Oedipus, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice, and Julius Caesar: Comparative Essay

Ambition is a key motivator of one's goals and desires. If regulated, ambition can contribute to success. However, overambitious behavior, as a result of pride in one's achievements or social status, can lead to greed and corruption of one's character, strongly affecting his or her intentions. This is extremely human and is thus represented ubiquitously in various old literature, especially those by Shakespeare and Sophocles. The theme of ambition is presented in Oedipus, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice, and Julius Caesar-through imagery and symbolism- in order to discuss character development in the aforementioned plays: ambition corrupts characters, driving sinister motives and causing them to attempt to rise above the ordinary, leading to their eventual, tragic downfall.

The theme of ambition is presented through the use of imagery in Julius Caesar and Oedipus. In the play Julius Caesar, during Caesar's triumphant parade, Cassius converses to Brutus about the potential of Caesar ruling Rome as a king, arguing "Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus, and we petty men walk under his huge legs, and peep about to find ourselves dishonorable graves" (Julius Caesar I.ii.136-139). Cassius craves power and social status. Holding a high and influential position in the Roman senate, he feels pretentious and yearns to be the most powerful. Upon the realization that Caesar holds more power and respect than him and has potential to become a dictator, Cassius is filled with animosity and jealousy and wants to murder Caesar. Cassius tries to convince Brutus to join the conspiracy as shown through Shakespeare's use of imagery: Caesar is portrayed as a giant towering over the rest of the Roman senators, who are ignored under his reign. Cassius's character is so intensely corrupted that he believes the assassination of Caesar was justifiable to feed his own political ambitions. This ostentatious behavior, however, leads to his death. Oedipus furthermore presents how ambition leads to characters' downfall through Polynecies's speech to convince his father Oedipus to return to Thebes:

The abominable filth grown old with him, rotting his sides! And on his sightless face the ragged hair streams in the wind. There's the same quality he carries in his thin old belly. All this I learn too late. And I swear now that I have been villainous in not supporting you! (Sophocles 151)

Polyneices yearns for power and even attempts to deceive his family in order to achieve this desire. Sophocles uses imagery-in the form of words such as as ragged, rotting, and thin-through Polyneices plea to describe Oedipus's current, poverty-stricken state in order to show a false sense of empathy toward his father's current living conditions. He uses this pretense to coax Oedipus to return to the city of Thebes in order for the city to receive blessings and to reestablish himself as ruler. When Oedipus refuses to return to Thebes, Polyneices, driven by ambition, even resorts to raising an army in Argos to attack his homeland. This overambitious behavior, however, results in his death. Consequently, both plays demonstrate- through imagery- how ambition can corrupt one's character, leading to his or her demise.

Symbolism is additionally used to show the theme of ambition in Julius Caesar, The Merchant of Venice, and Macbeth. Ambition is demonstrated in Julius Caesar through Caesar's speech to the senators, explaining his opposition to repealing the banishment of Publius Cimber:

But I am constant as the northern star, of whose true-fixed and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament. The skies are painted with unnumbered sparks. They are all fire and every one doth shine, but there’s but one in all doth hold his place.(Julius Caesar III.i.60-65)

Caesar’s pride over his victories against Pompey and his power as a Roman leader makes him feel superior to the Roman people. Believing that he can achieve anything, Caesar attempts to rise over others in order to gain more power as shown by symbolism in how he claims to align with the Northern Star. Since the North Star remains still while the northern sky and all other stars move around it, Caesar claims that he is the most resilient and undeterrable unlike all the senators, who are symbolized as the other stars in his speech, and declares that he, therefore, must rule the Roman Empire due to the others’ inconsistency. Caesar’s pretentious behavior results in his assassination by the conspirators, deposing him entirely from power. In Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice, Bassanio needs money to court Portia. Shylock agrees to loan money free of interest, saying:

Go with me to a notary, seal me there your single bond; and, in a merry sport, if you repay me not on such a day, in such a place, such sum or sums as are express'd in the condition, let the forfeit be nominated for an equal pound of your fair flesh, to be cut off and taken in what part of your body pleaseth me. (Merchant of Venice I.iii.156-163)

Shylock’s desire for Antonio’s flesh symbolizes his ambition. The Jewish moneylender is extremely maligned for his religion, promoting animosity toward the Christian citizens of Venice. As a result, Shylock strongly desires for revenge, and finds it in Bassanio’s request for money, demanding a pound of flesh from Antonio as bond. Shylock wishes to inflict pain and suffering upon Antonio, who is a Christian, in order to avenge his own suffering. The moneylender demonstrates his ambition towards getting revenge, even refusing up to three times the amount of the borrowed money and constantly demanding the originally promised bond of Antonio’s flesh. Shylock’s desire for revenge ultimately leads to his downfall: he had to convert to Christianity and bequeath his estate to Jessica and Lorenzo after death due to his intention to kill a Venician citizen. In Macbeth, Lady Macbeth demonstrates her ambitious behavior as she soliloquizes, upon receiving news of Macbeth’s promotion to Thane of Cawdor:

Come to my woman’s breasts, and take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers, wherever in your sightless substances you wait on nature’s mischief. Come, thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark. (Macbeth I.v.36-46)

Lady Macbeth, like her husband, covets power and social status. Readily accepting the malign prophecies of the witches, she, influenced by ambition to become more powerful, seizes the opportunity to kill King Duncan without any compunction. This is shown by Shakespeare through the use of symbolism to illustrate the conversion of milk, which symbolizes nurturing, into poisonous gall, which symbolizes ruthlessness. Lady Macbeth gives up her female personality for a male personality of maliciousness and malevolence, indicating that she would do anything for power. Her corrupted character leads her to murder King Duncan and perform other terrible atrocities. These actions, however, leads to her despair over committing them and ultimate suicide. Hence, symbolism in Shakespeare’s plays serves to show how characters have been changed by ambitious behavior by describing their sinister motives and pretentious actions and explaining how it leads to their downfall.

In the works of Oedipus, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice, and Julius Caesar, ambition is used to illustrate and describe character progression. Ambition induces the greed-driven transformation of these characters, contributing to their ruination. The literary devices imagery and symbolism are used in the plays to demonstrate how these characters transform by revealing the relentless ambition behind their intentions and actions. The plays ultimately serve to show that ambition should be encouraged but overambitious behavior can have detrimental consequences.