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DEPARTAMENTO de FILOLOGÍA INGLESA
Grado en Estudios Ingleses

TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

Blinded by a Green Light:
A Theoretical Approach to Ambition in Fiction

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2020/2021

Abstract

Ambition is an ambiguous concept that can represent a problem when it comes to analysing characters. In order to establish a theory through which ambition can be categorized and classified, I have carried out research within different areas. Those areas are Philosophy, Psychology, and Semantics which outline the dimensions, components, and dynamics that ambition generates in various contexts. The perspectives and approaches from the different fields offer conceptual tools and insights to describe ambition as a category of analysis. Then, I have developed a theory to examine its features and elements as well as the distinction between positive and negative ambition and how external factors are determining in the portrayal of the characters analysed. After the application of these parameters, we illustrate with a case study how a character popularly considered to be ambitious does not meet the criteria of absolute ambition.

Keywords: ambition in fiction, character analysis, characters' sphere, positive ambition, negative ambition

Resumen

La ambición es un concepto ambiguo que puede representar un problema a la hora de analizar personajes. Para establecer una teoría a través de la cual se pueda categorizar y clasificar la ambición, he investigado diferentes áreas. Estas áreas son Filosofía, Psicología y Semántica que describen las dimensiones, componentes y dinámicas que se producen como consecuencia de la ambición en diversos contextos. Las perspectivas y los enfoques de los diferentes campos ofrecen herramientas conceptuales y perspectivas para describir la ambición como categoría de análisis. A continuación, he desarrollado una teoría para examinar sus características y elementos, así como la distinción entre ambición positiva y negativa y cómo los factores externos son determinantes en la representación de los personajes analizados. Tras la aplicación de estos parámetros, podemos ver en el caso práctico cómo un personaje popularmente considerado como ambicioso, no cumple los criterios de ambición absoluta.

Palabras clave: ambición en ficción, análisis de personajes, ámbito del personaje, ambición positiva, ambición negativa

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1. Introduction

In 1935, T.S. Eliot, depicting ambition and its influence on individuals, wrote: “Ambition fortifies the will of man to become ruler over other men: it operates with deception, cajolery, and violence, it is the action of impurity upon impurity” (48). Most people, I believe, would agree with this description, considering it truthful. However, ambition is a double-edged sword that, depending on how it is used, can be a man's best weapon or its destruction; thus, sometimes it appears as a virtue, and others as a vice. This duality justifies its representation in Ancient Rome:

“Ambition as a winged woman, dressed in a green garment and accompanied by a lion. The wings symbolize: the extent of one’s designs and the promptness with which the ambitious person desires to execute them or to express the hardships and humiliations suffered in order to achieve those purposes. The colour green describes growth and success. Besides, the animal represents fierceness and the potential violence necessary to carry out the necessary actions” (*Diccionario universal de mitología o de la fábula* 1835, 91).

This image incorporates the traits and characteristics of ambitious behaviour. Then, ambition can be defined as an intrinsic force in human beings that can be active or remain latent. It can be understood as a simple and unproblematic notion that oscillates between its positive conception, ambition as a useful tool, or its negative one, ambition as a flaw. The fact that ambition is not generally subject to established rules or standards but to one's own judgement is why I see the need for a thorough exploration of the concept. Ambition can be discussed as a 'compositional' entity, i.e., it can be described as a combination of elements. It follows the same dynamics as a clock, with internal mechanisms and a series of processes that relate to each other. To understand and explore this concept and its implications in more depth, I am going to examine ambition as a category of analysis through different perspectives such as Philosophy, Psychology, and Semantics. After considering the different perspectives of the above-mentioned fields, I have elaborated the theory of ambition in which its components, dynamics, and processes are uncovered; making it possible to develop a comprehensive method for the analysis of ambition in fictional characters. Lastly, the application of the stated theory in the case study of Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby* because he is popular and commonly considered an ambitious character.

2. Multidisciplinary Research

This research aims to address ambition in different areas such as Philosophy, Psychology, and Semantics in order to examine the different theories and proposals regarding this concept. The Philosophy section introduces the perspectives from which ambition is approached and how it can be understood through great thinkers throughout history. The purpose is not to follow the thought of a particular philosophical school or movement, but to give a more general overview of the opposing or similar ideas of well-known philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hume, and Nietzsche. Then, the Psychology section focuses on how ambition is understood from a more technical and scientific point of view, e.g., the different approaches to analyse ambition from fields such as Educational, Developmental, Social, and Cognitive Psychology. Lastly, there is a section on Semantics that aims to search for useful information and features regarding ambition in some of the most highly rated dictionaries such as *Collins English Dictionary*, *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, *Oxford Dictionary of English*, and *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. This section also provides a study of ambition nuances and the frequency use of its main collocations as a means to better comprehend the meaning and connotations of ambition.

2.1. Philosophy

This section puts stress on how ambition has been explored within the field of philosophy; as a means of providing an analysis of the dilemma, it presents different authors with approaches that are contrary and others with similar perspectives. This dilemma comes from the two possible results of ambition, whether it is positive or negative, in different contexts such as social, political, and moral.

Philosophy is concerned not only with human nature but also with human behaviour; moral philosophy serves as a guide to distinguish between right and wrong actions from an ethical point of view. Plato proposed in *The Republic* a definition of the soul in terms of objects of desire without implying a negative perception. This division is structured in three parts: a rational one that desires truth and knowledge, a spirited part craving honour, and an appetitive part that longs after the satisfaction of bodily impulses. Moreover, each part has a distinctive object of desire which influences and prevails over the others depending on its intensity; for example, the spiritual part is responsible for

ambition which is, after all, a passion of the soul. As a result, Plato's categorization provides a revealing insight into the constituent elements of ambition.

