
HUBRIS AS A SELF DESTRUCTIVE FORCE – EXAMPLES IN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract: As one of the major elements of a tragedy, the tragic hero is a very complex world in itself. Tragic hero is the protagonist of the play, who ends tragically as a result of his/her own error or mistake. This error is known as Hamartia, and it was first used by Aristotle in his Poetics. Very often, the greatest fault is the pride, or better to say, the excessive pride of the hero, or Hubris. It is very important, because it is this error or mistake that helps the development of the plot and the downfall of the hero; that makes the hero get deep into suffering and troubles. Some of the greatest examples of Hubris in English and American literature will be presented in this paper, covering examples from different periods and movements in literature. For example, characters that exhibit hubris are, Beowulf, Ahab in Moby Dick, Dr. Faustus, King Lear, Jay Gatsby, Santiago in Old Man and the Sea, etc.

Presented as great characters, protagonists, these characters are adorned with the excessive pride or Hubris which becomes an obstacle on their way to happiness. The way hubris takes these characters towards their downfall, and the consequences of their pride – the suffering, losing the power, hurting others around them, death- will be analyzed in this paper.

Ahab in Moby Dick's pride is self-destructive because his ego, and not only his leg is hurt by the whale, and he is determined to kill it. Faustus' excessive pride makes him forget the end of the contract with the devil; Fed by the flattering words of Goneril and Reagan, King Lear's pride doesn't let him see the real and honest love of Cordelia; Pride makes Gatsby think only of Daisy and how to regain her, forgetting his own life, etc. However, in the case of Santiago we see that if one endures the sufferings and difficulties of life, pride can destroy but not defeat

As it is seen, this paper gives a reflection and an overview of how much hubris is presented in English written literature and the importance it has for the development of the story. However, the most important thing is to see the self-destructive power of excessive pride, how it leads these heroes towards their downfall, and eventually to their tragic end.

Keywords: Hubris, Pride, Literature, Tragic heroes,

1. INTRODUCTION

As one of the main elements of a literary work is the character. Characters play a very important role for the development of the story, and in order to understand them, we have to pay attention to what they say, what they think and what they do. There are protagonists and antagonists, who develop the plot, give life to a novel, short story or another prose work. Thus, the protagonist is in the centre of the plot, in the centre of the conflict and the character that develops the major themes. However, in many cases, these characters are not perfect; they are not unbreakable, unmistakable, they err, they make faults, and this error of theirs becomes the cause of their downfall, eventually of their tragic end. This error transforms the image of the heroes, from great people, into powerless, sad, rejected, even miserable people. This 'problem' is defined by Aristotle in his Poetics, and he calls it Hamartia, and calls it as a fatal flaw that leads to the downfall of the tragic hero.

But what are these errors, what is so powerful that changes the destinies of these heroes? Their faults and errors can be different, like misjudgment, over thinking, dilemma, ambition, jealousy, and very often the pride. Actually, it is peoples' pride that is often harmful, and it is this excessive pride of some of the protagonist that is the major issue of this paper. In literary terms, this pride is known as HUBRIS, and it is a defined as a common literary device applied to fictional characters whose excessive pride, self-importance, or arrogance leads them to negative consequences. As Berglas says, 'Hubris, the sin of overweening pride or arrogance, may be the most misunderstood disorder an executive will ever be confronted with.'¹ In fact, hubris leads to impulsive and often destructive behavior, often seen as a natural — or at least not unexpected — extension of the confidence and ambition required of anyone seeking power. Thus, it can be considered a problematic trait that can lead to serious, negative consequences for hubristic individuals and for those around them, so it's important to understand it.

This can be something a character feels internally, but it usually translates to the character's actions. It would be interesting to see how this excessive pride and arrogance is exemplified in some of the best literary works written in English, so this paper analyses the hubris, or the errors of some of the most important characters in English and

¹ Berglas, Steven, Harvard Business Review, 2014 <https://hbr.org/2014/04/rooting-out-hubris-before-a-fall>

American literature. I will try to cover the best examples, the characters that are well known and liked by readers, including characters from the earliest examples of literature written in English, beginning with Beowulf.

2. HEROES AND THEIR ERRORS

Beowulf- *Beowulf* is a milestone of Old English Literature, a great epic poem; one of the most important and most often translated works of Old English literature, and the earliest European vernacular epic. It is an epic that deals with events of the early 6th century. The great hero Beowulf, the protector and savior, a hero of the Geats, comes to help Hrothgar, the king of the Danes, whose mead hall has been under attack by the monster named Grendel. Victorious, Beowulf goes home to Geatland and becomes king of the Geats. Fifty years later, Beowulf fights another battle and defeats the dragon, but is mortally wounded in the battle, what brings a great sadness among the Geats. After his death, his attendants cremate his body and erect a tower in his memory, remembering him as the greatest hero of the Geats.

