



Overreaching Ambition, the Harbinger of Tragedy: Observing the English Literary Periods

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ABSTRACT

Ambition, innocently defined as ‘something one ardently desires to achieve,’ by the Oxford Learners Dictionary, harbors a paradoxical trait - its capacity for peril when taken to excess. This enigma finds early expression in the myth of Icarus, whose disregard for moderation led to his tragic demise. Across the annals of English literature, from the Renaissance to the Modern era, this theme of ambition’s double-edged sword echoes prominently. Works like Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, the Shakespearean tragedies both *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* straddling the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, Mary Shelley’s Romantic masterpiece *Frankenstein*, Emily Bronte’s enduring classic *Wuthering Heights* from the Victorian era, and Arthur Miller’s Modern American drama *Death of a Salesman* all serve as vivid canvases depicting the havoc wrought by unchecked ambition. This paper examines the motivations and consequences of unrestrained ambition, highlighting the importance of moderation in pursuing one’s goals. Applying a qualitative methodology rooted in textual analysis, this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of overreaching ambition on literary characters and its reflection on society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The prologue of Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus* serves as a compelling starting point, where the chorus draws a thought-provoking parallel between the ill-fated Icarus, whose unchecked ambition led to his tragic demise, and that of the protagonist of the play, Dr. Faustus. This parallel highlights the age-old warning that excessive ambition can be perilous. As we delve further into the annals of literature, spanning diverse literary periods, we discover that this hypothesis resonates across the ages, manifesting in works of literature as a recurring theme.

One need not look far to find ambition as a central motif in some of the most renowned literary classics. Consider two of William Shakespeare's iconic tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, where ambition takes center stage. These eponymous protagonists are emblematic of the Bard's exploration of the consequences of unchecked ambition. In *Julius Caesar*, the assassination of Caesar unfolds as a dire response to fears that his unbridled ambition to seize power through a coup d'état would plunge the nation into chaos. Mark Antony's pursuit of vengeance escalates into a battle, leading to Brutus's poignant confession, "Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more. Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him; (...) but, as he was ambitious, I slew him." (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1971, 65) This tale serves as a stark warning of ambition's potential for destruction.

In *Macbeth*, a Scottish general encounters three witches who propel him toward an insatiable ambition to claim the throne of Scotland. His rapid and bloody ascent involves regicide and multiple homicides, ultimately culminating in his own assassination. This speedy and bloody ascension to sovereignty which ends in his elimination

indicates once more that unchecked ambition is dangerous.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* presents a similarly cautionary tale. "Frightful must it be, supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavor to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world." (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1994, 9). Victor Frankenstein's audacious pursuit of playing God by creating life through innovative means results in his own downfall. The protagonist's reckless ambition and audacity in trying to be on par with almighty God or do even better and thereby transcend the boundaries of human knowledge, leaves a trail of tragedy in its wake. Towards the end he admits that he is "All my speculations and hopes are as nothing, and like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence (and now he is) chained in an eternal hell." (Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 1994, 204)

Transitioning to the Romantic period, one encounters Heathcliff, the vengeful protagonist of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Owing to the ill-treatment meted out to him by his adoptive family, the Earnshaws, he decides to take revenge on them by vowing to be the sole owner of their Estate. Driven by his ambition, he orchestrates a calculated plan that disregards the emotions and lives of those who he encounters. A broken man, Heathcliff's life concludes in solitude and bitterness, a stark contrast to his lofty aspirations. "It is not my fault that I cannot eat or rest (. . .) I've done no injustice, and I repent nothing. I'm too happy; and yet I'm not happy enough. My soul's bliss kills my body but does not satisfy itself." (Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* 2010, 348). On his deathbed, Heathcliff confides in Nelly about his current physical and mental state. He explains to her that he cannot rest because he struggles to feel fully satisfied despite succeeding in his revenge.

Even in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, primarily commenting on the themes of consumerism and urbanization in the 20th-

century America, ambition plays a significant role. Willy Loman's relentless pursuit of the American Dream becomes an obsession, leading to a distorted sense of pride and ambition where he even went to the extent of refusing help from friends who recognized his frailty and sensed his inability to reach his goal. Towards the end, unable to honour his financial commitments, he plans to surreptitiously commit suicide so that his family can continue living on the compensation which will be given by the insurance company. Finally, his dishonesty being discovered, his plan collapses. His tragic demise, a result of his unrelenting pursuit of success, serves as a poignant commentary on ambition in the context of the American Dream.

In these literary works spanning different eras, the protagonists exemplify the dangerous consequences of unchecked ambition. The hypothesis that reckless ambition inevitably leads to disaster is a repetitive theme which appears throughout these narratives. This research paper seeks to delve into the underlying reasons that drive these protagonists to their ultimate failures and demise.