It is the opposite for Hume, whose proposal deals with the idea that individuals are not able of accomplishing sincere moral aims. Hume (1910) states that the nature of desires is connected with social acceptance (378). This means that individuals' motivation is marked by the desire to gain the approval of others. Thus, individuals act in a self-interested manner and men will always be selfish and ambitious (552). In this case, he understands ambition as a negative trait; one that corrupts individuals and makes them incapable of sincerity.

A century later, in 1878, Nietzsche categorized ambition as an impulse towards "making one's self superior to others, and to desire that this should be recognised publicly" (174). He also emphasises this sense of ambition by introducing the idea of "will to power" which is defined as the prime motivator; it drives human nature to impose one's authority over others (quoted in Rocca 2012, 50). Consequently, ambition can be classified depending on one's purpose as the desire for knowledge, success, wealth, or power. Nietzsche seems to be convinced that despite the insistence on recognizing ourselves as spiritual beings, we are just condemned to be merely human. This is, allegedly to the philosopher, the reason why we do not manage to live in consonance with our aspirations. He believes that ambition has positive effects on human beings because the accomplishment of goals driven by ambition makes us transcend and evolve and this is the greatest end for us: to become our best version.

There is another dimension within success that comprehends ambition in love relationships. The setting in which Nietzsche (1878) frames these relations have different implications for women than for men. The author says that females want to be loved without having other women as rivals; however, once they have established a relationship, they do want other women to recognise the value of their chosen partner because this would "increase their own distinction" (302). In contrast, it is just the opposite for men since love "recognises no power" and it does not confer them honour; therefore, "ambitious people secretly or openly resent being loved" (382). Those who share their feelings reveal their weakness. It is safer for ambitious people to give a very self-contained or even distant image of themselves; so as not to provide much evidence of their interests, and not letting others interfere with their goals.

On the premise that ambition can turn into a vice, a question arises as to where the turning point is for it to continue being a virtue. Aristotle, who was concerned with rational competence and the morality in human nature, answers this question by introducing the notion of the "golden mean". His golden mean deals with the necessity of finding a balance between extremes. Therefore, the management of the desires is attained through equilibrium between rampant ambition and inert apathy. Thus, Aristotle understands ambition as the force that moves people primarily towards honour and glory. Nevertheless, this scope seems to be too narrow when considering other explorations of the topic.

Machiavelli's interpretation of ambition continues in the same vein, but this time from a moral and institutional perspective. He claims that ambition is the cause of human distress since it leads to decadence, degeneration, and civil disorder and argues that ambition and greed are evils found in all cities (Ramos-Alarcón 2016, 214). That is to say, ambition tends to generate avarice which can be found in citizens as well as in those who rule. It is a potentially useful force for political institutions but at the same time a double-edged sword. Despite its destructive powers, this force can be redirected towards the common good. He believes in its ability to achieve general welfare, but only if political institutions are in charge of a wise and prudent civilization because they are mutually dependent. Moreover, he believes that ambition drives individuals to oppress each other as their pulses and purposes are generally related to power and the pleasure produced by the feeling of domination over the rest; for Machiavelli, this sequence is going to be recurrent in history since human beings are condemned to repeat it because of the inherent nature of ambition (215). As a result, it is necessary to redirect ambition towards a course from which profit can be made out of it; but it will never be fully controlled and will inexorably lead to social disruption and chaos; this inclination will cause adverse consequences on individuals and civil states (218).

In sum, we can consider ambition as a driving force capable of countering both logic and reason. Regarding the stated philosophers, Plato describes objectively how ambition can be structured. His categorization provides a distinction of the three main objectives of ambition: wealth, success, and power. Despite their opposing perspectives on ambition, Hume and Nietzsche agree that the interests of the self will prevail and make individuals want to dominate others. Aristotle argued that a certain degree of ambition is not negative, but there must be moderation and individuals must be able to

manage it. Meanwhile, Machiavelli does not think that people can manage themselves, so they need a state to control excessive ambition. Although ambition is potentially dangerous and unstable at its core, it may be a positive instrument if it is wisely applied or balanced. Thus, we see the polarity of ambition; there is a beneficial side composed of controlled desires and a negative side that is immoderate and can be destructive.

2.2. Psychology

In Psychology there is a distinction between motivation and ambition; however, when these two elements are described, we can appreciate a certain kinship between them. The fields of Educational, Developmental, Social, and Cognitive Psychology focus on how ambition influences or determines certain behaviours.

First of all, ambition appears as a need in Maslow's theory where he addresses the necessity of fulfilling achievement and recognition as a way of improving self-esteem. Here, ambition is considered a trait in itself and it could be classified, therefore, by standardized inventories such as the Five-Factor Model (FFM). This model classifies ambition within the category of Conscientiousness, whose features range from competitive conducts to dominance of situations and status aspirations. Individuals with high levels of this trait display more goal-oriented behaviour; thus, they set ambitious objectives and try to be successful in every aspect of their lives. They are generally described as determined, hardworking, and methodical (Wright 2015, 230).

In the Hogan Personality Inventory (HPI) the main behavioural tendencies are captured based on the FFM. The HPI was developed to investigate the dominant themes in social life; this model shows the correlation between inventories based on the FFM scales. However, these models classify ambition differently, for instance, the HPI includes ambition within FFM Extraversion and Conscientiousness. This overlap is due to the fact that for the HPI model Extraversion measures Sociability, but its inventory scales (goal-oriented conducts, competitiveness, and occupying leadership positions) are related to Ambition (Hogan Personality Inventory 2021). In sum, these models determine the degree to which someone appears to have ambition as well as their main features. Moreover, it is apparent that ambition is strongly connected to social factors.

