

FIRST PLACE



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Francisco d’Anconia presents himself as a playboy who has abandoned serious concern for his family’s business. But early in the story Dagny realizes that Francisco’s public persona does not fit with the man she knows. Compare Francisco to another major figure in film, TV, or literature who adopts a similar double life to accomplish his purposes. How is he similar? How, in terms of his motives and methods, is he different? What kind of purpose could make the price of leading a double life like this worth paying? Explain your answers.

“Masquerade for a Purpose”

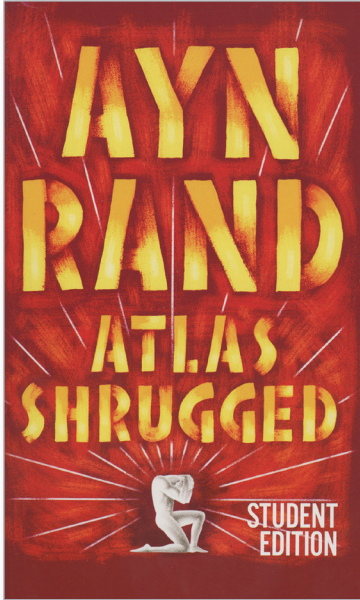
“We seek him here, we seek him there,
Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.
Is he in heaven?—Is he in hell?
That demmed, elusive Pimpernel” (101).

This doggerel regularly recited by the title character of Baroness Orczy’s *The Scarlet Pimpernel* comprises part of the mask that allows him to lead a double life the way Francisco d’Anconia pursues one in *Atlas Shrugged*. The Scarlet Pimpernel hides his identity so completely he remains a mystery to all but his closest associates. His quest? To rescue members of the French aristocracy from the guillotine during Robespierre’s reign of terror. This literary character provides an excellent study in comparison and contrast to the unique role Francisco adopts within Ayn Rand’s final novel.

Both the Scarlet Pimpernel and Francisco d’Anconia submerge their true natures for a season to accomplish their purposes. The respective motives and methods vary, however. Secretly masquerading as the Scarlet Pimpernel, Sir Percy Blakeney cloaks his true identity in a persona that differs significantly from his own. In *Atlas Shrugged*, on the other hand, Francisco maintains many of his strongest traits even while feigning pursuit of a hedonistic lifestyle of chasing women and spending and squandering his family’s reputation and wealth.

In her essay “The Spirit of Francisco d’Anconia: The Development of His Characterization,” Shoshana Milgram points out several of Francisco’s dominant traits, including his “exuberant imaginativeness, mocking wit, and elegant grace,” none of which vanish during his masquerade (79). The purposeless playboy disguise Francisco projects remains imaginative, witty, and elegant.

Sir Percy, in contrast, plays a dull-witted fool—a “foppish dandy” in the language of the day—whose closest followers know him behind the scenes to be anything but the kind of man who would lazily recite poorly written poetry in public. A master



strategist and cunning tactician, Sir Percy preserves only one trait of his truest nature: a love of fashion. Even this he heightens to the extreme, allowing him to hide in the fabric of society as the last person anyone, and particularly those closest to Robespierre, would suspect as the Scarlet Pimpernel.

Francisco, too, seeks to blend in to the fabric of ongoing society life, but by doing the opposite: playing up most of his natural strengths to mask the one that has intentionally gone on strike. In the same Milgram quote depicting his core traits, the one listed first, “his productive capacity,” no longer makes an appearance, to the great confusion, consternation, and even anger of characters like Dagny Taggart and Hank Rearden (79).

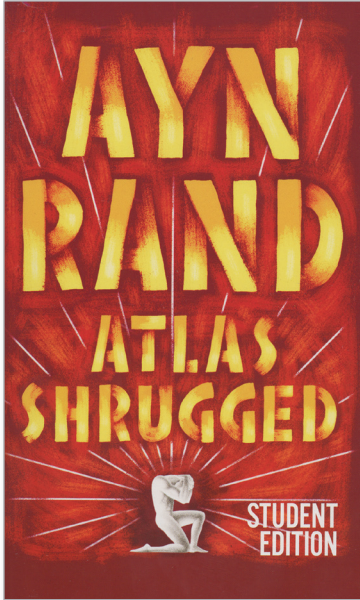
Both masqueraders from these literary works appear to be highly strategic in these contrasting methods of concealment, since each choice serves the underlying motive behind each. For dramatic undercover rescues of the French aristocracy such as the Scarlet Pimpernel performs, Sir Percy’s public image must appear incapable of any such feats. Otherwise the element of surprise is lost. The success of his ruse lies in the magician’s art of misdirection, an art he also applies to elaborate physical transformations into unlikely characters for each rescue he performs.

Francisco, on the other hand, holds as a key purpose for his return from the valley of the strikers to target and recruit Hank Rearden to join the strike by the men of the mind. “I came to this party solely in order to meet you,” he tells Hank on their first encounter (139). Had Francisco chosen Sir Percy’s strategy instead and masked all the traits Hank admires in men, he most likely would never have gained an audience or captured any of Rearden’s respect. As partially still himself, Francisco is able to appear as someone who has mysteriously gone bad or taken a wrong turn. From this hidden in plain sight vantage, he speaks truths on their first encounter that he believes Hank needs to hear in order to join their ranks, such as “I am calling your attention to the nature of those for whom you are working” (141).

