

Desire and Downfall in Christopher Marlowe's Tragedies: A Comprehensive Analysis

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ABSTRACT:

Desire, in some religious traditions and schools of thought, is treated as something intrinsically problematic and to some extent evil. But there is no denying that it is desire that lies at the very root of advancement. It was human desire to overcome the limitations imposed by nature that led to the advancement of knowledge as well as of science and technology. However, this desire sometimes, especially when unchecked, becomes the cause of destruction. In Marlowe's plays this truth is dramatised with subtle craftsmanship without being moralising like that of earlier religious plays, where desire has always been portrayed as sinful. Marlowe, to some extent, portrays desire as something admirable. It is their desire that makes his protagonists like Tamburlaine, Barabas, Doctor Faustus, or Edward II larger-than-life characters. And also this desire is that very thing that blinds them towards the truth and their duty, dehumanises them or makes them weak and leads to their ultimate downfall. This paper aims to explore the multifaceted nature of desire in tragedies that Marlowe used to interrogate human agency, disruption of universal balance and the limits of Renaissance individualism.

Keywords: Tragedy, tragic hero, desire, downfall,
Christopher Marlowe, Elizabethan drama,
Renaissance humanism.

The genre of drama witnessed an unprecedented flourishing in the Elizabethan era (1558-1603). Some of the most profound and enduring tragedies of the Western literary canon were produced during this time, and at the centre of this dramatic revolution was the distinct conception of the tragic hero, influenced by the Aristotelian concept as well as by the conflict between Christian religious doctrine and the emerging philosophy of Renaissance humanism. Unlike the mediaeval morality plays, which often depicted downfall as cosmic punishment for a sin of tremendous magnitude, Elizabethan tragedies, especially those of Christopher Marlowe, localise the reason for downfall within the individual, and the driving force towards destruction is the insatiable and overwhelming desire that leads to the pursuit of an objective that often defies morality, reason and order. The hero pushes beyond the bounds of acceptable universal order, attains a temporary breathtaking transcendence and moves forward to the inevitable, catastrophic collapse.

According to Christian doctrine, desire is not inherently evil. It argues that God placed desire in the human heart so that humanity would seek Him and that true satisfaction and ultimate joy can be achieved by directing this desire towards the creator. Psalm 37:4 of the English Standard Version of the Bible says, "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desire of your heart." The central problem in Christianity is not human desire but its object and intensity. James 1:14-15 of the English Standard Version of the New Testament says, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." Therefore, the ultimate Christian goal is not the elimination of desire but its transformation. Though it warns against the desire for wealth and material possession ("For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils"-- Timothy

6:10), desire for sexuality that is detached from love, fidelity, dignity, humanity and moral responsibility (“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you should know how to control his own body in holiness and honour, not in the passion of lust.” – Thessalonians 4:3–5), desire for power and pride (“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” – Proverbs 16:18); it encourages desire for God.

Marlowe used this notion of excessive earthly or materialistic desire as the very reason for the downfall of the hero. Unlike the Aristotelian concept of ‘hamartia’, often translated as ‘error’ or ‘mistake of judgement’ of the tragic hero that leads to their downfall, it is the hero’s excessive desire beyond control that dissipates their moral judgement and leads to their demise. This desire thus works as the dramatic energy in most of Marlowe’s plays; the hero wants more than what human nature can safely accommodate. This, on the one hand, makes the hero an exalted character, as it expresses courage, imagination and self-assertion, and, on the other hand, sows the seed of his destruction. However, Marlowe does not simply condemn desire; if he did, the protagonist would become an outright villain, and the audience wouldn’t feel pity for them. Instead, he portrays desire as something that is recognisably humane, and therefore the audience can sympathise with the protagonist. But everything comes to a turning point when his desire begins to dominate over all other values. Faustus knows that the negotiation with Lucifer can be fatal, yet his desire to acquire limitless knowledge instigates him to interpret danger as an opportunity.

