without anger" (193) but worst of all—to hate himself. This "practicality" centers around cushy convenience; to be practical is to be "sensible" by conforming to what society deems "advisable." Forsaking one's ideals to achieve one's aims and eventually abandoning one's aims to lead a purely "practical" life is the ultimate betrayal of oneself. No such balancing act can exist between one's goal and some lesser objective, as Keating's eventual annihilation proves. Roark could never have created his buildings by following the savage doctrine to "always be what people want you to be" (267). Pretending to play badminton like an earl may have secured him an easy commission but his career could never flourish simply by pandering to the crowd.

The equally uncompromising character of Dominique is evident when she launches her beloved statue of Helios down an air shaft to escape the horror of exposing it to the indifference of the world. She can accept anything but the "halfway, the almost, the just-about, the in-between" (386) so she destroys the statue, an act which unashamedly defies the conventional view of practicality. Surely she could have sheltered that which she loved, in the same way that Wynand created a refuge with his personal art gallery, rather than seeking to obliterate it from existence. However, Wynand was desperately clinging to the false hope that some fragment of his soul could remain untainted in his supposedly inviolable refuge. His attempt to preserve some beauty amidst all his soul-selling was impossible because there is no practical way to balance two entirely conflicting worlds. Dominique believed that beauty and perfection were inevitably doomed to destruction in a world that had no regard for beauty, which leads her to destroy the statue as a sort of mercy killing.

The impossibility of any slight or inconsequential compromise is intolerable to Dominique. Instead, she chooses the hardest way to fight for her freedom—by marrying Keating and becoming entirely devoid of feeling and then by marrying Wynand and enduring all the ostentatious obscenity that this lifestyle can fling at her. Indeed, one could even claim that she temporarily pandered to society's expectations by becoming the archetypically obedient wife. However, this was the only practical way of achieving the eventual liberation she sought with Roark. She simply could not accept any reality except a world of Roark's kind, despite believing that such a world was unreachable.

Living an uncompromising life is not Howard Roark and Dominique Francon's goal. It is merely the only viable way for them to achieve their goals. They set their own standards and



live by them because even the slightest lapse in these standards is an abominable submission too unbearable to even consider. Rand’s definition of compromise as “an adjustment of conflicting claims by mutual concession” highlights here how compromise is not possible; there is absolutely no mutual basis for any compromise between their standards and the irrational demands that are made of them. It is self-evident that, whether or not one intends to be uncompromising, there is no extra practical route in life. The route to success is not paved with comforting practicality but with the sort of practicality that involves no compromise with failure.

Rand offers a definite verdict as to whether the uncompromising approach to life is practical through the corresponding fate that each character meets. The tangible physical pain that Howard experiences pales in comparison to the years of drawn out torment that await Keating as he tries to pick up the pieces of his shoddily constructed life. Although Roark could count every muscle in his body by the number of “separate, different pains” (210) after his grueling months in the quarry, it is only towards Keating that I feel the most despicable emotion of all: pity. Roark is completely at ease even when he is “one inch from bursting into pieces” (257). Like his buildings, he offers no compromise because co-operation and collaboration are incompatible with his goals. He could not live by suppressing his true creativity or by killing his essence, proving that the uncompromising approach is the only practical way to succeed.

It was not for some vague, illogical pride that Roark refused to take handouts from Keating or a reference from Cameron, but because he knew that “it was useless, like all sacrifices” (698). He was acutely aware that there was no point in him conforming to the stunting constrictions of traditional architecture. He might as well have acknowledged that Keating was the true architect, that “success” was not in making honest structures but in throwing together tumorous monstrosities.

Roark’s initial loss in the Stoddard Temple trial contrasts with his eventual triumph at the Cortlandt trial and his glorious success as an architect. This progression serves to illustrate how Rand believes that the uncompromising approach to life trumps the supposedly “practical” submissive approach. After all, success is more practical than failure. Roark embodies the perfect “self-sufficient, self-motivated, self-generated” (711) creator whose every instinct rages against the worst form of sacrifice—self-sacrifice. Even the fear of building for a “world that does not exist” (367) never deters him. He is not building for some imagined world; he builds for himself and lives only for himself. Despite all his suffering, which he not only endures but serenely soars above, Howard Roark finally gains his freedom. He remains steadfastly uncompromising, even as a rising tide submerges the shells of all the compromised characters that surround him. He proves that “a house can have integrity, just like a person, and just as seldom” (132) and that the uncompromising approach to life is practical. A life such as Keating’s, which is spent trying to “flatter people who despise you in order to impress other people who despise you” (440) is no life at all and certainly not practical because no permanent reward can be gained from such a false, impractical and temporary solution. Roark’s final reward is eternal; “one can imagine him living forever” (470).