However, Beowulf was not perfect, he had flaws. It is his excessive pride, or hubris, in the battles, that led his fall from greatness, to his tragic end. As a result, it is this hubris of his, not his bravery, honor and reverence that is most important to the story. It is his pride what motivated him do amazing and extraordinary things, like swimming for five days and five nights in icy waters while carrying a sword and fighting sea monsters, and saving a neighboring king named Hrothgar, and his men from the torment of the monster Grendel and Grendel's Mother, who were of a great danger for the Geats. Beowulf's strength was obvious and dominant in battles, so he became a hero, everyone was proud of him and his achievements. However, all this resulted in Beowulf becoming arrogant. His men were sure that he could deal with all the difficulties that he was able to face and defeat all the enemies, always ready as his pyre was '*...hung with helmets, heavy war-shields and shining armour* (Unknown, 2016), p.3039-3140).' Beowulf knew that he was braver than the other men, and his confidence allowed him to defeat the monsters when no one else could even face them, and this excessive pride is seen in his attitude towards other fighters, when he underestimates them, by saying: "*You...were [n]ever much celebrated for swordsmanship or for facing danger on the field of battle...if you were as courageous as you claim to be, Grendel would never have gotten away with such unchecked atrocity*"(584-593). (Unknown, 2016) This lack of modesty and hubris follows Beowulf all his life, so getting old and being aware of it, and acting recklessly, he needlessly fights the dragon alone and as a result gets fatally wounded. The great hero Beowulf dies and everyone mourns him, accusing the dragon as the cause of his death. Nevertheless, if we think better, we'll understand that Beowulf himself was responsible for his own death, since had he not been blinded by hubris, he would not have ended tragically.

Dr.Faustus - *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, commonly known as *Doctor Faustus*, is an Elizabethan tragedy by Christopher Marlowe. It is based on German stories about the title character Faust, a well-respected German scholar.

Dr. Faustus has a good and decent life, but getting dissatisfied with the limits of traditional forms of knowledge—logic, medicine, law, and religion, — he decides that he wants power and unlimited knowledge. Being aware of the limits of human learning and his experiences with theology, is what pushes Faustus into giving up to evil. In this way he turns to the dark side for help, getting involved in black magic and selling his soul to the devil by signing a deal, and in return he gets absolute power and knowledge for 24 years. All this time he was obsessed with his power and knowledge provided by Mephistopheles² and doesn't come in terms with his Hubris, which he doesn't realize and eventually leads him to his downfall. Being too proud, he makes many mistakes, and ironically, doesn't see the mistakes he attempts to commit, like, for instance his greed for unattainable knowledge, his interest and commitment towards learning Black Art in order to be able to do whatever he wants, which in fact is Hubris of power. Then he spends his time going to several different important places to show his power in the form of trifling tricks, like for example his wrath towards Benvolio when he made horns appear on his head, and when instead of repenting, he chose his lust towards Helen in the end, etc. However, the greatest of his mistakes caused by his hubris is his pact with Lucifer, what makes him be seen as a negatively hubristic and ambitious man.

Although Faustus is a scholar and knows full well that he's playing with fire, he fails to repent and in this way regain his soul back, as we know that there are no possible actions to free Faustus's soul from the devil other than him repenting or Lucifer destroying the contract, and that is why his soul was doomed to everlasting suffering and pain. Faustus is a doomed Fool for misreading the bible, not taking the warnings of hell seriously and knowing that god exists; he still persists on selling his soul and not pursue goodness.

Clearly, it is his hubris that prevents him from canceling this pact and eventually to repent to the God for his greatest sin. He is too proud to see himself as an ordinary man again, and too proud to give up his immense knowledge and power.

² one of the seven chief devils and the tempter of Faust

King Lear - *King Lear* is one of the four great tragedies of Shakespeare. It is a story about an old king who divides his kingdom between his daughters, and which depicts the depth of human suffering and despair. We meet old King Lear as a great king, but who goes through a terrible downfall due to his misjudgment about his daughters. We follow his downfall and gradual descent into madness after he divides his kingdom to two of his three daughters based on their flattery, or words of how much they love him, and disinherits the one who was honest and sincere, and who loves him truly. His older daughters Goneril and Regan want the larger part of the kingdom so they flatter, and are dishonest, and since Lear's pride doesn't let him distinguish lies from truth, that is what brings tragic consequences for everyone. Goneril's words "*Sir I love you more than words can wield the matter, Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty*"(ActI, Sc.1, 55-56), and Regan's: "*made of that self-same mettle as my sister*"(ActI, Sc1, 69-70), were what Lear wanted to hear and they fed his ego and pride, as far as Cordelia's honest and true words and emotions "*I love your majesty according to my bond*",(ActI,sc1, 90-92) hurt his pride. This is how we understand that Lear prefers a superficial display of love by Regan and Goneril, to Cordelia's true love which is evident through her devotion and loyalty to her father. He wants to hear how much they love him, not feel how much they love him. This misjudgment would cost him a lot and is another of his errors. He realizes his mistake only when Goneril and Reagan get what they want and reject him, treating him in the most barbaric way. He is left abandoned, alone outside in the storm, just at the verge of losing his sanity. This mistake made him lose all his daughters, and all of them end tragically.

