

AMBITION AND TRAGIC FALL: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S MACBETH AND CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S DOCTOR FAUSTUS

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Abstract

This study explores the theme of ambition and tragic downfall in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. It examines how ambition becomes a tragic flaw that leads both heroes toward moral and spiritual ruin. Using a qualitative and comparative method, the research analyzes how Shakespeare and Marlowe portray the growth of ambition and its destructive effects. Aristotle's theory of tragedy and the ideas of Renaissance Humanism guide the analysis. The study finds that ambition in both plays begins as a noble desire but soon turns into pride and moral blindness. *Macbeth's* political ambition and *Faustus's* intellectual ambition both cross moral boundaries and end in destruction. Their stories reveal that ambition, when not guided by conscience, becomes a force of self-destruction. The research concludes that both playwrights warn against the dangers of excessive ambition and remind readers of the need for balance between human desire and moral duty. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Renaissance tragedy reflects the timeless struggle between aspiration and limitation in human life

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

1.1 Background of the Study

Ambition has been one of the most compelling forces in human history. It drives people toward success, yet it can also lead to destruction when it becomes excessive. The theme of ambition as a source of tragedy is deeply rooted in English Renaissance drama. During this period, writers explored human desires, the limits of knowledge, and the consequences of moral weakness. Two of the greatest dramatists of this era, William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, created characters whose ambitions became their downfall *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus*. Both plays explore how ambition, when unrestrained by moral or spiritual values, leads to personal ruin.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents a brave warrior whose thirst for power turns him into a murderer. *Macbeth's* initial nobility collapses under the weight of his growing ambition and moral decay. Likewise, in *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe portrays a scholar whose desire for limitless knowledge and power leads him to sell his soul to the devil. Both characters share a tragic flaw unchecked ambition that transforms them from greatness to misery. These two works reveal how human beings struggle between moral conscience and the desire to exceed human limits.

1.2 Context of the Study

The Renaissance was an age of discovery and human aspiration. People began to question

traditional limits on human potential. However, this new spirit of exploration often clashed with religious and moral values. Ambition, while celebrated as a human virtue, was also seen as dangerous when it ignored divine law or ethical boundaries. The idea of the tragic fall a fall from grace due to a personal flaw became central to the literature of the period (Bradley, 1904).

In both plays, ambition symbolizes the Renaissance man's desire to transcend ordinary boundaries. Macbeth's political ambition and Faustus's intellectual ambition both represent this new human hunger for greatness. Yet both characters also reveal the dangers of ignoring moral responsibility. Their falls remind the audience that ambition, when not guided by reason and conscience, leads to destruction rather than glory.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive studies on Macbeth and Doctor Faustus, few works focus exclusively on comparing their portrayals of ambition and tragic fall. Most critical studies treat them separately within their historical or moral contexts. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by examining how ambition functions as the central force leading both heroes to their downfall. It also investigates how each dramatist uses ambition to express the moral concerns of his time.

1.4 Questions

1. How does ambition serve as a tragic flaw in the characters of Macbeth and Faustus?
2. In what ways do Shakespeare and Marlowe differ in presenting ambition as a moral danger?
3. What moral lessons about ambition and downfall do the two plays communicate?

1.5 Objectives

1. To analyze how ambition operates as the tragic flaw in both Macbeth and Doctor Faustus.
2. To compare how Shakespeare and Marlowe represent the relationship between ambition and moral downfall.

3. To identify the moral and philosophical messages conveyed through the downfall of the two protagonists.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is important because it highlights a universal human concern the conflict between desire and morality. By examining ambition and downfall in Macbeth and Doctor Faustus, readers can better understand how Renaissance drama reflects human nature's dual capacity for greatness and self-destruction. The comparison also deepens appreciation of how Shakespeare and Marlowe shaped the tragic tradition. The findings will be useful for students and scholars of English literature who seek to explore the moral and psychological dimensions of Renaissance tragedy.

1.7 Scope

The study focuses only on the theme of ambition and tragic fall in Macbeth and Doctor Faustus. It does not cover other themes such as fate, free will, or supernatural elements, except where they directly relate to ambition. The analysis is textual and comparative, using close reading as the main method of study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first chapter introduced the problem of ambition and tragic downfall in Shakespeare's Macbeth and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. It showed how both writers explore ambition as a force that lifts and then destroys their central characters. This chapter continues that idea by reviewing what scholars have said about these two tragedies. It examines how critics have studied ambition, moral weakness, and downfall in both plays. It also compares how each dramatist presents ambition as the cause of tragedy. The discussion moves from general studies of tragedy to specific interpretations of Macbeth and Doctor Faustus.