This pattern – the hero’s excessive desire that results in his rejection of divine limits and the subsequent destruction – can vividly be traced in the major plays of Christopher Marlowe: *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I* (1587); *Tamburlaine the Great, Part II* (1587–1588); *The Jew of Malta* (1589–1590); *Doctor Faustus* (1589–1592); and *Edward II* (1591–1592). Tamburlaine desires universal dominion and greatness beyond limit; Barabas desires revenge and “infinite riches”; Doctor Faustus

wants limitless knowledge and magical power; and King Edward desires to preserve personal affection and royal authority over kingly responsibilities.

In *Tamburlaine the Great, Part I & Part II*, Marlowe presents the purest distillation of the desire for earthly power. Tamburlaine, a Scythian shepherd, driven by an unquenchable thirst for sovereignty, rises to become a world-conquering emperor. He asserts that this drive is grounded not in mere political expediency but is in human nature itself:

“Nature that framed us of four elements,

Warring within our breast for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite
And always moving as the restless spheres,
Wills us to wear ourselves and never rest
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.”

(*Tamburlaine the Great, Part I, Act II, Scene 7*)

This desire for the ‘earthly crown’, to Tamburlaine, is an elevated spiritual imperative, not merely a political ambition. Marlowe strips him of the traditional moral values. He is ruthless, widely successful, and, for a certain period of time, seems invincible. He defeats kings and captures their kingdoms; political hierarchy becomes an instrument of his will. With his oratory excellence, he talks about violence as something of grandeur. He does not think of a limited kingdom but a world that he can possess with force.

Part I also foretells Tamburlaine's downfall. His relationship with Zenocrate presents an alternative point of view to his character—the

conqueror is humanised in love. His grief in Part II at Zenocrate's death exposes the vulnerability that he cannot overcome with his military prowess. He can defeat enemies and capture kingdoms but cannot defeat mortality. Yet he demands that heaven participate in his mourning for Zenocrate, which shows the scale of his refusal to accept limitation. Tamburlaine's reaction to Zenocrate's death is significant. It transforms personal grief into cosmic rebellion. He wants the universe to recognise the death of a single human being. This episode poses a visible contradiction in his character—he wants to be absolute, but at the end he is only a mortal being. This paradox is further intensified in Part II. He continues to conquer, yet his victory produces disgust instead of exaltation; his logic of conquest becomes self-consuming, and he becomes even more ruthless, inflicting torture and humiliation on his captives. The man who once wanted to dominate the world has now become isolated from ordinary human bonds.

The final blow comes when Tamburlaine becomes ill. So far he has treated his body as an instrument of conquest. But it now refuses to be obedient to him. The conqueror who had previously imagined himself as capable of being master of the world has now been reduced to the physical limits of the body. However, Tamburlaine remains defiant even in his illness. He seemingly does not learn the moral lesson, and his ambition does not die. His tragedy is that he cannot accept the condition that his body imposes. He can conquer the world but not death. His downfall thus demonstrates the ultimate limit of power. Stephen Greenblatt observes that Marlowe's heroes construct themselves against the established authority, and their identities depend upon their constant act of self-fashioning. This observation goes appropriately with Tamburlaine. He constructs his identity with repeated acts of autonomy, and when mortality interrupts, the entire foundation of his constructed identity becomes unstable.

The Jew of Malta (1589–1590) offers another kind of downfall. Barabas is a wealthy merchant, and his constructed identity is inseparable from his property. When the city governor confiscates

his property in order to finance the state's military needs, Barabas not only loses his wealth but also the very foundation of his identity and is consumed with thoughts of revenge. From this point he becomes increasingly Machiavellian – he starts manipulating his daughter Abigail, his servant Ithamore, the nuns, the governor, the Turks and others. This initially seems to give him power over everyone around him, but gradually this very system of manipulation that he has created becomes impossible to control. He becomes so consumed in his idea of revenge that he even kills his own daughter by poisoning her when she converts to Christianity and becomes a nun. This is the very moment when his self-fashioning becomes self-destruction, as Abigail is the last emotional bond capable of restraining Barabas from vengeance. Once Abigail is gone, Barabas becomes even more isolated from human qualities.