Ambition also finds a place at the core of McClellan's theory of motivation (1988), where he depicts three main motivators, namely, a need for achievement, a need

for affiliation, and a need for power. The motivator that prevails over the others, in a particular individual, is responsible for that individuals' traits. For instance, if the achievement need prevails, the individual tends to focus on overcoming challenges and accomplish goals. If the dominant motivator is affiliation, their main concern is to encourage collaboration over rivalry. Lastly, power as the leading need involves the necessity to compete and win against others, to exert control over them, and the constant search for recognition. In all three motivators, the essence or absence of ambition can be perceived; both, the first and the third show the traits discussed in the previous personality models such as competitiveness and goal-oriented behaviour, while the second one would imply the lack of ambition.

We can see that motivation is studied as the interaction of individuals and the environment. Falcón (2008) states that this interaction can be caused, motivated, or goal-oriented. It is caused if external and internal stimuli influence the conduct, motivated because human conduct is permanently oriented towards an objective, and goal-oriented when inner impulses, desires, or needs produce a tendency in behaviour (6). Considering the last two types we can see that behind motivation lies ambition; individuals tend to be goal-driven and different objectives and desires trigger actions. Although these authors employ the word motivation or motivators, it is interesting that the descriptions of these elements are consistent with what philosophers describe as ambition. As a result, there is a connection between ambition and motivation and, as such, influences behaviour; this influence may arise from explicit desires or unconscious drives. For this reason, a search on ambition has been undertaken across various disciplines within psychology to explore its power in human actions and conducts.

In the field of Educational Psychology, Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller's research (2012) uncovered a connection between ambition, educational success, and professional accomplishment. They observed that individuals who display a greater ambition seem to be more inclined to complete their projects and achieve their goals. Moreover, they conclude that there is not a strong correlation in the fact that ambitious people living longer or better lives than those who seem to be unambitious. In Judge and Kammeyer-Mueller's model, ambition's features appear as traits that can be related to the FFM dimensions since they are the "result of underlying personality dispositions and perceptions of the world" (760). Afterwards, the researchers state that the positive relationship between ambition and intrinsic success is due to the satisfaction produced

by the fact of having achieved competence-related desires. However, it can produce just the opposite effect if the expectations placed on the project are too high. In their words: “It is consistent the idea that ambition is a more contextually relevant personal characteristic for life success than the more abstract, general traits identified in the five-factor model” (770). In sum, they claim that ambition can be understood as an “intermediary” between the willingness of reaching goals and achievement. Dealing with a similar issue, Naranjo Pereira emphasises the necessity of an active motivation that guides and supports students’ behaviour towards their educational goals; the amount of motivation generated should be significant enough for the individual to develop the willingness to achieve academic and personal growth (2009, 168).

Within the field of Developmental Psychology, Ashby and Schoon (2010, 350) explore the connection between teenagers’ aspirations regarding their careers and the significance of their family background as well as ambition value. These factors determine not only social status fulfilment, but also their incomes when reaching adulthood for both men and women. At this point, it is evident that for these disciplines the social area is the one most influenced by ambition. Here comes into play the role of social classes and how different backgrounds determine different outcomes for people; their possibilities depend on their backgrounds which shape their ambitions and influence their potential success. Keller and Zavalloni (1964) explore how the significance of a goal is established depending on the “relative distance” between members of a determined social class and their real possibilities to achieve it (58). Moreover, there are “variations in aspirations not because the individual class members are more or less ambitious, but because the classes themselves are nearer to some goals than to others” (60). That is to say, “social class alters the content of what is aspired to and, thus, constitutes an intervening variable between individual ambition and social achievement” (60). Then, if the outcome when reaching objectives ends in failure, it does not only cause frustration but also a feeling of defeat. The correlation between the expectation of society and one’s high hopes can produce much more ambition because once the prestige is attained, it acquires greater importance. Another key feature is the economic aspect. In the words of Keller and Zavalloni: “once a minimum of economic security can be taken for granted, energetic and ambitious individuals will be eager to find jobs that will bring them prestige, self-fulfilment, and the promise of advancement” (64). Afterwards, they deal with the arrangement of goals established by social structures

which rarely seem to fulfil the three main aspects that compose ambition: earnings, social recognition, and power. This dissatisfaction leads to a clear distinction between social classes since once the economic part is granted there is a tendency to move on to gain prestige. The conclusion they reach can be summarized as social inequality that separates the lower classes, which are more likely to experience failure as they get fewer opportunities and encounter several barriers, whereas the middle class starts from an economic base that allows them to get better education and occupations.

On this concern about living conditions, Cognitive Psychology addresses ambition as prompted by a belief. Ambition works as the main motivator, while belief is the incentive to take action. The aim is to achieve “well-being and satisfaction in terms of commitment to a valued future and empowerment to take the steps to realise it” (Bandura 2011, 7). Bandura also states that ambition arises from comparing your life to others. He distinguishes two types of ambition: social and aspirational. Social if the comparison is set on the life quality of others; and aspirational when it is measured the potential social status of the individual. Thus, there is ambivalence regarding ambition as it can be understood as the driver of actions or it can be used as the measure that estimates the potential of individuals.

In Psychology, motivation and ambition are studied as different elements, but when different authors develop their theories on motivation a clear connection to ambition can be seen. These previous research and approaches constitute also the starting points for the theory of ambition. This section has confirmed that ambition is composed of three purposes; these are a need for achievement, affiliation, and power. This is because individuals have a will to progress and expand in different ambits. Besides, these motivators that drive ambition arise from the urgency of obtaining social recognition and the feeling of satisfaction derived from the accomplishment. There have also been stated the consequences of unfulfilled ambition resulting in frustration and a sense of defeat.