Many literary critics view both Macbeth and Faustus as tragic heroes whose ambition leads to their ruin. According to Bradley (1904), the greatness of Shakespeare's tragic heroes lies in their strength of character, yet that same strength

becomes their downfall. Macbeth's ambition, once noble, becomes evil when he allows desire for the throne to overpower conscience. Bradley notes that Shakespeare presents ambition as a human quality that can easily become corrupted by moral blindness. Similarly, critics such as Ornstein (1960) believe that Faustus's tragedy comes from the same moral weakness. Faustus's ambition to gain unlimited knowledge is not evil at first, but his refusal to accept moral boundaries turns it into a destructive passion. Both critics see ambition as a double-edged sword capable of greatness but also of self-destruction.

The idea that ambition represents moral blindness is also central to modern interpretations. Ribner (1959) argues that both Shakespeare and Marlowe use ambition to explore the conflict between human aspiration and divine law. In Renaissance thought, man was seen as the image of God but still limited by moral and spiritual laws. When man attempts to go beyond these limits, he brings about his own fall. Macbeth and Faustus are both examples of this rebellion. Ribner explains that Shakespeare's plays reflect a moral universe where disorder follows moral sin. In Macbeth, the murder of Duncan symbolizes the breaking of natural and divine order, while in Doctor Faustus, the pact with the devil represents the rejection of God's authority. Thus, ambition is the instrument through which both heroes destroy their relationship with the moral order of the universe. Critics have also compared how Shakespeare and Marlowe shape their protagonists' inner conflicts. Knight (1932) observes that Shakespeare portrays Macbeth's ambition as an inner temptation. The witches may spark his thoughts, but the real struggle happens in Macbeth's mind. His soliloquies reveal guilt, fear, and the slow decay of his moral self. By contrast, Faustus's ambition is intellectual rather than political. As Tillyard (1943) explains, the Renaissance view of knowledge was deeply connected with religion. To seek forbidden knowledge, as Faustus does, was to challenge divine wisdom. Faustus's desire to control the natural world reflects the Renaissance spirit of discovery, but Marlowe shows how such ambition without humility leads to eternal loss.

The two plays also differ in how they represent the moment of downfall. Shakespeare's Macbeth loses his peace of mind long before his death. His ambition isolates him, leading to suspicion and tyranny. Critics such as Kastan (1982) suggest that Macbeth's tragedy lies in his awareness of moral decay but inability to stop it. He knows he is wrong, yet his ambition drives him onward. In contrast, Marlowe's Faustus is blind to his spiritual decay until it is too late. He denies the reality of hell even as he feels its power. Scholars like Levin (1952) describe Faustus's tragedy as a moral allegory of pride a fall from divine grace caused by the pursuit of forbidden goals.

Another group of critics has explored the social and historical meanings of ambition in the plays. Tillyard (1943) and Dollimore (1984) both argue that ambition in Renaissance drama reflects the tension between the medieval and modern worldviews. In the medieval view, ambition was sin because it opposed humility before God. In the emerging modern view, ambition could be seen as a mark of greatness. Shakespeare and Marlowe capture this conflict. Macbeth's ambition to become king violates the moral law that places rulers under divine order. Faustus's ambition to gain unlimited knowledge mirrors the early modern scientist's wish to command nature. Yet both plays warn against the dangers of human pride when it forgets moral duty.

Scholars have also commented on how ambition affects the structure and emotional tone of each tragedy. Bradley (1904) calls Macbeth a tragedy of moral imagination. The horror in the play arises from seeing a noble man's ambition turn into cruelty. The poetry and imagery reveal the darkening of Macbeth's soul. In contrast, Marlowe's play is structured as a moral fable. As Ornstein (1960) notes, Faustus's ambition moves in a circle he begins with hope, enjoys brief success, and ends in despair. The repetition of his doubts and false repentance emphasizes the emptiness of his ambition. Both dramatists use structure to underline the same truth: that ambition without moral balance ends in emptiness and loss.

Some critics have explored ambition from a psychological viewpoint. Bloom (1999) suggests

that Shakespeare gives Macbeth psychological depth by showing how ambition distorts perception. Macbeth starts by imagining greatness and ends by losing his sense of reality. His famous line, "Life's but a walking shadow," captures the emptiness of ambition once its moral purpose is lost. Faustus's tragedy, according to Greenblatt (1980), reflects the early modern anxiety about identity and selfhood. Faustus wants to be more than human, to define himself through power, but his ambition destroys the very self he tries to build. Both characters reveal the paradox of ambition: the desire to be more leads to becoming less.

