

## The Effect Phineas Taylor Barnum's Ambition In Jenny Bicks' *The Greatest Showman*

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### Abstract

This article focuses on the analysis of Phineas Taylor Barnum's ambition in Jenny Bicks' *The Greatest Showman*. The study aims to explain how Barnum's ambition affects his character development. The research uses a qualitative descriptive method with individual psychology as the framework, combining intrinsic and extrinsic approaches with both deductive and inductive techniques. The data come from Barnum's dialogues and actions in the script, collected through close reading. *The Greatest Showman* tells the story of Barnum, a man with great ambition who rises from poverty to become a famous showman, but also struggles with family, recognition, and self-discovery. The findings show that Barnum's ambition has two main effects: personal growth, reflected in his confidence, resilience, and family awareness; and personal development, reflected in his leadership, creativity, and decision-making. The study concludes that ambition, when directed positively, becomes a driving force that shapes Barnum's character transformation.

**Keywords:** Ambition, The Greatest Showman, Phineas Taylor Barnum, Jenny Bicks

### INTRODUCTION

Ambition is a personal trait that makes someone want to reach success, achievement, and goals (Judge and Mueller, 2012). In personal development, ambition is very important because it motivates people to find self-fulfillment and to control their own life. Yager and Kay (2023) say that ambition is a unique human trait that becomes the foundation, the main goal, and the guide in managing life. Building ambition starts with setting life direction, including dreams, purposes, values, and responsibilities, then continues with actions that match those goals (Rampersad and Hussain, 2014). However, ambition is sometimes linked with power, dominance, and narcissism. In daily life, ambition is a common trait that people can easily see (Yager and Kay, 2023).

Rhode (2021) explains that ambition is a strong force in many civilizations and drives their biggest achievements. Success gives satisfaction, but to reach it someone must be consistent with their decisions (Gordon, 2003). Failure does not remove ambition, but it can reduce the will to make long-term plans (Anderson, 2002). Ambition is present not only in real life but also in literature. Therefore, this article conducts research on ambition because it comes from the human desire to overcome inferiority and to achieve superiority or excellence (Adler, 1923). Therefore, ambition is not only part of human life but also becomes an important theme in the way characters are represented in literature and film.

This article analyzes a literary work in the form of a movie script entitled *The Greatest Showman*, written by Jenny Bicks in 2015. The script presents the story of Phineas Taylor Barnum, a character who is known for his great ambition in building his career and gaining recognition from society. This article applies individual personality to explore how the effects of that ambition are reflected in his life journey. Through this analysis, this article aims to provide a deeper understanding of how ambition influences personal growth and personal development, and it is expected to contribute to the discussion of character analysis in both literature and individual's personality.

Ambition has two main effects in an individual's life, namely personal growth and personal development. Positively directed ambition can bring real progress in both of these dimensions.

#### a. Personal Growth



According to Irving and William (1999), personal growth is the continuous process of developing oneself as a whole person. It includes setting goals, learning new skills, and improving aspects such as emotional intelligence, communication, and problem-solving. In *The Greatest Showman*, Barnum shows personal growth when he learns from failure, builds confidence, and realizes the importance of his family.

#### b. Personal Development

Irving and William (1999) also explain that personal development is related to specific areas of an individual's life and how they can be planned, achieved, and evaluated. It involves efforts such as education, training, and self-reflection. Barnum's personal development is seen in his leadership skills, creativity, and decision-making ability, which grow as a result of his ambition to achieve success and recognition.

From the analysis above, it can be seen that ambition gives Barnum both personal growth and personal development. His growth appears in the way he changes his attitude, gains confidence, and learns to value his family, while his development can be observed through his leadership, creativity, and decision-making skills. These findings show that ambition, when directed positively, not only helps Barnum to achieve external success but also shapes his character and inner transformation.

### METHOD

There are three methods: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method (Creswell, 2014). This article uses the qualitative method. The data source comes from Jenny Bicks' *The Greatest Showman* (2015), which consists of 106 pages. The dialogues and character interactions in the script serve as the main data. To collect the data, this article applies close reading by examining the language, structure, and context of the story, then selecting and categorizing the dialogues that relate to ambition. For the analysis, this study combines intrinsic and extrinsic approaches. The intrinsic approach observes character, plot, and structure, while the extrinsic approach applies individual personality, focusing on ambition. The analysis uses both deductive and inductive techniques (Little, 1996): deductive by applying theories to the text, and inductive by identifying patterns from the data. These combined methods allow the research to give a deeper explanation of the effect of Phineas Taylor Barnum's ambition as reflected in *The Greatest Showman*.

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This article finds that Phineas Taylor Barnum's ambition in *The Greatest Showman* has two main effects: personal growth and personal development. From the analysis of the movie script, the ambition of Barnum is reflected in several data that show his internal changes and external achievements.

