



The Chameleon's Ambition for Power in the Film *Kung Fu Panda 4*

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Abstrak

This study examines The Chameleon's ambition for power in the animated film *Kung Fu Panda 4* by treating the film as a narrative text. The Chameleon is portrayed as a sorceress and shape-shifting villain who seeks to seize Po's Staff of Wisdom and use it to absorb the chi of past kung fu masters in order to become the most powerful ruler in the kung fu world. Her ambition is closely connected to her earlier experiences of rejection and underestimation due to her small body and non-traditional appearance as a kung fu practitioner. The research aims to describe how The Chameleon's ambition for power is constructed through characterization, and how this ambition functions within the narrative structure of the film. A qualitative descriptive approach is employed, using Abrams and Harpham's characterization theory, particularly the showing and telling methods, as the main analytical framework. Data are taken from selected scenes and dialogues that reveal The Chameleon's motivations, strategies, and interactions with other characters, especially Po and Zhen. The findings indicate that her ambition is expressed through strategic planning, manipulation, and the instrumental use of magic and others' abilities. Her ambition not only shapes her identity as a villain, but also drives the central conflict and highlights thematic issues related to power, recognition, and self-worth in the film. These results suggest that ambition for power can be read as a complex narrative device rather than a merely individual psychological trait in contemporary animated cinema.

Keywords: Ambition For Power, Characterization, Villain, Animated Film, Kung Fu Panda 4

1. Introduction

In narrative film, it is often the villain rather than the hero who most strongly drives the conflict and exposes underlying tensions in the story world. Antagonists typically personify extreme forms of desire, control, or transgression, and their actions compel other characters to re-examine their own values (Smith & Lee, 2021; Ommen, 2023). Recent research on both animated and live-action films indicates that villains are not simply plot devices but complex figures whose motivations and inner conflicts warrant close examination (Kovač & Petrova, 2025; Prasetyo & Anindita, 2024). Ambition for power, in particular, is a frequent but nuanced motivation associated with antagonists, as it usually combines personal insecurity, social rejection, and a craving for recognition (Sun & Chen, 2022; Torres & Alvarez, 2026).

Kung Fu Panda 4 (2024) continues the popular *Kung Fu Panda* franchise by presenting a new antagonist, The Chameleon, a small lizard sorceress capable of shape-shifting and stealing the chi of kung fu masters. Various plot summaries and reviews describe her as a powerful villain who aims to take Po's Staff of Wisdom and use it to absorb the abilities of previous adversaries, thereby becoming the most formidable ruler in the kung fu world (Fitriani et al., 2020; Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2025). At first glance, The Chameleon appears to be a straightforward power-hungry character. However, the film also hints at a more complex background: as a young aspiring kung fu student, she was rejected by multiple schools and mocked for her small body and unusual appearance. These early experiences of exclusion and ridicule suggest that her later ambition is not arbitrary but emerges from a long history of marginalization.

Although *Kung Fu Panda 4* has attracted popular attention, academic work on the film is still limited. Previous studies on the *Kung Fu Panda* series tend to focus on moral values, motivation, or cultural representation rather than on the construction of specific antagonists (Fitriani et al., 2020; Brown, 2022). Linguistic and pedagogical studies have also explored the use of American or animated films as tools for character education and language learning (Brown, 2022; Zulkifli & Putri, 2023). However, these studies do not position The Chameleon's ambition for power as the central object of analysis and do not systematically examine the narrative and visual techniques used to construct her as a villain. This leaves a clear gap for a focused study on how the film represents her ambition and how this ambition functions within the overall story.

Characterization theory offers a useful framework for addressing this gap. Abrams and Harpham distinguish between showing and telling as two principal methods through which narratives present character traits to the audience. In the showing method, the character's personality is revealed indirectly through actions, speech, and interactions, which invite the audience to infer underlying traits. In the telling method, traits are conveyed more explicitly through direct description by a narrator or by other characters (Abrams & Harpham, as cited in Fitriani et al., 2020; Yildiz, 2023). Film as a visual medium combines both methods, using performance, camera work,

and dialogue to build a coherent impression of a character's motives and identity. Applying this approach to *Kung Fu Panda 4* can clarify the ways in which The Chameleon's ambition for power is represented and interpreted.