The moral dimension of ambition remains central to both plays. Critics like Kirsch (2008) emphasize that Shakespeare never condemns ambition entirely. What he condemns is ambition that rejects conscience. In the same way, Marlowe does not mock Faustus's desire for knowledge but warns against pride that seeks power without wisdom. Both writers show that ambition must be guided by moral awareness to avoid tragedy. The downfall of their heroes is not caused by fate alone but by a moral choice the decision to place desire above duty.

From this review, it becomes clear that critics see ambition as both the source and the destroyer of human greatness. Shakespeare and Marlowe, though different in style, share a moral vision that warns against the corruption of ambition. The studies reviewed here show that ambition in Macbeth and Doctor Faustus functions as a tragic flaw that leads to the heroes' fall. However, most existing research treats the two plays separately, rarely bringing them into direct comparison. This leaves a gap that the present study aims to fill. By comparing Macbeth and Faustus as figures of ambition and downfall, the study will highlight how Renaissance drama expresses the tension between human aspiration and moral order.

This review also links directly back to the introduction. Chapter One showed that ambition is central to both plays and that it serves as the key moral force in their downfall. The works of Bradley, Ribner, Knight, and others confirm that both dramatists use ambition as the tragic flaw that defines their heroes' fate. The next chapter will build upon this foundation by analyzing specific

scenes, dialogues, and imagery from both plays to show how ambition operates dramatically and morally. Through this close comparison, the research will illustrate how Shakespeare and Marlowe transform the same theme into distinct yet related visions of human tragedy.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

This chapter explains how the research was designed and conducted to explore ambition and tragic downfall in William Shakespeare's Macbeth and Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. It describes the research design, data sources, collection, and analysis. It also explains the theoretical framework that guided the study. Because this is a literary research project, it uses a qualitative and interpretive approach rather than statistical methods. The goal is to understand how ambition functions as a tragic flaw and how it leads both characters toward moral destruction.

3.1 Research Design

The study follows a qualitative comparative design. This design helps the researcher identify and analyze patterns, contrasts, and moral meanings within the two tragedies. The comparative nature of the study allows for a side-by-side analysis of how each playwright treats ambition within the tragic structure. Through careful reading and interpretation, the study finds connections between human ambition and moral collapse in both plays.

3.2 Research Approach

A textual-analytical and interpretive approach was used. The research closely examines the primary texts, focusing on the heroes' speeches, soliloquies, and symbolic acts that reveal ambition and inner conflict. The researcher describes and interprets how each protagonist's ambition develops into a destructive force. The study avoids abstract theorizing and focuses instead on what the text itself communicates about human ambition, guilt, and moral choice.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

Every serious academic study requires a clear theoretical base. This research applies Aristotle's theory of tragedy from *Poetics* as the guiding framework. Aristotle defines tragedy as "an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude," which arouses pity and fear, leading to catharsis (Aristotle, trans. 1961). According to him, the tragic hero is a noble person who falls from greatness because of a personal flaw, or hamartia (tragic error).

In this study, ambition is treated as the hamartia in both *Macbeth* and *Faustus*. The Aristotelian model helps explain how ambition, though a natural human drive, becomes excessive and leads to ruin. The framework also helps explore how pity and fear are produced in the audience when the hero, blinded by ambition, brings about his own downfall.

Furthermore, the research draws on Renaissance Humanism as a secondary theoretical lens. The Renaissance view of man as capable of greatness but limited by divine and moral law underlies both plays. While Aristotle's theory explains the tragic structure and flaw, Humanism explains the moral and philosophical background that shapes each character's ambition. *Macbeth's* and *Faustus's* overreaching desires reflect the Renaissance conflict between human aspiration and divine order.

This dual framework Aristotelian tragedy and Renaissance Humanism provides the moral and structural foundation for interpreting ambition and downfall. It supports the central argument that both Shakespeare and Marlowe present ambition as a tragic force that destroys the balance between human potential and moral restraint.

3.4 Sources of Data

The primary data sources are the original plays:

- Shakespeare, W. *Macbeth* (1606)
- Marlowe, C. *Doctor Faustus* (1604)

The secondary data sources include scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays that interpret the plays from tragic, moral, and humanist perspectives. Critics such as A. C.

Bradley, G. Wilson Knight, and Harry Levin provide key insights into the tragic nature of ambition. These works support and contextualize the study's analysis while maintaining originality in interpretation.