2.3. Semantics

To define an intricate concept such as ambition, let us begin by taking a look at its etymology from *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: "ambition" arises from the Latin "ambitio, ambitionis" which originally meant “to go around” as it was used to describe

the action of political candidates to get votes. In origin, the purpose of this activity of going around was to gain votes and popularity; thus, the word eventually came to mean “the desire for honour or power”. Afterwards, the term came into French and English in the late Middle Ages as ambition and it meant “an admirable desire for advancement or improvement”. Later on, that meaning turned to be “the ambition or desire to obtain something” and acquired certain negative connotations in early English since it was associated with arrogance and vanity.

The term ambition derived from the verb “ambire” which is also the origin of the Spanish words “ámbito” (sphere) and “ambiente” (environment). According to the *Online Etymological Dictionary*, the Spanish word “ámbito” is a cultism that comes from “ambitus” which implies a circular movement. The verb has a meaning of movement as an embrace. That is why “ambire” refers to the perimeter of something; the real or figurative space in which someone exerts its influence, like an expansive wave. From this same verb, it is also derived the word “ambiente”, meaning what surrounds us or what embraces us on all sides).

Nowadays, the definition of ambition is the "desire to achieve a particular goal: aspiration" as well as "an ardent desire for rank, fame, or power", according to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. The commonalities that definitions from the *Cambridge*, *Collins*, and *Oxford* dictionary entries share are the determination to achieve or accomplish something and the striving after success, power, and wealth. Apart from those similarities, the *Oxford Dictionary* adds the nuance of an “ambition of being or becoming someone”. This introduces a new perspective of the term situating ambition in a place where it is not only the drive to obtain something, but it also represents a condition or status that someone can pursue; it implies the transformation of the individual’s identity. This idea deals with the alteration of the individual’s own essence and nature as well as the search for self-creation which can be linked with the craving for promotion and the expansion of the ego.

Along with the definitions, these dictionaries also provide several synonyms and antonyms concerning ambition. Beginning with those words with similar meanings, we have aspiration, pretension, and passion. Nevertheless, there are significant differences in the undertones of meaning that these notions share with ambition. For instance, there is a connotation in aspiration suggesting the idea of hope because the goal to be achieved

is beyond one's scope; as we can see in *Oxford's* example: "What changes are needed to meet women's aspirations for employment?" Next, pretension advocates for the desire for recognition and success but it implies a lack of the required skills to actually succeed; as exemplified by the *Cambridge Dictionary*: "The Chronicle has pretensions to being a serious newspaper". Then, passion is a "strong feeling" that makes a special emphasis on "powerful emotions" which are usually related to affection and/or sexual desire as stated in the *Collins* and *Cambridge* dictionaries. Regarding antonyms, we find words such as apathy, passivity, and inactivity which, interestingly, imply the lack of action and/or intention that the term holds.

In his study, Rohmah (2015) analysed 2,749 written contexts for the word "ambition". The data revealed that its meaning has a tendency to be negative, but there are cases in which it is positive or neutral. The researcher concluded that this tendency is probably produced by the connotations the term holds from its early usage; as a consequence, the current meaning of ambition is still negative.

This negative perception is also seen in the frequency results for certain phrases related to ambition. After an Internet search, the number of results for ambition can be compared with the ones of certain phrases. We find that "ambitious but honest" represents the 33% results against the 51% of "ambitious and honest". This could imply the idea that most speakers do not see any incompatibility between being ambitious and being honest. However, this need to specify that despite being ambitious, someone can be honest implies that there is a popular idea in which ambitious people are dishonest by nature. This impression is also seen in phrases like "ambitious and gentle" with a percentage of 21% compared to the 34% for "ambitious and evil"; thus, negative connotations may have developed from the fact that the actions taken by ambitious people give a negative image of them. Lastly, "ambition and success" representing 90% of the results over 28% of "ambition and failure"; this positive outcome may be due to a predominant association of ambition related to the idea that it leads to achievement, rather than considering other possible consequences.

The aforementioned dictionaries also include collocations that offer more detailed insight into the possible uses of ambition. These collocations can be useful to determine the main semantic nuances of ambition, commonly noted as values of binary variables. Hundsnurscher and Splett (1982) proposed several main classes of semantic

categorisation such as Behaviour-related, Social-related, and Privative (7). Based on these classes, I have described the primary nuances of ambition as [\pm expansion], [\pm absolute], and [\pm positive].

The expansiveness of ambition deals with impressive and demanding behaviour in terms of scope. It aims to extend one's control by augmenting the circle of influence. This nuance, [+expansive], is present in collocations such as “naked, bold, and great ambition”, which share the same main features, and also describe the willingness to take risks portraying attributes like [+courageousness].

The feature of the expansion is closely related to the nuance [+absolute], which indicates a strong intensity to succeed. This feature describes an ambition decisive, blunt, and with no limits. It appears in collocations such as “ultimate ambition” and, depending on the context, “driving and burning ambition”.

The last main nuance addresses the possible implications of ambition; whether it is positive or negative. For example, “lofty ambition” is a virtuous, honourable, and admirable ambition; thus, its nuances are [+positive] and [+expansion]. The complementary antonym of that collocation would be “selfish ambition” that has the same features but they remain negative.

Other possible features for ambition can be more easily understood by describing them through their collocations. For instance, we find the hypernym “career ambition” and its hyponyms: “literary, political, social, and sporting ambition”. Their features can be depicted as [+expansion], [+positive], and [+status] because they are linked to the idea of the desire for promotion. We can also find gradable antonyms such as “lifelong, longstanding, and short-term ambition” whose nuances can be labelled as [+expansion], [+positive], and [+enduring], or [-enduring] in the case of “short-term ambition”. Other collocations are “unfulfilled ambition” and “frustrated ambition” which represent the most negative meanings with attributes like [-expansion], [-positive], [-absolute], and [-status].