On the other hand, Ithamore's betrayal proves the instability of criminal alliances. Barabas recruits Ithamore as he finds him a useful instrument for fulfilling his purpose. However, Ithamore eventually becomes a threat as he starts blackmailing Barabas, being manipulated by a prostitute and her pimp. Barabas's belief that he can manipulate others without being manipulated shatters here, and his own scheme turns against him. Barabas also believes that he can make profit by exploiting the political conflict between Malta and the Turks. But eventually the political world turns his own mechanism against him, and the elaborate plan that he schemed to have his revenge ends with leading him to his physical destruction.

While Tamburlaine desires dominion over the physical world and Barabas over wealth, Doctor Faustus desires limitless knowledge as well as intellectual and metaphysical dominance. Faustus is the quintessence of Renaissance humanism — he is a master of logic, medicine, law and theology. But these are not sufficient for him. He wants knowledge that transcends academic boundaries; he longs for the knowledge that brings power:

“...Divinity, adieu!
These metaphysics of magicians
And necromantic books are heavenly:
Lines, circles, scenes, letters, and characters:
Ay, these are those that Faustus most desires.
O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honour, of omnipotence,
(*Doctor Faustus*, Act I, Scene I)

Faustus wants godlike agency; he wants command over nature, over the hidden forces of the universe. To him, “A sound magician is a mighty god.” So he tries his “brains to gain a deity.” It is this epistemological desire that leads him to pursue necromancy and sign a deal with Lucifer – twenty-four years of omnipotence in exchange for his eternal soul. But soon we realise that his magical power has turned his intellectual ambition into mere material desire:

“I’ll have them fly to India for gold,
Ransack the ocean for orient pearl,
And search all corners of the new-found world
For pleasant fruits and princely delicates.”
(*Doctor Faustus*, Act I, Scene I)

Faustus’s downfall is deeply psychological and spiritual. His longing for infinite knowledge soon degenerates into trivial pursuits; he plays pranks, conjures illusions, makes the spirit of Helen appear.

The tragedy of Faustus lies in the paradox of his desire: he seeks infinite knowledge and absolute freedom but binds himself to ultimate slavery and spiritual blindness. His final soliloquy reflects his realisation of the price that he has to pay for his transgressive desire. His soaring ambition has now reduced to a desperate and impossible wish to escape his ultimate damnation:

“O soul, be changed into little water-drops,
And fall into the ocean, ne’er be found!”
(*Doctor Faustus*, Act V, Scene 2)

The fact that Faustus knows his own danger yet intensifies the tragedy. He is perfectly aware of the Christian teaching and knows the significance of repentance yet repeatedly hesitates. The scenes where the 'Good Angel' and 'Bad Angel' appear, in fact, externalise Faustus's inner conflict – he wants to repent but delays it. As the clock moves towards the allotted time, he becomes more desperate and tries to bargain. He begs the heavens to stop the movement of the universe. His final cry: "My God, my God, look not so fierce on me! / Adders and serpents, let me breathe a while.! / Ugly hell, gape not! come not, Lucifer!/ I'll burn my books! —Ah, Mephistophilis!" (*Doctor Faustus*, Act V, Scene II) dramatises the final reversal of his earlier confidence.

The downfall of Faustus is therefore not merely a punishment of a sinner. It is the collapse of his self-fashioning, the very destruction of his self-created identity – he wanted omnipotence, god-like power and command over nature but at the end discovers that human beings can never go beyond mortality.

Edward II (1591–1592) presents a different treatment of desire; here the protagonist does not seek unlimited supernatural or imperial power. Nor does he desire forbidden knowledge or wealth or vengeance. He desires only to be with his personal favourite, Piers Gaveston. His desire for Gaveston's company is so intense that he is even willing to give up his kingdom and ruin his marriage as long as he can have Gaveston:

“...Make several kingdoms of this monarchy,
And share it equally amongst you all,
So I may have some nook or corner left,
To frolic with my dearest Gaveston.”