However, it is not only Lear who suffers from his hubris. Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son, and Lear's two older daughters are also victims of their own error, their own pride. Edmund's pride makes him chose no means to suppress his illegitimacy. His pride feeds his villainy and thus he chooses no means to destroy his brother and his father, what gives him Machiavellian qualities.

Reagan and Goneril's pride on the other hand is seen through their flattery towards their father and, just like Edmund, they would chose no means to achieve their goal of gaining rule over England, resulting in the horrible behavior and treatment of their father. Nevertheless, their desire for status is satisfied- yet Edmund, the sisters' lust object, destroys their alliance and they destroy one another. Thus, their pride is the source of their own destructive nature, which in the end destroys them too.

To conclude, the theme of pride plays a key role in catalyzing a series of events, which show Lear's kingdom deteriorating and being placed into the hands of his deceitful daughters.

Ahab - In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* the reader embarks on a journey narrated by a man in search of his soul, that is Ishmael, and led by a man in search of the destruction of evil, that is Ahab. Ahab is the captain of Pequod, and often went whale hunting. In one of his adventurous journeys, he survived a terrible accident. The big, well known sperm whale, Moby Dick took Ahab's leg, so from that moment, Ahab's life turned completely changed for the worse, he lost his soul, not only his leg. His ego was hurt, so he felt he was spiritually crippled too, not only physically disabled. This made him think of nothing but revenge, and this became his drive. As George Cotkin says, Ahab 'hungers not only for revenge about a lost limb, but for a deeper penetration of the meaning of life' (Cotkin, 2012), P.242. He longed to search the white whale, Moby Dick, which for him was the Evil of the Earth, and kill him, and in this way save the world from the evil. He believed he was doing well to the world by ridding it of this devilish creature, but in fact it truly brings Ahab to commit the ultimate sin, and become the evil of Christianity. He turns his back on God and follows in the footsteps of Lucifer himself. His pride was a death sentence for him, as he brought destruction of the ship Pequod and all but one member of her crew, Ishmael, who survived to tell the story. Ahab was no match for his nemesis Moby Dick and took his final plunge into the ocean with him, a fitting ending for a man drowned to death long prior by his obsession and sin of pride. Ahab's body drowned, just as his soul had when Moby Dick first took his leg. Ahab's ego, his excessive pride blinded him, didn't let him realize that he was getting into a great battle with nature, which cannot be won.

Jay Gatsby is the rich, mysterious protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby*. He is around thirty, a young man who was poor but became extremely wealthy. His main motivation to become rich was his love for Daisy Buchanan, whom he met before leaving to fight in World War I in 1917. It was when he had to leave for war and tell Daisy about his true background, that he was poor. This fact was very disturbing for Daisy, so she then moved on to another man in her life, eventually marrying him, resulting in Gatsby's pride being hurt, or repressed. This made him strive and do his best to fulfill his id's repressed desire, and become extremely rich. That was when Gatsby found out that his next door neighbor, Nick Carraway, was Daisy's cousin, whom he befriended and convinced to organize a surprise meeting between him and Daisy. After their meeting, their relationship bloomed once more, and his ego then escalated into a higher desire of wanting Daisy to leave her husband Tom. He told her to say a few things to Tom, that she never loved him and that she was leaving him. Of course those things were not true, because Daisy loved Tom when she married him, and she did not want to leave him. He felt his pride was hurt badly. This made Gatsby nervous and anxious, which he showed in different situations. Being hurt, he mumbled out

his defenses when Tom confronted him about his illegal bootleg business, and started speaking nonsense to Daisy when she finally learned his real identity. However, the climax happened when he confronted Tom at the hotel, saying that „she never loved you, do you hear? “He cried” (Chapter 7:83). This showed Gatsby was freaking out, and was out of his control. He could accept that Daisy chose Tom over him, and was still anxious and waited for her to come out of the house and run away with him. In this state, being too proud, and his hurt pride and manhood, he took Daisy, and drove, but being not able to behave and act reasonably, they caused an accident, killing Myrtle, Tom’s lover. It was a terrible accident, where a woman was killed. Moreover, Gatsby was left alone, with his wealth only, which was senseless to him without Daisy. He had wealth but not love; he had a mansion but not a home. One can be sure that it was Gatsby’s pride that caused his downfall and eventually his tragic end, because he did everything for Daisy and she did nothing other than hurting his pride.