As Hurdford, Heasley and Smith (2007) explained, it is possible to describe “the common conceptual elements” of these collocations (214). By separating them into groups of attributes, it is possible to identify their differences and similarities. These nuances may vary depending on the context, but from this first approach, we can

determine that in almost all spheres ambition has an expansive connotation. We find the feature of absoluteness only in cases where ambition has a powerful and strong meaning. And there is also a duality since it can be negative, but in some cases, it is positive, as in “lofty ambition”.

Ambition itself can be ambiguous, versatile, and undetermined since it describes the pursuit of personal progress or promotion or both; it can be used to express either noble or improper desires. In addition to the different main purposes and the dual perspective of this concept, we can trace ambition as a circle of expansion that can be beneficial or toxic and that can last a lifetime or only a short period of time through its etymology, definitions, and collocations. We have also seen that this term generally has negative connotations because it has been used in negative contextual and social situations.

3. A Theory of Ambition

Ambition, from its origins, refers to everything that the individual wishes to have control over. Indeed, this is because ambition itself involves an intense desire for improvement; the term not only applies to the craving for personal development and progression but also suggests an excess of desire. This section aims to develop a series of sub-sections to unpack ambition. In this way, its elements and characteristics can be easily appreciated and then, they can be used in the analysis of characters.

3.1. On the Circularity of Ambition

Based on the etymology of the term, ambition can be displayed as a circle. This would involve the creation of an imaginary sphere that has the self, or ego, at its centre. This circle delimits two areas. There is the outer space, where things that are not the self are situated, and there is the inner space, where everything that is there is linked to the self. The fact that ambitious people would be located at the centre implies egocentrism in their way of thinking and their actions. This egocentrism is a projection of oneself; characters are aware of and recognise their identity through the ego. Anyone who crosses the ego’s domain has to acknowledge its dominance and they have to pay a tribute of respect, adoration or recognition. There is no respect for other people's nature or environments surrounding ambitious people; these two elements are the ones that the ego wants to confront as a means of changing everything strange or external to it. The

ambitious characters appear to be stimulated by a tendency to expand this circle, either moderately or limitlessly.

This circularity that tends to the expansion is seen, for instance, in *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff uses wealth and power in his personal mission to enlarge his sphere by owning and shattering all that he was denied. His brutal ambition is insatiable; he enjoys exerting control over others and even using family members to gain more power. Throughout the novel, he behaves like an absolute tyrant who subjugates and mistreats all those who try to stand in his way. The expansive dynamic is reflected in the fact that he does not seem to have an end goal; he continues to widen his circle even as he fulfils certain targets. The only limit to his absolute ambition is his death.

3.2. Ambition as Expansion

Ambition can be understood as a particular way of relating to one's circle of influence. Any kind of person establishes a relationship with their own circle, and the same happens with characters within their fictional world. In the case of the one who is ambitious this circle acquires greater importance. For the ambitious character, the circle is more relevant than any other feature or event because there is an internal need to keep expanding it. The task of expanding the circle becomes the most distinctive feature of the character as well as the possible means used to expand it. There are several ways of achieving this expansion; for example, by extracting some profit from everything at hand. Moreover, expansion can have different objectives; it can be an expansion to achieve authority, power and/or dominance. To be considered truly ambitious, the character must live in a constant effort to expand the circle and encompass more and more. In extreme cases, the ambitious one seeks absolute and unlimited victory and subjugation; that is to say the conquest not only surrounding areas, but the world, the universe, and even the divine.

3.3. Ambition: Ambit versus Ambitus

Every character has, therefore, a circle that is composed of those who support, love, and cooperate with them. This circle can be considered one's ambit. However, the ambitious one does not respect, encourage or collaborate with those in the sphere. The respect and support shown are not free and natural but forced or bought. For the ambitious character, there is no possibility to share or to act altruistically because there

is an interest and the intention to force the other to surrender what is desired; the same happens with cooperation which becomes subordination.

We could be talking about a corrupt and fraudulent ambit; one that may seem generous, but actually hides its true and obscure intentions. This type of ambit describes a more notorious and powerful type of ambition. From the description of the Latin term “ambitus”, we can consider this term is the true circle of ambition. This term designates a political corruption crime related to the candidate's attempt to openly or secretly influence the results of the elections through bribery (*Oxford Classical Dictionary* 2015). Therefore, the ambitus can be used to denote the type of sphere held by those who have an expansive and absolute ambition.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, not only the ambition of the soul is emphasised but also its corruption. The excesses produced by Dorian's ambition turns his hedonist ambit into a perverted ambitus. Wilde intends to disclose certain philosophical examination of the degeneracy and disintegration of the ambit. The author even includes in the novel: "Here was a visible symbol of the degradation of sin. Here was an ever-present sign of the ruin men brought upon their souls" (1994, 107).

3.4. Ego vs. Alter

Ambitious characters wish to transform everything they do not recognise as self through manipulation, aggression, subjugation, and distortion. They have a limitless eagerness that involves the repetition of these actions whenever necessary until everything outside has been transformed from its essence and subjugated to egoic self. The subjugation also entails the annihilation of the other. The alter must be dispossessed of its essence, alienated, emptied of everything that is not the self of the ambitious. the ambitious fears or hates, or both, everything that is not self. Ego devours alter, captures and digests it; there is an aspiration to turn it into more ego or completely dominate it. The ambitious initiates a process of depriving the other, of emptying it. The purpose is to pervert the alter; to try to reverse its essence, so that it turns the individual into another according to one's pleasure, or to eliminate it outright.