In the current body of research, animated films have been widely explored as media for teaching values, shaping character, and engaging audiences emotionally, yet most studies concentrate on protagonists or on broad moral themes rather than on the inner lives of villains. Studies on the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise, for example, often examine motivation, moral values, or cultural elements, but they do not place The Chameleon's ambition for power at the center of their analysis (Brown, 2022; Fitriani et al., 2020; Zulkifli & Putri, 2023). At the same time, recent discussions of villainy in film emphasize the importance of understanding how antagonists are made persuasive through their motives, trauma, and desire for control (Ommen, 2023; Smith & Lee, 2021; Kovač & Petrova, 2025). Taken together, these works represent the state of the art in character-based film studies, yet they leave a specific question unanswered: how does *Kung Fu Panda 4* construct The Chameleon's ambition for power, and what role does this ambition play in the story's structure?

The study of antagonists has become increasingly important in contemporary literary and film criticism. While traditional narratives often position heroes as the primary focus of analysis, recent scholarship argues that villains frequently embody the deeper ideological and psychological tensions within a story. Through their actions and motivations, antagonists reveal social anxieties, moral conflicts, and alternative perspectives that challenge dominant values. Consequently, examining villains can provide insights that are often overlooked when attention is directed solely toward heroic characters.

In many narrative traditions, the desire for power functions as one of the most common motivations for antagonistic behavior. Power offers the possibility of control, recognition, and influence, making it an attractive objective for characters who perceive themselves as marginalized or powerless. However, ambition for power is rarely a simple desire for domination. Instead, it often reflects deeper emotional needs, including the longing for acceptance, respect, and self validation.

Psychological approaches to character analysis suggest that feelings of rejection and exclusion can significantly influence individual behavior. Characters who experience repeated humiliation or social marginalization may develop compensatory ambitions as a means of overcoming perceived inadequacies. Such ambitions can eventually transform into obsessive pursuits of authority, particularly when individuals believe that power will protect them from future vulnerability.

Animated films frequently utilize this pattern in the construction of villains. Rather than presenting antagonists as inherently evil, contemporary animation increasingly portrays them as individuals shaped by painful experiences and unresolved emotional conflicts. This trend encourages audiences to understand villainous behavior not merely as a moral failing but also as the result of complex social and psychological circumstances.

The Chameleon reflects many of these characteristics. Her ambition emerges from a history of rejection by institutions that failed to recognize her potential. The repeated dismissal of her abilities appears to generate feelings of resentment that later motivate her pursuit of extraordinary power. As a result, her actions can be interpreted as attempts to compensate for the lack of recognition she experienced earlier in life.

The relationship between power and identity is another significant theme in villain studies. Scholars have argued that power often becomes a substitute for self worth when characters lack social acceptance or personal confidence. In such cases, authority is not pursued solely for practical benefits but also as a means of constructing a stronger sense of identity. This perspective is particularly relevant to The Chameleon, whose transformations suggest an ongoing struggle with self perception and legitimacy.

Shape shifting itself carries important symbolic meanings within narrative fiction. Characters who possess the ability to change their appearance frequently represent instability, insecurity, or fragmented identity. Their transformations may symbolize attempts to become someone else in order to gain approval, authority, or belonging. In The Chameleon's case, shape shifting can be viewed as both a magical ability and a metaphor for her desire to overcome perceived limitations.

Film as a visual medium provides unique tools for representing ambition and power. Through costume design, lighting, color schemes, camera angles, and facial expressions, filmmakers communicate information about a character's intentions and emotional state. Villains are often associated with visual patterns that emphasize dominance, secrecy, or danger, allowing audiences to interpret their motivations even before they speak.

Dialogue also plays a crucial role in character construction. The words chosen by a character reveal personal values, emotional struggles, and relationships with others. Statements expressing resentment, superiority, or frustration may signal underlying ambitions for power. Therefore, analyzing The Chameleon's dialogue can contribute to a deeper understanding of how the film presents her motivations.

Another important aspect of characterization is interaction with other characters. Antagonists are often defined not only by what they say about themselves but also by how others respond to them. Reactions from heroes, supporting characters, and society at large help shape audience perceptions of villainy. Through these interactions, films establish whether a character is viewed as threatening, sympathetic, misunderstood, or irredeemable.