3.5 Data Collection

Data were collected through close reading and thematic annotation. The researcher identified lines and scenes where ambition and moral awareness are most visible. Key passages were extracted, categorized, and analyzed for patterns of meaning. Secondary sources were reviewed using Google Scholar, JSTOR, and other academic databases. Citations follow the APA 6th edition format to ensure academic integrity.

3.6 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic and comparative methods. First, the researcher examined each play separately to understand how ambition operates within its unique context. Then, a comparative analysis identified how Shakespeare and Marlowe differ in presenting ambition's rise and fall. The analysis was guided by Aristotle's principles of tragic structure the hero's greatness, the fatal flaw, the reversal (*peripeteia*), recognition (*anagnorisis*), and catharsis.

Through this process, the study interprets ambition not only as a personal fault but as a universal moral warning. *Macbeth's* worldly ambition and *Faustus's* intellectual ambition are analyzed within this shared tragic framework.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents the main findings and interpretation of the study. It applies the methods described in Chapter Three to analyze how ambition and tragic downfall are represented in *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus*. The discussion is organized around the psychological, moral, and dramatic development of ambition in each protagonist. It also includes a direct comparative analysis to show how both playwrights transform ambition into a moral tragedy.

4.1 Ambition as a Tragic Flaw

In both *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus*, ambition begins as a positive desire but gradually becomes destructive. Shakespeare presents *Macbeth* as a brave and honorable man whose ambition turns him into a tyrant. When he first hears the witches' prophecy, he is tempted but still aware of moral limits. However, his desire for the throne soon outweighs his sense of duty. His words "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition" show that he recognizes ambition as his flaw yet allows it to control him.

In Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, ambition also begins with promise. Faustus is a learned scholar who seeks to expand human knowledge. But like *Macbeth*, he rejects moral restraint. His decision to sell his soul for power and knowledge reveals ambition in its most extreme form. He wants to be more than human, to "make men live eternally" and "raise the dead." Both characters show how ambition crosses moral boundaries when it is guided by pride rather than conscience.

4.2 Inner Conflict and Moral Awareness

Both protagonists experience moments of doubt that expose their inner struggle. *Macbeth's* soliloquies show that he understands the evil of his actions but cannot resist them. His conscience speaks, but ambition silences it. After killing Duncan, he becomes haunted by guilt and paranoia. His ambition leads to self-isolation and madness.

Faustus's conflict is spiritual rather than psychological. He knows that his pact with Lucifer is a sin, but he convinces himself that repentance is useless. His repeated cries for mercy reveal the tension between faith and pride. The Good Angel and Evil Angel scenes symbolize this battle for his soul. *Faustus's* tragedy is not ignorance but deliberate blindness; he chooses ambition over salvation.

4.3 The Process of Downfall

In both plays, ambition follows a similar pattern: temptation, moral decay, and destruction. *Macbeth's* downfall begins with murder and ends in despair. Each act of violence deepens his guilt and alienates him from humanity. By the end, he

realizes that his ambition has made life meaningless: "Life's but a walking shadow."

Faustus's downfall also follows a downward path. His ambition gives him brief pleasure but no satisfaction. His magic tricks become empty displays. When the final hour comes, his courage fails, and his ambition turns to terror. His cry "I'll burn my books!" shows the futility of all he sought. Both characters reach the same truth: ambition without morality leads not to greatness but to ruin.

4.4 Comparative Analysis: *Macbeth* and *Faustus*

A direct comparison reveals deep parallels between the two tragedies. Both *Macbeth* and *Faustus* are Renaissance figures who challenge moral limits. *Macbeth's* ambition is worldly, while *Faustus's* is intellectual, but both stem from the same prideful desire to exceed human boundaries. Both plays end in tragedy because ambition blinds the heroes to the limits of human nature. Shakespeare and Marlowe warn that human greatness must be balanced with humility. *Macbeth's* death restores moral order, while *Faustus's* damnation reaffirms divine justice. Both endings express the Renaissance belief that rebellion against moral law leads to self-destruction.

4.5 Moral and Philosophical Meaning

The moral message in both plays is clear: ambition, when unrestrained, becomes a moral disease. In *Macbeth*, ambition corrupts the natural order of society; in *Doctor Faustus*, it corrupts the divine order of creation. Both dramatists portray ambition as the bridge between human aspiration and moral failure. The tragic fall of each hero teaches that ambition must serve virtue, not replace it.