A clear example of this is the allegory of Nazism in the world of *Harry Potter*. The character of Lord Voldemort and his supporters seek the absolute dehumanisation of those considered inferior. The resemblances are obvious from the moment it is

explained the aim of the Dark Lord: the supremacy of the pure-blood wizards against the mud-bloods and half-breeds, who were subject to persecution, torture, and extermination.

3.5. Polarity of Ambition

There is a distinction between positive and negative ambition. Positive ambition can be understood as permissive; it is the one whose aim is to enhance motivation. It is based on the idea of being better without trespassing the limits of moral values. Thus, this type implies that there is respect towards the elements that the ambitious character considers alter. This respect towards the nature of external elements makes possible the adaptation to circumstances, rather than the transformation of them into one's own interests. This kind of ambition can be seen as a source of life and opportunity for those who wish to approach it; the decision to enter into this character's sphere rests upon those who approach it freely and openly. This ambition is used as an instrument to go through obstacles and hardships and there is also willingness to become a better person and to progress. Besides, it is implicit some toleration and patience; in this case, these traits work like the counterpoint for ambition, balancing it. The balance has to do with the idea of crossing moral boundaries. Ambition can be voracious and its consequences may be destructive or harmful; hence, moderation is necessary because it establishes certain benevolence. Although there may be circumstances where sacrifices have to be made, this positive ambition provides the perfect situation for the ambitious character to be an altruist and to help people while pursuing goals.

On the other hand, negative ambition can be considered destructive and potentially dangerous. It has a tendency to dominate or destroy everything that stands in its way or that is not part of its circle. The main problem with the passions aroused by this type of ambition is the necessity of having a cool mind; one that allows the character to perform the desired actions without being devoured by the craving that ambition produces. The main issue of this kind of ambition is that when it is excessive, it becomes blinding.

3.6. The Blindness of Ambition

In the words of Montesquieu, "A man is not unhappy because he has ambition, but because he is devoured by it" (2012, 10). Blind ambition is the yearning without

lucidity and its path changes depending on the situation. The blindness can even trigger irrational actions or behaviours that are driven by an excessive and obsessive need to achieve a goal. Once the ego is fixated on an aim, it forces and encourages the individual until the accomplishment of the objective. This is due to the fact that the ambitious ego sees only what it wants to possess, the rest remains invisible; it only perceives what is important to the self. In this case, the ambitious ego subjugates everything it sees, both elements and individuals. Nevertheless, there can be subjects that are not harmed, assaulted, or subordinated within the ego's sphere; if they have nothing to offer or do not interest the ego, they are not noticed. The fact that there may be subjects or elements within a person's domain, that are not dominated or oppressed, is not indicative of the amount of ambition that the ego holds. It depends on the ego's conception of reality, and this in turn depends on the ego's inner desires.

The blindness of the ambitious person is a recurring motif in fiction. For instance, it is usually represented when the ego takes control of the character's mind and commits all sorts of crimes out of ambition. Then, the state of unbridled passion dissipates and the character takes charge of the situation again. It is the moment of revelation when the character discovers the atrocities committed against innocent people or even loved ones because of ambition. It is the case of Macbeth, propelled by a desire of becoming king of Scotland that leads him and his wife to perform all kinds of crimes blinded by their ambition.

3.7. Ambition and Fair Play

As the expression goes: you can achieve whatever you want, as long as you are willing to pay the price. Then, there are two possibilities. First, the ambitious character is playing fair because there is a will to win and to achieve the ego's desires with dignity and honour. Secondly, the price to pay exceeds the possibilities of the character and the result is crossing the boundaries of moral principles. This individual is so ambitious that the end fully justifies the means, which are unimportant because the end is the ego on its own. Since ambition seems to involve a sense of purpose and it seeks collective approval, we could think the fair play has to do with an aspiration that is subordinate to social ethics and morality. The actual ambition would be the one that does not respond to any moral principle. When faced with the risk of not seeing its objectives realised, ambition moves compulsively and with sufficient determination to not care about the collateral damage that its actions may cause.

3.8. The Purposes of Ambition

These purposes that compose ambition can be mainly categorised into three main dimensions: power, success, and wealth. If the ambitious character's ultimate goal is a combination of these three elements, we can speak of absolute ambition; on the other hand, if the character only desires or pursues one of these elements, we speak of a diluted and more relaxed ambition.

First, the category of power comprises different dimensions and characteristics. For example, it can be divided into power exercised over others; power as a result of the possession of objects or people's wills, loyalty and respect; or the competitiveness born out from the desire to have more power than others. This competitiveness in turn can be divided into a positive one, which motivates the individual to be productive and it is useful. The negative competitiveness aims to achieve or win at all costs.

Secondly, success consists of a satisfactory outcome accompanied by a feeling of fulfilment or happiness. As we have seen, success has a strong cultural component. The surrounding culture, society, and environment establish the parameters of success. Therefore, success is determined by different cultural values; it can be understood as a personal or social one. For example, achieving success in business or success in love. There is another type in which there is implicit the desire for power; the success of holding a political office. The authority to supervise others, who are considered subordinate, is an element that feeds ambition. Thus, success and power come together when it comes to holding a position of control.

The last category is wealth, which is not only the desire for material goods but also lasting prosperity. In general, the result of this ambition ends up being avarice and greed when the desire for gaining wealth becomes selfish, excessive, and unstoppable.