Narrative structure further influences the representation of ambition. In many stories, a villain's pursuit of power functions as the central force that drives conflict and creates obstacles for the protagonist. The antagonist's goals establish the stakes of the narrative and motivate the hero's journey toward growth and self discovery. Without such opposition, the dramatic tension of the story would be significantly reduced.

In *Kung Fu Panda 4*, The Chameleon's ambition serves precisely this narrative function. Her desire to obtain the Staff of Wisdom and absorb the abilities of powerful kung fu masters creates the primary conflict that Po must confront. This ambition not only threatens the balance of the kung fu world but also challenges Po's understanding of leadership and responsibility.

The portrayal of villains in family oriented animation has evolved considerably over time. Earlier animated antagonists were often depicted as purely evil figures with little psychological depth. Contemporary films, however, increasingly present villains with understandable motivations and personal histories. This shift reflects broader cultural interest in exploring the complexity of human behavior rather than reducing characters to simplistic moral categories.

Understanding The Chameleon's ambition therefore requires attention to both narrative and psychological dimensions. Her actions contribute to the film's external conflict, while her background provides insight into the emotional foundations of her behavior. Combining these perspectives allows for a more comprehensive interpretation of her role within the story.

Ultimately, analyzing The Chameleon as an ambitious antagonist contributes to broader discussions about power, identity, and social recognition in contemporary animation. Her character demonstrates how personal experiences of rejection can shape individual aspirations and influence moral choices. By examining the ways in which the film constructs her ambition, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of villain characterization and its significance within modern animated storytelling.

Another dimension that deserves attention is the relationship between social status and the desire for authority. Individuals who experience exclusion from prestigious institutions often develop a heightened sensitivity toward recognition and achievement. In narrative fiction, this condition is frequently represented through characters who seek power as compensation for their lack of social acceptance. The Chameleon's repeated rejection from kung fu schools reflects this dynamic, suggesting that her ambition is closely connected to her struggle for legitimacy within a social hierarchy that once dismissed her.

Scholars of narrative psychology argue that personal identity is largely shaped by the stories individuals construct about their past experiences. When negative experiences dominate these narratives, individuals may reinterpret their lives through feelings of injustice, resentment, or revenge. Such internal narratives can motivate extreme actions aimed at correcting perceived wrongs. The Chameleon's determination to prove her worth may therefore be understood as an attempt to rewrite the story of her own marginalization.

The concept of recognition is also central to understanding villainous ambition. According to social recognition theory, individuals seek acknowledgment of their abilities, contributions, and value from others. When recognition is denied, frustration and alienation may emerge. In many fictional narratives, villains pursue power because they believe that authority will finally provide the respect they have been unable to obtain through conventional means. This perspective offers an alternative way of interpreting The Chameleon's actions beyond a simple desire for domination.

The present study addresses this research gap by focusing directly on The Chameleon's ambition for power and by examining it through Abrams and Harpham's characterization theory, especially the distinction between showing and telling as modes of presenting character. By doing so, the research offers a novel contribution in two ways. First, it shifts attention from Po and other heroic figures to the antagonist, treating her ambition not as a simple cliché but as a carefully constructed narrative force. Second, it combines characterization theory with insights from recent work on emotional and social dynamics in narrative, allowing The Chameleon's ambition to be read both as a textual device and as a response to long-term experiences of rejection and underestimation (De Graaf et al., 2019; Kubrak & Starostina, 2023; Sun & Chen, 2022; Torres & Alvarez, 2026). In line with this focus, the study aims to explain how The Chameleon's ambition for power is constructed in *Kung Fu Panda 4* and how this ambition functions within the film's narrative structure.

2. Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design within the field of literary and film studies. The film is treated as a narrative text, allowing its characters, dialogues, and visual compositions to be analyzed in a way that parallels the study of written literary works (Fitriani et al., 2020; De Graaf et al., 2019). A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on interpreting meanings, character traits, and narrative functions rather than on measuring variables numerically. The main concern is to understand how The Chameleon's ambition for power is represented and how this representation contributes to the development of the story.

