

Ambition as a negative quality philosophy

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Ambition is defined as a longing to accomplish something or even as the motivating factor for one's personal success. Everyone has a goal or dream that he or she wishes to achieve, but sometimes it is hard to reach this without some sense of ambition or longing to attain it. The societal view of ambition is considered to be an essential quality of any leader. Anyone that has done great things in his or her life or even desired to do greater things possesses a certain ambitious quality.

However, an excessive amount of ambition could lead a person to believe that he or she has to go through extraordinary measures (good or bad) to reach this aspiration. With that said, ambition should only be possessed to a certain extent, and in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ambition is the sole reason for downfall. The fact that Macbeth reaches such a great accomplishment and high standing, yet he is unsatisfied portrays Macbeth's over-ambitious nature.

The corrupt nature of unrestrained ambition clouds one's ability to think and act rationally, leading to eventual demise as shown in William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* through conflict, paradox, and symbolism.

The different conflicts of man vs. self displayed in the play portray excessive ambition as a negative quality and as the possible result of downfall. The first struggle over ambition between man and self in *Macbeth* is seen when Macbeth says, "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only/Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself/And falls on th' other—" (*Mac.* 1. 7. 25-28). From this, *Macbeth* shows that he allows his ambition to control his actions rather than simply motivate him. He understands that he is about

to do something wrong, but he also knows there is nothing he can do to prevent it. This quote describes how he understands that his ambition becomes greater than his own intent. At one point, however, Macbeth feels discontent with his decision to murder Duncan which is shown when he says, " We will proceed no further in this business:/He hath honored me of late, and I have bought/Golden opinions from all sorts of people." (Mac. 1. 7. 31-33). Macbeth begins to realize that he may be in a good enough position in society as is. He begins to question whether or not he should reach a higher standing in a more dignified way, rather than by murdering the king. This quote demonstrates that Macbeth realizes his ambition may lead to something bad - some sort of collapse. The conflict of man vs. self shown through Macbeth's dialogue and soliloquies throughout the play exhibits the negativity of an exceedingly ambitious quality.

Macbeth's ambitious personality is also displayed through the witches using paradox throughout the play. The irony on the play begins fairly early when the witches give their prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo. The witches tell Macbeth in an ironic paradox, " All hail, Macbeth! That shalt be king hereafter." (Mac. 1. 3. 50). Although this statement is true, it is ironic because Macbeth did not realize that his time as king would turn out opposite of expected. He most likely believed that he would be rich, well respected, and would hold all power in Scotland which would make him happy. However, the witches' prophecies were cleverly intended to manipulate his fragile mind. In order to satisfy his own ambition, Macbeth kills Duncan in hopes that he will reach the happiness of being king, when in actuality, his kingship concludes miserably. The witches also display ironic

dialogue to exhibit Macbeth's ambitious nature through the apparitions. The first and second apparitions completely contradict each other where the first says to beware of Macduff, yet the second says no one born of woman can harm him. The third apparition also tells Macbeth that he will be safe until the woods move into his house (which seems impossible). With this, the witches are trying to give Macbeth confidence, but not true confidence - they are trying to give him a false sense of security. They use double meanings to accomplish this. This heightens his ambitious quality by motivating him to finally reach a happy kingship. However, the reason the witches have for giving him these double meanings foreshadow that this ambition will lead him to demise. The paradoxes used in the witches' dialogue prove and give insight into Macbeth's extreme ambition and give clues toward his eventual end.

Lastly, the use of symbolism throughout the tragedy assists in proving the negative effects of excessive ambition. A prominent symbolic image in the play is seen through animals, for example, when Lady Macbeth uses a serpent to symbolize the act of striking the king when the appropriate time comes. The characteristics of a serpent include witty, evil, and sneaky which directly relate to Lady Macbeth's characteristics. This idea proves that ambition is not always a positive quality to possess. Ambition is portrayed negatively here in that she becomes evil in nature. These three characteristics that are descriptive of a serpent and Lady Macbeth prove that a person will go through extreme costs to achieve whatever he or she wants without a care. The most obvious example of symbolism, though, is toward the end when Lady Macbeth begins to show signs of paranoia in her sleep

when she says, " Out, damn'd spot!" (Mac. 5. 1. 35). The " spot" Lady Macbeth tries to remove from her hand symbolizes the different murders that she and her husband are involved in. The fact that she is not able to fully wipe it off also symbolizes her difficulty overcoming the guilt she feels. This proves that Lady Macbeth slowly begins to lose her mind (which eventually leads to her tragic fate). Although this is not a direct result of her ambition, her ambition motivated her to go to extraordinary measures to get what she wants. This motivation did directly lead to her insanity. Through the use of symbolism, the reader can conclude that ambition not only leads to demise, but also a certain amount of guilt and suffering leading to downfall.

Society sees ambition as a positive quality, but it is a quality that can easily produce negative effects if used in excessive amount. A person's desire to do something could become too great and lead the person to go through extremes to achieve what he or she wants. This could (though, not always) lead to a negative outcome. Excessive ambition, when used to do evil things, is not worth the guilt that accompanies it. The use of literary elements in Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth* gives plentiful situations in which causes harmful consequences.

Work Cited

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. 1623. British Literature.

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