#### a. Personal Growth

This article finds 5 data related to the effects of Phineas Taylor Barnum's ambition:

##### Data 1

*JENNY: You have surprised the world, Mr. Barnum. And you have surprised me. You have taken me in, stolen my heart. You have become everything to me.*

*BARNUM: I must go home.*

*JENNY: Phineas...*

*BARNUM: I have stayed too long. I can't be away from my family anymore. I am wasting my time here. What I mean to say is: Mr. Bennet has the itinerary well in hand. I'm not serving any real purpose here. I'm going home tomorrow. Please, tell me you'll go on without me. You must finish the tour.*

*JENNY: Is that all? Do I mean nothing to you? Of course. Go home to your wife.*

*BARNUM: Thank you, Jenny. Thank you so much. If I have misrepresented my intentions to you in any way, I am very sorry.*  
(Bicks, 2015)

From the quotation above, this article studies that Barnum shows the effect of ambition in the form of personal growth. At this moment, Barnum realizes that his pursuit of fame and recognition through Jenny Lind's tour leads him away from his family. The dialogue reflects a shift in his priorities, as he admits that success feels meaningless if it causes him to lose connection with his loved ones. According to Irving and William (1999), personal growth is the continuous process of developing oneself as a whole, which includes emotional intelligence and self-awareness. Barnum's words show that he develops awareness of what truly matters in his life, showing maturity and growth in his character. His decision to return home highlights how ambition not only drives external achievement but also teaches him to balance personal relationships with professional goals.

## Data 2

*BARNUM: If you're here to gloat, I'd reconsider.*

*ROTH: Police caught the folks who started the fire. Just thought you'd like to know. Come on. You look like you could use it. You'll rebuild, I hope.*

*BARNUM: You hate the circus.*

*ROTH: I did, at first. It's everything a critic is supposed to hate big, obvious, enjoyable, fun... But when they started protesting? I had to reconsider. What was going on inside those four walls...? Was democracy at its finest. A celebration of humanity in every form big, small, bearded, whatever. And that scares people. That's why they burned you down. It may not be art, and it's definitely lowbrow. But it ain't humbug.*

*BARNUM: Thank God for Jenny's tour. I can borrow off those profits and rebuild...*

*ROTH: The tour? My God, you don't know...? I'm sorry. I thought you knew...! (Bicks, 2015)*

From the quotation above, Barnum shows the effect of ambition in the form of personal growth. In this scene, after his circus burns down, Barnum immediately plans to rebuild instead of giving up. His ambition motivates him to rise again from failure and to turn adversity into opportunity. This resilience and optimism mark his growth as a person who learns to transform setbacks into strength. This finding relates to Irving and William (1999), who explain that personal growth is a continuous process of developing oneself as a whole, including the ability to adapt and to manage challenges. Barnum's response illustrates this idea, because his ambition leads him to rebuild his career rather than remain defeated. His words show how ambition strengthens determination and emotional maturity, teaching him to keep moving forward despite adversity.

## Data 3

*BARNUM: Someone once said love your enemies because they will tell you the truth.*

*TOM THUMB: And what's the truth?*

*BARNUM: That I'm a fraud. A charlatan. Coarse. Vulgar. Borderline criminal.*

*TOM THUMB: Jeez. You say that like it's a bad thing.*

*BARNUM: That's the good part. Underneath that? I'm nothing. Barely human. A freak.*

*TOM THUMB: Ya know? A very unwise man once said to me, "Be proud of who you are". Hey, I found him! Tolja he'd be here! That's right, Barnum. You're a freak. A weirdo. You don't fit in. Welcome*

*to the human race. My mother kept me locked in a back room for years 'cause she was ashamed of me. It was like that for all of us. But you pushed us in the spotlight. You told the world stories that made them love us. You made us into a family. (beat) Your humbug gave us a home, Barnum. And we want it back. (Bicks, 2015)*

From the quotation above, Barnum shows the effect of ambition in the form of personal growth. In this scene, Barnum admits his insecurities and calls himself a fraud and a freak after being criticized. The dialogue shows that his ambition to gain recognition makes him feel inferior when he faces rejection. However, this moment also becomes an important step in his growth, because he starts to recognize his weaknesses honestly. His confession marks a shift from denial to self-awareness, which is part of his process of maturity. Although ambition pushes him to achieve more, it also forces him to confront his flaws and to rebuild himself with a stronger sense of identity.