2. METHODOLOGY

To undertake this exploration, we employed a qualitative methodology, using textual analysis. Our research draws from a rich tapestry of sources, including books, journal papers, and online materials, such as forums and speeches. The initial spark for this investigation emerged during a group discussion on *Macbeth*, which prompted us to connect the theme of ambition to *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, another play of the 17th century. This connection served as the catalyst for our broader exploration of ambition across various literary periods.

While navigating the narrative techniques employed in the chosen literary works, we acknowledge their heterogeneity. *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus* employs a third-person narrative

that begins with the chorus introducing Faustus's early life and personality, with all predictions subsequently witnessed by the audience. *Macbeth* utilizes a third-person objective approach, where the audience witnesses the story unfold. *Frankenstein* adopts a rather unique first-person epistolary narrative through an exchange of letters, embedded within the main narrative. The *Death of a Salesman*, despite lacking a specific narrator, the reader relies on the words and perspective of its principal character, Willy Loman, whose advancing age and mental decline introduce ambiguity into the narrative. Miller, (1961) speaking about Willy Loman, claims that "sounds, faces, voices seem to be swarming in upon him and he flicks at them, crying" (*Death of a Salesman*, 108). Thus, making the narrator seem inaccurate, thereby distorting the plot quite often resulting in confusion for the audience.

The varied narrative techniques employed in these works contribute to the complexity of our analysis of ambition and its excessive use.

2.1 Ambition and Its Consequences

In his paper, 'What is Ambition and Where Does it Come From?' Jon D'Alessandro asserts that ambition, a concept deeply ingrained in Western culture, remains enigmatic and polarizing. Over time, ambition has undergone a transformation, shifting from a term with negative connotations to one with positive ones. In Shakespearean literature, ambition often carries a negative undertone. During that era, it was widely believed that ambitious pursuits inevitably led to downfall due to opposition. For example, in *Julius Caesar*, as the assassins gather around Caesar's lifeless body, Brutus remarks, "ambition's debt is paid" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1971, 65). This 'debt,' as Brutus terms it, is often settled through revenge—either by an individual, fate, or nature. Shakespeare seems to suggest that ambition is a desperate endeavor to rise above the common masses, resulting in collateral damage to others,

society, or the natural order. However, executing such ambitions is challenging, requiring intricate plans to bring down a relentless individual.

Central characters in Shakespearean plays that explore the theme of ambition exhibit not just ambition, but an insatiable, uncontrollable form of it. It is this unchecked ambition that leads to their downfall. Macbeth's confession, "I've no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, and falls on th' other" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1994, 41), epitomizes unbridled ambition. At that moment, Macbeth contemplates avoiding murder, but his ambition relentlessly pushes him towards it. Dr. Emil Pfundheller, in his work *On the Character of Lady Macbeth* (1873), posits that Lady Macbeth even "does violence to her own nature" in her ruthless pursuit of making her husband a king. This unbridled ambition ultimately leads to tragedy for both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Hence, it can be concluded that it is not ambition but the excessive, unchecked form of it that proves perilous.

This notion extends beyond the Elizabethan era and holds true for literature from various other periods. The ambiguity surrounding ambition—whether it is viewed as 'bad' or 'good'—stems from the intensity of ambition in an individual. In contemporary culture, ambition is lauded as a positive trait. Young individuals are encouraged to be ambitious as it can enhance their innate qualities. A lack of ambition is likened to a rudderless boat, potentially leading to failure due to a lack of future plans. Ambition also fosters resilience, tolerance, and adaptability in society. However, ambition must be tempered, taken in moderate doses, to avoid the tragic consequences of excess. The terms 'doses' and 'excess' are inherently abstract, and their measurement is solely determined by individuals' actions and behavior when they are consumed with the goals they wish to achieve.

This abstract manner of measuring ambition

being explained, it seems to simplify and almost negate Alessandro's opinion of ambition having a polarizing and unintelligible effect on laymen specially of the West. This is because one begins to observe and understand that the behaviour of individuals changes when they are obsessed with the goals they wish to achieve. The different degrees of compulsion which push people to attain their goals potentially thrust them to the extremes of ambition as they become hooked to their objectives. This phenomenon often results in overreaching ambition with dire repercussions.

3. DISCUSSION

In the literary works, *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus* and *Frankenstein*, the protagonists grapple with the idea of transcending human limitations and challenging the divine through their intellectual pursuits. Their ambitions lead them to disregard ethical norms and natural laws in their relentless quest for absolute power, a pursuit often born of hubris.