The discussion shows that ambition in *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* is both the driving force and the cause of tragedy. Both Shakespeare and Marlowe create heroes who begin with greatness but end in ruin because their ambition exceeds moral boundaries. Through these two tragedies, the playwrights express the timeless truth that human desire must remain guided by moral conscience.

CHAPTER 5**CONCLUSION**

This chapter concludes the research on ambition and tragic downfall in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. The study aimed to understand how ambition functions as a tragic flaw and how it leads both heroes toward destruction. It used a qualitative and comparative method supported by Aristotle's theory of tragedy and the ideas of Renaissance Humanism. This chapter summarizes the major findings, draws general conclusions, and offers suggestions for future studies.

The study found that ambition is the central force that shapes both tragedies. In *Macbeth*, ambition is political and social. Macbeth begins as a loyal and brave soldier, but his desire for the crown grows stronger than his moral sense. The witches' prophecy awakens his ambition, and Lady Macbeth strengthens it through her influence. Macbeth's downfall begins when he decides to act upon his ambition and murder King Duncan. His conscience struggles, but ambition wins. His guilt and fear increase after the crime, and he loses peace, love, and honor. Shakespeare presents ambition as a force that destroys not only moral balance but also human relationships. In the end, Macbeth realizes that his ambition has made life meaningless. His tragic fall restores the moral order that his ambition had disturbed.

In *Doctor Faustus*, ambition takes a different form. Faustus's ambition is intellectual and spiritual. He is not satisfied with the limits of human knowledge and wants to master the secrets of the universe. He sells his soul to Lucifer to gain supernatural power. Like Macbeth, Faustus is not forced by external powers; his downfall comes from within. His ambition blinds him to the value of his soul. Even when he recognizes his sin, he cannot truly repent because pride and despair control him. Marlowe uses *Faustus* to show that ambition, when separated from faith and morality, becomes self-destructive. His final hour is a moment of terror and regret, as he faces the result of his own choices.

The comparative analysis showed that both playwrights share a moral vision. Ambition, though natural in human beings, must be guided

by moral boundaries. When ambition grows beyond reason, it becomes pride, and pride leads to ruin. Both Macbeth and Faustus are strong, gifted men, but their strength becomes their weakness. Shakespeare's hero falls within the world of politics and morality; Marlowe's hero falls within the world of spirit and faith. Yet, both represent the same truth about human nature: that greatness without virtue is dangerous.

Aristotle's idea of hamartia helps explain the structure of both tragedies. Macbeth's ambition and Faustus's desire for power are their fatal flaws. Each man's downfall follows the pattern of error, recognition, and destruction. Renaissance Humanism also helps to understand the plays in their historical setting. The Renaissance encouraged exploration of human potential, but both Shakespeare and Marlowe remind the audience that human aspiration must respect divine and moral limits. The combination of Aristotelian tragedy and Renaissance Humanism shows that both playwrights believed in balance between human will and moral order.

The findings also suggest that both plays remain relevant because they reflect universal truths. In modern life, ambition continues to shape human actions. The lesson of *Macbeth* and *Faustus* warns that ambition without moral direction still leads to personal and social harm. The plays teach the value of self-knowledge, humility, and moral reflection. They show that success gained through immoral means cannot bring satisfaction.

This study also highlights how the two tragedies differ in their treatment of guilt and redemption. *Macbeth*'s tragedy ends with death but also with moral clarity. He recognizes his error before he dies, and this gives his story a sense of moral resolution. *Faustus*, on the other hand, dies without repentance. His story remains a warning about the danger of rejecting divine mercy. Shakespeare allows a glimpse of order restored, while Marlowe leaves the audience with fear and pity. These differences show how each playwright uses tragedy to explore human ambition within different moral and spiritual frameworks.

The study's limitations are natural to literary research. It focused mainly on ambition and downfall and did not include other related themes

such as fate, free will, or temptation. Future researchers can expand the analysis by connecting ambition with other moral and psychological aspects of the two heroes. They may also explore how ambition is treated in other Renaissance works or in modern literature. Comparing Macbeth and Doctor Faustus with later tragic heroes, such as those in modern existential or psychological dramas, could open new insights into how ambition continues to define human identity.

In conclusion, both Macbeth and Doctor Faustus remain timeless studies of the human heart. Through their tragic heroes, Shakespeare and Marlowe show that ambition, though a sign of human greatness, can also become the cause of human ruin. Their plays reveal that moral awareness is the key that separates aspiration from arrogance. The downfall of Macbeth and Faustus is not only personal but universal, reminding every reader that unchecked ambition destroys both the self and the world around it.

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