#### Data 4

*BARNUM: Caroline was kind enough to tell me where you were. I have brought hardship on myself, and visited pain upon those I cherish most dearly. You warned me of my folly, and I would not listen. If you have no warmth in your heart for me, say the word and I will never trouble you again. But if the case is otherwise, then you should know... (looks at her) ...That I am yours, body and soul. It is your smile, your laughter, that has been my guiding star. Without it, the rest is dust and ashes... I know that now. I wanted to be better than who I was. And I lost my way...*

*CHARITY: I never wanted anything but you. The man I fell in love with.*

*BARNUM: That is the man I will be. From now on. (beat) Charity...*

*CHARITY: Stop selling already and kiss me. (Bicks, 2015)*

From the quotation above, Barnum shows the effect of ambition in the form of personal growth. In this moment, Barnum reflects on the mistakes he makes because of his ambition and realizes how much pain he causes his family. His admission that he “loses his way” demonstrates his awareness of his weaknesses and his willingness to change. According to Irving and William (1999), personal growth is a continuous process of developing oneself as a whole, involving self-awareness and the ability to learn from experience. Barnum’s words indicate that his ambition leads him to greater self-understanding and maturity, showing how failure becomes a turning point in his personal growth.

#### Data 5

*PHILLIP: You know, Barnum? When I first met you, I had an inheritance. I had acclaim. I had invitations to every party in town. And now, thanks to you, that’s gone. All that’s left now is friendship, my love with Anne, and work I adore. So thanks a lot, Barnum.*

*(turning serious) You brought joy into my life, where there was none before. It’s the one thing you’re good at.*

*BARNUM: Yes, unfortunately, banks don’t accept joy as collateral.*

*PHILLIP: Still, there’s a few suckers out there. I own ten percent of the show, remember? I’ve been taking my cut every week. If it helps, I’ve got about twelve thousand stashed away. (Bicks, 2015)*

From the quotation above, this article studies that Barnum experiences the effect of ambition in the form of personal growth. In this dialogue, Phillip shows how Barnum’s ambition, even though it causes loss and sacrifice, also brings deeper values such as love, friendship, and meaningful work. Through Phillip’s words, Barnum realizes that ambition does not only focus on material success or social recognition but also on the ability to create joy and purpose for others. This moment helps Barnum grow as a person, since he learns that true achievement lies not in wealth but in meaningful connections and shared happiness.

## b. Personal Development

This article finds 2 data related to the effects of Phineas Taylor Barnum's ambition:

### Data 1

*CHARITY: This is the same?!*

*BARNUM: It is.*

*CHARITY: Can we afford this?*

*BARNUM: Of course. And even if we couldn't, it's an investment.*

*Land is the one thing they're not making any more of. (to Helen) I*

*think there's something on the porch for you. (to Caroline)*

*Something for you too. And, funny enough, there's a ballet school*

*just down the street. (Bicks, 2015)*

From the quotation above, this article studies that Barnum shows the effect of ambition in the form of personal development. Barnum demonstrates how his ambition is directed toward securing a better future for his family by investing in land and opportunities for his daughters, such as a ballet school nearby. This reflects his ability to plan, set priorities, and make decisions that focus on specific aspects of his life, including family stability and personal responsibilities. According to Irving and William (1999), personal development involves structured efforts to improve particular areas of one's life, which can be planned and evaluated. Barnum's decision in this moment illustrates his effort to transform ambition into tangible actions, showing growth not only for himself but also for the well-being of his family.

### Data 2

*BARNUM: Your parents still live nearby, don't they?*

*CHARITY: Phin. If I didn't know you better, I might wonder if you bought this house to rub my parents' noses in your success.*

*BARNUM: OUR success. And of course not. It's true that I've accomplished everything your father said I never would...*

*CHARITY: Yes... But you know, to them, house or no house, you'll always be a bum from the south side.*

*BARNUM: Yes, but now I'm a bum with a huge house they have to walk past every Sunday. (Bicks, 2015)*

From the quotation above, this article studies that Barnum shows the effect of ambition in the form of personal development. Barnum demonstrates how ambition motivates him to improve his social and economic standing, even in the face of others' low perceptions. His words highlight that he not only achieves financial stability but also uses his success to redefine how he is perceived by those who once underestimated him. According to Irving and William (1999), personal development focuses on specific aspects of growth that can be achieved, planned, and evaluated. Barnum's success in acquiring the house represents a measurable outcome of his ambition, showing how his determination translates into real achievements. This moment reflects how personal development allows an individual to shape their identity and position in society through persistence and self-improvement.

## CONCLUSION

In this conclusion, the analysis of the dialogues in *The Greatest Showman* script, it is clear that Barnum's ambition influences his life in two ways. In some dialogues, his words show confidence, persistence, and a growing awareness of family values, which reflect his personal growth. In other parts, the dialogues highlight his role as a leader, his creative ideas, and his decisions in building the circus, which represent his personal development. Therefore, the analysis of the data proves that Barnum's ambition shapes both his growth as a person and his development in society.



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