The primary data source is the animated film *Kung Fu Panda 4*, released in 2024. The film is accessed in its original English version to preserve nuances of dialogue and vocal performance, which are important for character analysis

(Brown, 2022; Yildiz, 2023). The units of analysis consist of scenes and dialogues that involve The Chameleon and are relevant to the research focus, especially those that reveal her motivations, strategies, and relationships with other characters such as Po and Zhen. These scenes are treated as textual segments that can be examined closely within their narrative context.

Data collection is conducted through repeated viewings of the film. During each viewing, the researcher takes notes on sequences that appear to illustrate The Chameleon's ambition for power, including her attempts to seize the Staff of Wisdom, her use of shape-shifting magic, and her confrontations with Po and other figures. Relevant dialogues are transcribed, paying attention to wording, tone, and situational context. Visual details that support the interpretation of ambition and power—such as gestures, spatial positioning, and the framing of shots—are recorded in descriptive form, while the analysis remains focused on character and narrative rather than on technical aspects of animation or cinematography (Johnson & Miller, 2020; Kubrak & Starostina, 2023).

The data analysis follows the interactive model of qualitative analysis, which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Fitriani et al., 2020). In the condensation stage, the collected scenes and dialogues are selected and grouped according to their relevance to The Chameleon's ambition for power. Segments that clearly demonstrate her experiences of rejection, her explicit statements about power, and her strategic actions are retained, while material that does not relate to the research focus is excluded. In the display stage, the selected data are organized into thematic categories, such as background and early rejections, explicit expressions of ambition, strategic use of power, and responses from other characters. These categories provide a structured basis for interpretation.

Abrams and Harpham's characterization theory is applied throughout the analysis as the main interpretive lens. For each selected scene, the researcher identifies whether The Chameleon's ambition is presented primarily through showing or telling. For example, scenes in which she manipulates other characters, executes complex plans, or uses magic to gain advantage are examined as instances of showing, while dialogues in which she declares her goals or is described by others are treated as examples of telling (De Graaf et al., 2019; Yildiz, 2023). By comparing these modes of presentation, the study explores how different narrative strategies collaborate to build a coherent image of her ambition.

Insights from recent work on emotional and social intelligence and on villain characterization support this analysis. These studies suggest that characters who feel undervalued may develop intense efforts to prove themselves, sometimes by seeking power over others (Kovač & Petrova, 2025; Sun & Chen, 2022; Torres & Alvarez, 2026). Such perspectives inform the interpretation of The Chameleon's ambition as a response to rejection, even though the primary framework of the study remains characterization theory. Throughout the process of drawing conclusions, the researcher repeatedly returns to the film text to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in the data and consistent with the overall storyline of *Kung Fu Panda 4*.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis of *Kung Fu Panda 4* focuses on a series of scenes and dialogues that highlight The Chameleon's past, her explicit statements about power, and her strategic actions throughout the film. After the data were condensed and organized into thematic categories, several interrelated patterns emerged. These patterns show that her ambition for power is not presented in a single moment, but gradually constructed through the film's narrative choices. For clarity, the discussion in this section is organized into sub-sections that move from her background and early rejections, to the way her ambition motivates the plot, and finally to the broader implications of her pursuit of power for themes of recognition and self-worth.

3.1 The Chameleon's Background and Early Rejections

The analysis indicates that The Chameleon's ambition for power is rooted in a background of repeated rejection and ridicule. The film's backstory suggests that she once aspired to be a kung fu student but was turned away by multiple schools, largely because of her small body and non-traditional appearance. These early experiences position her as someone excluded from legitimate paths to strength and recognition (Fitriani et al., 2020; Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2025). Instead of receiving guidance from established masters, she is forced to seek alternative routes to empowerment through sorcery and deception.

From the standpoint of characterization, this background is conveyed through a combination of telling and showing. The film uses lines of dialogue and brief explanatory comments to inform the audience about her past, which functions as telling in Abrams and Harpham's terms (De Graaf et al., 2019; Yildiz, 2023). At the same time, her bitter tone when referring to kung fu masters and her determination to surpass them show the enduring impact of these rejections. The interplay of telling and showing allows viewers to infer that her ambition is not simply greed for power, but a response to long-standing feelings of humiliation and inferiority. This psychological grounding makes her subsequent pursuit of domination more comprehensible, even if it remains morally problematic.