Dr. Faustus, dissatisfied with the conventional knowledge of his time, takes a perilous turn when he decides to make a pact with Lucifer, "Had I as many souls as there be stars, I'd give them all for Mephistopheles [...] The Emperor shall not live but by my leave, Nor any potentate of Germany." (Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, 2007, 112). Lucifer grants him supernatural powers for a limited time of 24 years. This time constraint adds urgency to Dr Faustus's ambitions, pushing him to maximize his newfound abilities within the given time frame.

Similarly, Victor Frankenstein, inspired by the unrealistic goals of ancient philosophers like Cornelius Agrippa, seeks to defy the boundaries of modern science. His ambition revolves around disproving the Christian concept of creation by God almighty and ascending beyond the realm of humanity thus transcending to Godliness. Frankenstein's ambition is articulated when he expresses his desire to bring light to the world

through the creation of a new species. He says, "I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation [...] life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as a new creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs." (Shelly, *Frankenstein*, 1994, 51-52) This interest to defeat God could have been the effect of the Renaissance period when moving away from theocentric writing to anthropocentric writing was happening and writers were experiencing a breath of fresh air.

In *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, the main characters display unbridled ambition in their pursuit of power, ultimately leading to their downfall. Their unchecked thirst for power blinds them to the consequences of their actions and eventually leads to their tragic fates.

Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* also harbors an insatiable thirst for power, driven by a desire for revenge against the Earnshaws and the Lintons. His ambition is fuelled by a deep sense of betrayal, particularly by Catherine Earnshaw's decision to marry Edgar Linton. Heathcliff's determination to avenge himself and acquire property leads him to manipulate and scheme his way to power. Speaking to Catherine, his beloved, Heathcliff promises to avenge himself for the mistreatment inflicted upon him. "I want you to be aware that I know that you have treated me infernally-infernally! Do you hear? And if you flatter yourself that I don't perceive it you are a fool; and if you think I can be consoled by sweet words, you are an idiot; and if you fancy, I'll suffer unrevenged, I'll convince you to the contrary, in a very little while!" (Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, 2010, 116) Subsequent to Father Earnshaw's death, Heathcliff disappears for three years hoping to groom himself to become a wealthy gentleman capable of competing for

Catherine Earnshaw's hand. When he returns to the village, he carries an air of prosperity about him. He sees his Catherine living in the lap of luxury at the Lintons as she was by then married to Edgar Linton. Unable to rashly break up Catherine's marriage he tries to enter Catherine's life and schemes to bring down the Lintons and to amass their wealth in the future. A Byronic hero, Heathcliff's first step was to entice Miss Isabella Linton and marry her. Though Heathcliff's final ambition was to achieve power, it could be considered negative as his desire was driven by anger, pain, and vengeance. This resulted in his gaining no satisfaction with all the wealth and property he had accumulated and subsequently owned. It did not bring him joy because in the end he still had not appropriated his love, Catherine. All he had accumulated was to make everyone else suffer and, in the end, this resulted in his own suffering (e notes, 2012). To become a gentleman in the space of three years after escaping from being a domestic at Wuthering Heights, seems rather a swift race to ambition which indicates that he would have had a genuine overreaching ambition which finally ruined his life.

In the *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman relentlessly pursues the American Dream, believing that hard work will lead to success and recognition. However, his denial of reality and obsession with achieving societal power blinds him to his own decline. His state of disavowal is observed when he proudly says 'business is bad, it's murderous. But not for me of course' (Miller, *Death of a Salesman* 1961 40). His ambition is centered on gaining recognition in society at any cost. Unfortunately, his inability to acknowledge his deteriorating circumstances ultimately leads to tragedy.

All the protagonists of the texts used for this research paper end up in tragedy as a result of their egoistic thinking and rash speed in reaching their goals.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ambition emerges as a prominent and central theme within the literary works examined, often driven by the relentless pursuit of power and glory. It is important to recognize that ambition itself is not inherently harmful; rather it is the manner in which it is chased and the swiftness with which goals are pursued that determine whether it leads to positive or negative consequences. When ambition is followed excessively, recklessly, and immorally, it can become a destructive force, leading to the eventual downfall of individuals, as vividly illustrated in the tragic narratives explored here. Therefore, it is crucial to exercise moderation in the pursuit of one's ambitions to achieve the desired results.

One must be cautious not to allow ambition to transform into an unhealthy obsession. Overly fixating on a goal can deplete one's energy and, instead of finding satisfaction in their achievements, individuals may ultimately experience regret. This recurring theme is evident in all the fictional works explored in this paper. The protagonists in these narratives are unable to find true contentment in their accomplishments and often come to lament their choices.

Importantly, the moral lesson conveyed through these literary works transcends fiction and holds relevance in the real world, within all global societies. Embracing moderation in ambition could contribute to fostering a more harmonious international environment. By avoiding the extremes of ambition, individuals and nations alike may find a path towards greater fulfillment and peace.

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