

# Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

## Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Definition

Self-fulfilling prophecy is defined as any expectation, positive or negative, about a situation or event that affects an individual behavior in such a manner that it causes that expectation to be fulfilled.

Let us assume a teacher, who expects a student to be slothful, is likely to treat that student in such a way that it draws out the very same response he or she expects. Similarly, if we start a day and think “I’ll have a bad day today,” such thinking may alter our actions, and the prediction might be fulfilled by those actions. The term “self-fulfilling prophecy” was coined by Robert Merton in 1948. He described it as:

“A false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come true”

Individuals react to a situation the way they perceive it, and so their reaction is governed by their perception of that particular situation. No matter what the situation means in reality, their reaction toward the situation causes it to be fulfilled in accordance with their perception.

## Examples of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Literature

Self-fulfilling prophecy is used as a plot device in literature. It is usually employed ironically, where the prophecies are realized due to the actions of a [character](#) who tries to prevent them. One can find examples of self-fulfilling prophecy in popular literary pieces, such as the following:

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**Example #1: *Oedipus Rex* (By Sophocles)**

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One of the best self-fulfilling prophecy examples is in the Greek [drama](#) *Oedipus Rex*. Laius, Oedipus' father, abandoned his son to die after learning the prophecy from the Oracle of Delphi, that he would kill him one day and marry his mother. He did not die as he was raised by the king and queen of Corinth.

When he grew up, he came to know of the same prophecy from the same source. Not knowing that the king and the queen of Corinth were not his real parents, he traveled toward Thebes", the city of his biological parents, in order to avert the prophecy. Ironically, the prophecy fulfilled itself as he killed his father, defeated the Sphinx, became the king of Thebes, and married his mother.

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**Example #2: *The Ruined Man Who Became Rich Again Through a Dream*, from *Arabian Nights* (By Muhsin Mahdi)**

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Self-fulfilling prophecy may take the form of a self-fulfilling dream, as in the famous work of Arabic literature *Arabian Nights*. For example, in one of its stories, *The Ruined Man Who Became Rich Again Through a Dream*, a man is told in a dream to leave his native city Baghdad and travel to Cairo, where he will discover a hidden treasure in a certain place.

The man does so, but soon after facing misfortune, he loses his belief in that dream and ends up in jail. He told the story of his dream to an officer, who told him that he was a fool, but took note of the dream himself. The man returned to Baghdad along with the officer. Finally, the officer discovers the treasure hidden in that man's home. The prophecy would have been fulfilled for that man, if he had had belief in the prophecy.

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**Example #3: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)**

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A classic example of self-fulfilling prophecy is found in William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. The three witches tell Macbeth that he will become a king, but after him the son of his best friend Banquo will ascend the throne. He became a king by killing Duncan, fulfilling the first half of the prophecy, and tried to keep his friend's son away from the throne. He killed his best friend and his son, Fleance.

Eventually, the remaining half of the prophecy fulfilled itself. Macduff took revenge for his father's death, and killed Macbeth to ascend to the throne. The [audience](#) at the time of Shakespeare did understand the fulfillment of the prophecy, as later on Macduff was succeeded by James I of England, who was a descendant of Banquo. Thus, the prophecy was fulfilled.

### **Function of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy**

More often than not, the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy device in literature gives the readers a clear insight to the actions and motivations of the characters. Generally, it is used in literature to represent ironical situations, and the readers read the actions of the characters with interest, as they allow them to predict and to understand the outcome, despite the characters' desperate efforts to avert it.