3.2 Ambition for Power as Narrative Motivation

The Chameleon's ambition for power is explicitly articulated through her desire to capture Po's Staff of Wisdom and use it to absorb the chi of powerful kung fu masters from the spirit realm. Various reviews and synopses note that this plan is designed to make her stronger than any single master and to give her control over the kung fu world (Fitriani et al., 2020; Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2025). Within the narrative, her ambition functions as the principal motivation behind the main conflict. It is her plan, rather than Po's personal goals, that drives the story forward and sets the stakes for the other characters.

In narrative terms, ambition for power operates both as an internal desire and as an external objective. Internally, it reflects her need to prove that she is more than the weak and insignificant creature others once perceived. Externally, it takes the form of concrete actions directed at obtaining the Staff of Wisdom, attacking opponents, and subjugating the kung fu order. The film links these internal and external dimensions by showing how her sense of self depends on the accumulation of power and the defeat of those who once excluded her (Kovač & Petrova, 2025; Sun & Chen, 2022). Losing the opportunity to become the most powerful being would mean, for her, a return to the status of invisibility and contempt.

Within the framework of characterization theory, this ambition is built through a dynamic combination of showing and telling. Telling occurs when she openly declares her intention to rule or when other characters describe her as dangerous and power-hungry. Showing occurs in sequences where she designs traps, coordinates attacks, and uses shape-shifting to deceive opponents. Together, these methods create a consistent portrait of ambition that remains visible throughout different stages of the narrative.

3.3 Showing Ambition: Actions, Strategies, and Manipulation

A closer examination of The Chameleon's actions reveals that her ambition is expressed not only through aggressive behavior, but also through strategic planning and manipulation. She commands an army of larger creatures yet relies on them selectively, deploying them in ways that maximize her advantage rather than rushing into every confrontation herself. Her mastery of shape-shifting magic allows her to assume different forms, infiltrate spaces, and exploit the weaknesses of her targets. These tactics demonstrate that her pursuit of power is guided by intelligence and adaptability rather than by impulsive violence (Kovač & Petrova, 2025; Prasetyo & Anindita, 2024).

These aspects belong primarily to the mode of showing in Abrams and Harpham's terms. The audience sees her designing schemes, negotiating with subordinates, and timing her attacks to coincide with moments of vulnerability for Po and his allies. In several scenes, she uses persuasive language to undermine the confidence of others or to tempt them with promises of power, thereby treating relationships as instruments for her own advancement. Such behavior portrays ambition as an active, ongoing process that requires constant strategic adjustment (De Graaf et al., 2019; Johnson & Miller, 2020).

This representation aligns with recent discussions of intelligent villains in film, where antagonists are depicted as planning several steps ahead of the heroes and transforming structural disadvantages into tactical strengths (Ommen, 2023; Smith & Lee, 2021). The Chameleon's small size and initially limited physical power do not prevent her from pursuing domination; instead, they push her to develop forms of cunning and magical expertise that compensate for her bodily limitations. Her ambition for power therefore appears as an expression of practical intelligence that converts perceived weakness into a source of threat.

3.4 Telling Ambition: Dialogues and Other Characters' Perceptions

While The Chameleon's actions show her ambition, the film also uses telling to clarify how this ambition is perceived within the story world. In key dialogues, she explicitly states her desire to become the greatest and most feared villain, to overturn existing hierarchies, and to rewrite the rules of kung fu. These declarations leave little ambiguity about her goals and provide verbal confirmation of what her actions already suggest (Fitriani et al., 2020; Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2025). Her language emphasizes superiority, control, and destiny, indicating that she views power not only as a means of survival, but also as a form of moral revenge against those who underestimated her.

Other characters, especially Po and Zhen, further contribute to this telling by describing The Chameleon as dangerously ambitious and framing her plans as a threat to the balance of their world. Their reactions show that her ambition is not perceived as a private desire but as a force with wide social consequences (Brown, 2022; Zulkifli & Putri, 2023). By expressing fear, concern, or moral judgment, these characters help the audience interpret The Chameleon's ambition as excessive and destabilizing, reinforcing her role as a villain.