(*Edward II*, Act I, Scene IV)

King Edward's desire is, therefore, immediate and personal; and his tragedy lies in the conflict between personal longing and royal responsibilities as a king. He prioritises his personal affection over his duty as a king, and the private preference becomes the constitutional

crisis. According to the mediaeval and Renaissance points of view, a king, instead of being a mere individual, was the embodiment of the kingdom, and the interests of the state were to come first, not his personal inclination. Edward in his love for Gaveston defies this established notion. He elevates the baseborn Gaveston to the rank of nobility and showers him with wealth and titles, inciting the ire of the nobles. He thinks that his royal authority is capable of protecting his personal desire. But he forgets that ruling involves a network of relationships between the king, his courtiers, the barons, and others. He refuses to settle the dispute that rises over Gaveston between himself and his royal accomplices. As a result, they, led by younger Mortimer, eventually rebel against the king.

Edward's fall is excruciatingly gradual and multifaceted; his military is defeated, he is forced to abdicate, systematically humiliated, imprisoned in a sewer, deprived of sleep, food, and dignity, and, finally, murdered in a brutal, agonising way. In *Edward II*, Marlowe depicts both the physical and psychological destruction of a king who thought himself to be God's anointed deputy but at last is reduced to being a weeping wretch.

A comparative study of these plays reveals a clear, evolutionary trajectory of the downfall of Marlovian heroes. Each protagonist shows a different face of desire and the extreme to which an individual can strive to reach to fulfil this desire, and each downfall reveals the limit beyond which no human can go. Tamburlaine's desire is physical and martial; his downfall is simple yet universal — the inability to escape death. He can conquer the world but must submit to death. Barabas desires economic freedom, and when his wealth is confiscated, he seeks vengeance. His downfall is social and ironic; he uses manipulation to get what he wants but becomes the victim of his own plan that he devises for others' downfall. Faustus desires limitless knowledge that can give god-like agency and omnipotence and tries to push the boundary of human limits. His downfall is spiritual and metaphysical. Finally, Edward neglects his kingly duties

for his infatuation with Gaveston, and his downfall is political, demonstrating the tragic reality of power.

The downfall of these protagonists follows a common sequence that turns their desire into their downfall. First comes dissatisfaction. Each protagonist is dissatisfied with their initial situation. Tamburlaine is dissatisfied with his low social status, Faustus with the limitation of conventional knowledge disciplines, Barabas with the loss of his wealth and economic freedom, and Edward with the limitations imposed by political institutions. Then comes self-fashioning or identity construction. Each of them constructs an identity for themselves with their actions, from which they are inseparable. Tamburlaine establishes himself as a conqueror, Barabas as an avenger, and Faustus as an intellectual as well as a magician. On the other hand, Edward imagines himself as an autonomous ruler for whom duty comes only after his gratification. Third comes transgression; each pushes the boundaries of their limits. Then comes temporary success. Tamburlaine becomes successful in conquering kingdoms; Barabas successfully executes his plans, Faustus gains the forbidden knowledge as well as magical power, and Edward for a moment succeeds in having Gaveston. This momentary triumph leads them to isolation. They refuse to leave the way they are on. And in doing so they destroy the very relationship that might help them restrain and, therefore, sustain. Tamburlaine loses Zenocrate; Barabas loses Abigail; Faustus loses touch with his other scholars; and Edward loses Queen Isabel and Gaveston as well as political allies. And at last comes the downfall. Tamburlaine becomes ill and realises that he cannot surpass the bodily limit; Barabas falls into his own trap; Faustus is dragged to hell, and Edward is murdered brutally after being inflicted with ruthless torture.

Marlowe's heroes are some of the most memorable tragic heroes in English literature. They are not merely the playthings of fate. They are not the noble, morally elevated figures brought to their downfall by accident or by reversal of fortune. They themselves are the pioneers

of their downfall. They fall because they want more than life safely offers to them; they push the boundaries of human limitations too hard, try to surpass them, and turn possibility into absolute power. Their downfall is the price of their greatness. They refuse to accept what they have got naturally. Instead, they choose to build their identity according to what they desire. They want command over anything and everything in their lives. Their desire generates their action, action reveals their character, and the character determines the consequence. It is the desire that they carry beyond the limits of their selves that makes their characters compelling, creates the heroic energy, and makes them larger-than-life characters, ultimately becoming the engine of their catastrophe.

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