3.9. The Durability of Ambition

Regarding its durability, ambition can be divided into two types. If the desire is unlimited and the ambition is both blinding and absolute, the determination is most likely to last a lifetime. Lifelong ambition can be understood as the dedication of characters' life to a single and obsessive purpose that directs and fuels their actions. However, if ambition has limits and the character has only small desires and purposes, we are dealing with short-term ambition. This type can be composed of desires that can be divided into

different objectives which can be fulfilled in the relatively short term. In this case, ambition lasts until the goal is reached; thus, ambition changes and its features are adjusted to a new goal after accomplishment.

An example of a character with short-term ambitions is Nick Carraway, the narrator from *The Great Gatsby*. Although Nick's desires change throughout the novel, when he arrives at West Egg his primary ambitions are to escape the boredom and to find a job with a better wage. He can set goals and long for a better life, but he is realistic enough to know when he has to leave behind his aspirations. After Gatsby's death, he decides to withdraw from society, disgusted by all the hypocrisy and false hope. His loyalty and empathy lead him to abandon his ambition as he realizes the misery behind that nation full of glam, money, and excess.

3.10. Consequences of Ambition

Ambition may or may not have satisfactory results; when the outcome is unsatisfactory, frustration or a feeling of defeat emerges. It has to do with the perspective of negative ambition, which implies the obsession to accomplish goals. This ambition usually causes losing touch with reality. Furthermore, the obsession often leads to the justification of any means and the transgression of moral values' limits. When this kind of ambition occurs, the possibilities of experimenting frustration increase when characters' expectations are dashed because of their lack of control over circumstances. Frustration can be divided into two types: external and internal. External frustration deals with those desires or purposes that cannot be fulfilled because they involve conditions beyond the character's control. Conversely, internal frustration takes place when inner desires are not fulfilled because the "person's belief clashes with new evidence perceived by the person" (Petric 2019, 2).

4. Case Study

The Great Gatsby, set during The Roaring Twenties, is the story of a tragic hero. Jay Gatsby is defined as "quick and extravagantly ambitious" (Fitzgerald 2008, 107). He has been often described as ambitious as well as "mysterious, snobbish, and untruthful" (Bramaditya 2017, 30). According to Ornstein, the novel is great not only for its perspective on the American Dream but also because "Gatsby's dream, naïve and

unreachable is one of the outstanding illusions of the race” (1956, 143). The fact that this dream is triggered by his ambition makes him start his quest; a process of reinventing and creating a refined version of himself to achieve the life he desperately desires. The plot is also driven by Gatsby’s wish of restoring his love affair with Daisy Buchanan with the help of his new neighbour Nick Carraway.

4.1. Jay Gatsby’s Circle of Ambition

The circle of Gatsby's ambition is delimited at the beginning of the novel when he decides to leave behind his humble origins to seek a brighter future:

“When Gatsby works for Dan Cody, a millionaire who owns yachts, Cody states that Gatsby is extravagantly ambitious. Later, Gatsby’s father, James Gatz, tells Nick, Gatsby’s neighbour, how ambitious his son was since Gatsby was a boy. All the indications above show that Gatsby is being ambitious to become a successful, rich and powerful person” (Octaviani 2014, 22).

We meet his ambitious ego that places itself at the centre, without caring about the future of his family. Bearing this circle in mind, Gatsby is a prodigiously ambitious man: he manages to learn the manners of a socialite, and even finds his way into university. He undertakes these actions because he is determined to widen his circle of control.

4.2. The Expansion of Gatsby

We can perceive an expansive dynamic in Gatsby’s behaviour. He is able to make a fortune and build a reputation that allows him to at least relate to members of the old aristocratic society. In this way, he is depicted as a person with aspirations and desires; but Gatsby does not present the expansive ego that strives to subjugate and denaturalise everything that comes in its path. He does not impose his will over Daisy; he uses his wealth in an attempt to show Daisy that he is on the same level as her, and for a while, she is fascinated by his extravagance and luxurious lifestyle. We see the expansive self in this turning point conversation when he explicitly asks Daisy to deny that she loved Tom Buchanan, her husband: “Daisy, that’s all over now,” he said earnestly. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Just tell him the truth — that you never loved him — and it’s all wiped out forever” (Fitzgerald 2008, 141). It is because he makes a request, rather than violently imposing his desires, that he distances himself from the ambition conceived in theory.

4.3. Gatsby's Lack of Ambitus

As mentioned before, every character has a circle that is considered its ambit or ambitus. Since ambitus describes a corrupt ambition with obscure intentions, we can only define Gatsby's circle as his ambit. He does not fulfil certain aspects that define ambition in "absolute" terms. Gatsby has the ambition to be rich and to have a certain social status; he later adds to this aspiration the desire to win the love of Daisy as she represents everything he has been pursuing. He respects other characters in order to fulfil his ambition. Although it could be said that he uses Nick to approach Daisy again, he is able to establish a friendship with him. We see their good relationship in scenes like this one when Gatsby acts friendly and gentle: "Good morning, old sport. You're having lunch with me today and I thought we'd ride up together." (Fitzgerald 2008, 69). Thus, he is collaborating with Nick without using bribery or other evil means.

4.4. The Determination of His Ego

Gatsby's ego is limited; after establishing his fortune and securing a good social status, his ego does not transform or subjugate what is outside his environment. The only time he feels the need to dominate is at the moment when Gatsby's ego recognises Tom as alter; that is why he wants the explicit denial from Daisy's mouth, to subordinate Tom's figure by humiliating him in front of his wife and other characters.

4.5. Gatsby's Positive Ambition

Gatsby's character can be considered a representation of positive ambition. The kind of ambition for which he is considered a benefactor, a sort of idealist. He portrays the American Dream by showing the possibilities of social transformation: a lower-class boy who works hard towards a brighter future, one full of money and distinction. His respectful position towards the nature of elements makes possible his adaptation to external circumstances. Although his ambition is potentially destructive to himself, it is not aimed to destroy others. Moreover, Gatsby shows tolerance in waiting for Daisy to make a decision and then, benevolence when the outcome is not what he desired.