From the perspective of characterization theory, these verbal cues complement the more implicit indications offered by behavior. Telling ensures that viewers who might not fully infer her motives from action alone still understand her overarching objective. At the same time, the contrast between how she speaks about power and how others describe its effects helps to frame her ambition as ethically troubling. This mixture of perspectives enriches the portrayal of ambition by showing it as a contested element in the narrative rather than as a neutral personal trait (De Graaf et al., 2019; Yildiz, 2023).

3.5 Power, Recognition, and Self-Worth

Beyond its immediate function in the plot, The Chameleon's ambition for power reflects broader themes related to recognition and self-worth. Her earlier experiences of being rejected by kung fu schools suggest that she internalized a sense of inadequacy shaped by normative expectations about who can become a master. By seeking to surpass all masters and to rule over the kung fu world, she attempts to invert the hierarchy that once placed her at the bottom (Fitriani et al., 2020; Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2025). In this sense, her ambition can be interpreted as a compensatory response to long-term marginalization.

Studies on emotional and social intelligence argue that individuals who feel undervalued may develop strong drives to prove themselves, occasionally by seeking roles that grant them authority and control (Kubrak & Starostina, 2023; Sun & Chen, 2022; Torres & Alvarez, 2026). When viewed in this light, The Chameleon's desire to absorb the powers of other masters and to become invincible appears as an attempt to construct a new identity in which she is no longer weak, small, or dismissible. Her absorption of other masters' chi symbolically erases the distinction between those who excluded her and the self she is trying to create.

However, the narrative resolution of *Kung Fu Panda 4* ultimately challenges the value of this form of ambition. The Chameleon's defeat demonstrates that power obtained through domination and appropriation cannot provide genuine recognition or stable self-worth. In contrast, Po and Zhen's partnership illustrates a different model of strength based on cooperation, acceptance, and mutual respect (Brown, 2022; Fitriani et al., 2020). The film thus suggests that while ambition for power may originate in understandable experiences of rejection, its violent pursuit leads to isolation rather than to meaningful validation.

Through this complex portrayal, *Kung Fu Panda 4* presents The Chameleon's ambition for power as a narrative device that motivates the plot and raises questions about how societies treat those who do not fit established ideals. Her story invites viewers to consider how exclusion can shape destructive forms of ambition, while at the same time affirming alternative paths to self-definition grounded in community and shared growth.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of *Kung Fu Panda 4* shows that The Chameleon's ambition for power is not a simple narrative ornament, but the central force that shapes both her identity and the progression of the story. Her ambition grows out of a history of rejection and humiliation, which is gradually revealed through hints about her past and through her own hostility toward the kung fu establishment. This background explains why she seeks to obtain the Staff of Wisdom, absorb the abilities of past masters, and reconstruct the hierarchy of the kung fu world in a way that places her at the top. In this sense, the film presents ambition for power as a response to long-term exclusion as well as a personal desire for recognition.

From the perspective of characterization, The Chameleon's ambition is constructed through a consistent interplay between showing and telling. Her plans, manipulations, and use of shape-shifting magic demonstrate how she actively pursues power, while her explicit statements and the reactions of other characters clarify how this ambition is understood within the story. Together, these elements produce a coherent portrait of a villain who is intelligent, strategic, and deeply driven by the wish to overturn the labels of weakness that have been attached to her. The study's findings therefore answer the main research objective by demonstrating how ambition for power is built into The Chameleon's characterization and how it functions as the key narrative motivation in *Kung Fu Panda 4*. These conclusions suggest several broader implications. The film implies that ambition for power can emerge from experiences of exclusion and may lead individuals to seek control in order to repair damaged self-worth. At the same time, the story warns that power pursued through domination and appropriation cannot provide lasting recognition or genuine belonging. For educators and researchers, this analysis indicates that animated films can be used as accessible material for discussing themes of power, identity, and social acceptance, not only through heroes but also through villains. Future studies may extend this research by comparing The Chameleon with other antagonists in the *Kung Fu Panda* franchise or in different animated films, or by combining characterization theory with additional psychological frameworks to explore how audiences respond to ambitious villains.

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