Santiago - Santiago is the protagonist in Hemingway’s famous *Old Man and the Sea*. He has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish, and he is the laughingstock of his small village. However, the old man decides to change his luck and sail out farther than ever have before. This determination to sail out to where the big fish are, is a proof of the depth of his pride. No matter that pride is often depicted as negative attribute that causes people to reach for too much and, as a result, suffer a terrible fall, it is different in Santiago’s case. His pride also enables him to achieve what he otherwise would not. In other words, the pride that leads to the destruction of his quarry also helps him earn the deeper respect of the village fishermen and secures him the prized companionship of the boy.

In fact, Santiago’s pride is portrayed as the single motivating force that spurs him to greatness. It is his pride that pushes him to survive three grueling days at sea, battling the marlin and then the sharks. Yet it is important to recognize that Santiago’s pride is of a particular, limited sort. Pride never pushes him to try to be more than he is. Santiago takes pride in being *exactly* what he is, a man and a fisherman, and his struggle can be seen as an effort to be the best man and fisherman that he can be. As he thinks in the middle of his struggle with the marlin, he must kill the marlin to show Manolin "what a man can do and what a man endures." Santiago achieves the crucial balance between pride and humility—that actually enables him to endure, and not get defeated. This endurance is of nearly Christ-like proportions. For three days, he holds fast to the line that links him to the fish, even though it cuts deeply into his palms, causes a crippling cramp in his left hand, and ruins his back. His bodily aches attest to the fact that he is well matched, that the fish is a worthy opponent, and that he, because he is able to fight it so well, is a worthy fisherman. Like Christ, to whom Santiago is unashamedly compared to at the end of the novella, the old man’s physical suffering leads to a significant triumph. After Santiago goes through the struggle with the marlin, he earns the respect of the other fishermen in the village, and he earns the companionship of Manolin. However, after winning the battle with the marlin, Santiago knows that he will never have to endure such an epic struggle again; he knows that he is destroyed, but not defeated.

As Bryce Courtenay says: “Pride is holding your head up when everyone around you has theirs bowed. Courage is what makes you do it.”³ This quote shows that pride can enable people to accomplish even what they think to be impossible, but before one can do this, they must take courageous action. A quote from "The Old Man and the Sea" reads: "You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell for food, he thought. You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman. You loved him when he was alive and you loved him after. If you love him, it is not a sin to kill him. Or is it more?" (Ernest Hemingway 105). It was Santiago’s pride that enabled him to catch the large fish, and all those who have courage, and pride, like Santiago did, can accomplish amazing things. So this dignity in pain and suffering, his courage, determination and faith, give Santiago the characteristics of a real Code hero⁴.

3. CONCLUSION

Pride is found as a very important theme even in early literary works. Aristotle explained it in his Poetics and based on him, we can analyze the personalities of heroes in literary works. Pride in normal levels is very positive, it motivates and pushes people ahead to achieve their desires and aims and become successful. However, when one’s pride is in excess, when people’s pride is not in the frames of the normal, it becomes the reason for their downfall, makes them suffer, lose control and end tragically. This is how great characters lose their greatness and become victims of their own errors, and we just mentioned only few examples in English and American literature. Beowulf is excessively proud of his strength and power, Dr.Faustus is very proud to admit his sin and repent, Ahab is excessively proud to be hurt by an animal so he wants a revenge, Lear is too proud to admit his mistake and misjudgment, Gatsby is very proud he did a lot to win Daisy’s love but at the end she rejected him, what extremely

³ [Bryce Courtenay](#), ReadHowYouWant.com, 2011 , p.190

⁴ According to Hemingway, Code hero is a man who lives correctly , following the ideals of honor, courage and endurance.

hurt his pride and ego, and many more, are respected people, people of a high status or a good position in society, whose downfall or death is seen as punishment for their error, in this case for their excessive pride. No matter what is the main motivation for their excessive pride, it makes these great people become only shades of what they were. However, it is different case with Santiago who is too proud to appear as a defeated fishermen in front of the villagers. His pride makes him endure extreme suffering at the sea, suffering that destroys him physically however he still remains not defeated. These characters illustrate in the best way what excessive pride can do to people, so we get a kind of a moral lesson that we should be careful with our pride and keep it under control.

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