4.6. Blinded by Ambition

"His extravagant and obsessive designs to recapture Daisy's love are vain attempts to "repeat the past," an ambition to which Gatsby devotes all his energies" (Quirk 1982, 584). It seems that the blind ambition of Gatsby is represented by the symbol of the green light, the one across the bay is what has mesmerized him; caught staring at it every night

waiting for his moment. Before meeting Gatsby, Nick narrates how he saw Gatsby observing this light:

He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward — and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock (Fitzgerald 2008, 24).

That green light signifies Gatsby's hopes for and thoughts of a future with Daisy. Patiently, he is waiting for something to happen and for everything to work out as he wishes. In a way, he recognises the unattainability of his goal but Gatsby also knows that he is close and that he could reach it. Gatsby is aware that once he asks Nick to arrange the date to see Daisy again, he will never be able to return to that state of uncertainty. A state where everything is possible and is still within his grasp. He is blinded by the expectations of his ambition; the life he has been longing for all these years. As Nick states at the end of the novel, Gatsby “believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us” (Fitzgerald 2008, 193).

4.7. Gatsby's Unfair Play

We can consider that there is no fair play in Gatsby's strategies to achieve his dream life. From the very beginning, he lies about his background and past to gain social recognition: “I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West — all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition” (Fitzgerald 2008, 70). He is able to build a fortune but by getting involved in illegal business. As Millgate noted, “It shows the lengths that Gatsby is willing to go in order to achieve his dream as well as how corrupted that dream has become in his attempts to achieve it” (quoted in Fälth 2013, 15). Therefore, he is able to cross social ethics and moral boundaries in order to achieve his goals. Still, Gatsby does not use any foul play to get rid of Tom; considering that this character is the major impediment that keeps him away from his long-held aspiration. Therefore, Gatsby prefers to be chosen selflessly and this fact shows a lack of absolute ambition.

4.8. The Purposes of His Ambition

Consequently, Gatsby only displays two of the three main purposes of ambition: wealth and success. “Gatsby's wealth, in itself, is not important to him once he has it; it

is nothing more than something that he can use to get what he really wants, which is Daisy” (Barbour 2008, 69). Wealth is one of the main purposes composing Gatsby’s ambition; not only for economic security but also the status gained because of the possession of material goods. Besides, he is in a constant quest for social recognition; he needs to be considered valid by those on a higher social ladder. Therefore, his success is marked by social and cultural values; the fact that Daisy could see him as an equal is the ultimate proof that he has fulfilled his dream since she represents the elegance that comes with money as well as respect.

4.9. The Great Durability of His Ambition

The durability of his ambition is intended to encompass his entire lifetime. Gatsby’s dedication to the particular and obsessive purpose of improving his life has directed and fuelled his actions. He has only one goal for which he has fought all his life, and that is to achieve that state of "greatness", which for him implies recognition and economic stability. However, the features of his ambition are adjusted when Gatsby believes that he has regained Daisy's love: “Well, there I was, way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn’t care. What was the use of doing great things if I could have a better time telling her what I was going to do?” (Fitzgerald 2008, 160). Once he thinks he is valid in his beloved’s eyes, everything he has fought for becomes secondary. Although the ambition that motivated him to reach this point changes and transforms, it is still lifelong. However, it is not absolute ambition since wealth or fame no longer play such an important role in his life.

4.10. Consequences of Gatsby’s Ambition

Despite Gatsby's determination, his efforts are frustrated. His downfall is mostly driven by his misperception of social values. His fanatical optimism and his naivety make him unable to ascertain the multiple obstacles in American society. Nevertheless, these issues do not stop his kindness and faith; he is still willing to overcome every challenge until reaching his peak. At the end of the novel, Gatsby’s aspirations are destroyed by reality: he cannot convince daisy that there is no difference regarding their social status. Although he has made a fortune big enough to impress her, the security and position that Tom provides are decisive for Daisy. “Belonging to an “old family” with “old money” generates a higher social status than self-earned money does” (Warner, Meeker and Wells 1998, 74).

We can see then that, although the figure of Gatsby has been considered and understood as the representation of someone ambitious, he does not fulfil certain aspects that define ambition in absolute terms. On this basis, it is clear that rather than complying with the image of an ambitious character according to the theory, Gatsby is a nostalgic man who lives on illusions and feeds on his hopes. What drives this character is the ambition for a better future, one that never comes.

5. Conclusion

Ambition is more than a simple concept; it is a force that comes from oneself and encompasses a series of aims and purposes. This force is unlimited, powerful, and absolute; all means are justified in order to succeed. It has no moral boundaries and governs characters' entire existence. This is the most significant kind of ambition. In this case, the analysis of Jay Gatsby's character reveals that he does not meet the established criteria. Ambition determines his life when, as a teenager, he decides to abandon everything to prosper; however, we see how he gets stuck in the past after meeting Daisy. His entire ambition or aspirations are reduced to the single and limited objective of recovering their love story. Thus, although Gatsby is commonly mentioned as an example of ambition, he does not fulfil all the features regarding the stated theory. As it has been shown, he does not feel the need to totally dominate his environment or to expand constantly his ambit; hence, he does not meet the characteristics of absolute ambition.

This dissertation has established a theory as a means to categorise and recognise what an ambitious character is like, from its background and motivators to its actions. As a consequence, ambition's main features and components have been analysed as well as its possible outcomes and effects on the mind and paths of a fictional character. This method of classification can constitute the basics in order to analyse characters; therefore, there is a possibility of discovering additional nuances as well as new features.

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