These two men who adopt a disguise-with-a-purpose do have a core similarity, however. Both the Scarlet Pimpernel and Ayn Rand’s character risk the loss of the woman they love deeply in order to stay true to their course. The purpose each pursues overrides even that core relationship.

But it is the nature of their respective purposes where the two heroes diverge most strongly. Sir Percy’s duty of care hinges largely on protection of the monarchy and the right of the ruling class to maintain its place in society. He is an English nobleman, supporting the French aristocracy, and ultimately rescuing the young Dauphin, next in line for the French throne, from the guillotine by the end of the story.

While Ayn Rand might well support the rescue of any child, the philosophy behind the Scarlet Pimpernel’s overall rescues as he risks his life and his love relationship for members of the French aristocracy differs greatly from the intent she assigns her character. The idea of aristocracy itself strikes directly at her core values, as expressed in her summary of her philosophy in which she identifies “productive



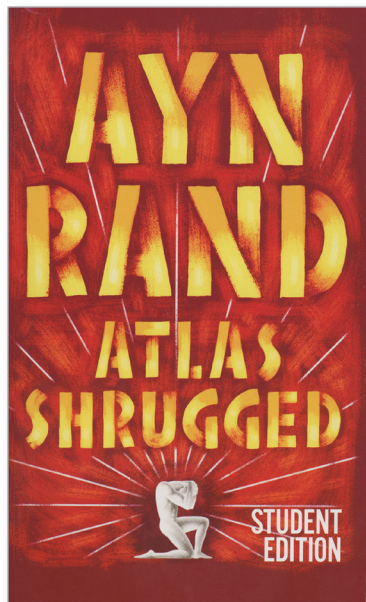
achievement as . . . [man’s] noblest activity” (1070). Francisco is the character she uses to illustrate this new form of nobility. Like Sir Percy, Francisco is born to money and the positions and power it could provide. Yet he stands for nobility based not on birth and inherited wealth, but on developing one’s capacities and earning one’s wealth. He envisions industrial trademarks replacing coats of arms and believes the test of each new generation is the capacity to keep and build upon the money received.

Each of these literary heroes no doubt believes he is following Rousseau’s wisdom that every man has the right to risk his own life in order to save it. Yet when each purpose is plumbed to its depth, perhaps only Francisco withstands this test. The Scarlet Pimpernel’s courageous risk-taking revolves around preserving an aristocratic system that saves his own lifestyle but does not ultimately allow him to help create a sustainable world, the kind in which all men are on equal footing, a world in which productive achievement at all levels fuels the engine.

In her piece “Man’s Rights,” Rand states her belief that systems embracing the concept of the Divine Right of Kings place themselves in exemption from moral law. She includes in her list of examples, such as “the Inquisition . . . Nazi Germany—the slaughterhouse of the Soviet Union,” the one the Scarlet Pimpernel risks his life to support: “the absolute monarchy of France” (109). Though Rand may have disagreed with the way in which monarchies such as France’s were overthrown, she chooses other motivational purposes than rescuing the nobility class for her characters. When the heroes of *Atlas Shrugged*, including Francisco, rescue John Galt they are doing so not only to preserve their friend, but also to save their own lives through the world Galt can help them create. Preserving this form of new nobility by risk-taking for men and women of productivity rather than sacrificing themselves for inherited nobility avoids the pitfall in which sometimes the ruler might be a person of character worth following and at others a tyrannical dictator in power by mere virtue of birth.

Leading any double life exacts a toll, requiring a constant juggling of traits, a hypervigilance against unmasking. It also presents significant risks, as illustrated by both literary figures as they lose a great deal of respect from the general public while adopting their masks as well as from the women they love. Is such risk and loss rational?

I believe such a masquerade and long-term submersion of one’s true identity can only be justified if the purpose is linked to values such as Francisco espouses. He is as committed as his friends who retreat to the valley to going on strike, to removing the benefit of his mind and gifts from the world as it has become. But he also recognizes that as long as a force of nature like Hank Rearden continues to play the game in a world the looters run—working for them unconsciously, enabling them to continue to stay afloat and in power—the strike by the men of the mind may not succeed. Grasping both the big picture and how his particular gifts and personality can be used, Francisco acts to win this piece in the chess game: Hank’s shifts in



insight. For this purpose, Francisco must be free to move in society without succumbing to the looters himself. For this he must adopt a disguise. A masquerade. A concealment of his true plans, thereby making himself of no value or interest to the looters. He uses his mask to conceal not his vices but his most heroic choices.

When the times are as desperate as depicted in the world of the novel *Atlas Shrugged* and when the purpose can be linked to the values of reason, purpose, and self-esteem the way Francisco justifies his choices to Hank, the adoption of a double life in which the world's a stage upon which the act-er decides it wisest to become an actor to accomplish those purposes can be a virtuous and courageous decision. Sometimes, in fact, when Atlas shrugs, the best strategy may be to appear to the world as though he hasn't.

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