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The exploration of the study of power, ambition and corruption manifested in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of ambition, power and corruption that were reflected in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* during the Elizabethan period (1558-1603). During that period, society was characterized by the desire for power, unrestrained ambition, and corruption. The desire to have a lot of power was high among people, whether it was obtained through legal or illegal means. The characters Macbeth and Doctor Faustus reveal that power which is the main factor behind corruption. Through the characters Macbeth and Doctor Faustus, it is revealed that power is mainly responsible for doing corruption. The data sources for this qualitative study are collected from secondary sources like text books, journals, newspapers, and websites. This study demonstrates that ambition and power can corrupt individuals which lead to ultimate downfall. The textual references are given as evidence to support the argument of this study. The purpose of this article is to analyze the fact that if anyone commits a crime, they must be punished today or tomorrow. Finally it is found through the characters of Doctor Faustus and Macbeth that power and ambition bring corruption and corruption brings eternal downfall for human beings.

Keywords: Ambition; Power; Moral consequences; Supernatural elements; Repentance; Downfall

1. Introduction

The Elizabethan period mostly reflects the silent key features like thirst for unknown knowledge, rationalism, secularism, humanism, individualism etc. as this age is also considered as the golden age of English literature because of its huge development, stability, harmony and peace. Power and ambition are two central themes in both Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. In *Macbeth*, we witness the rapid transformation of a noble and loyal warrior into a ruthless and power-hungry tyrant. The play delves deep into the corrupting nature of ambition, as Macbeth's desire for power overwhelms his moral compass. Likewise, in *Doctor Faustus*, we follow the journey of a scholar who makes a pact with the devil in exchange for limitless power and knowledge. Driven by his insatiable ambition, Faustus bargains away his soul, only to realize the devastating consequences of his choice. Marlowe's plays explore the 'will to power' in various characters, highlighting the importance of politics and power in shaping human destiny (Simkin 2010). These two plays not only delve into the personal consequences of power and ambition but also examine broader societal implications. They raise questions about the nature of authority, the corruptibility of individuals in positions of power, and the moral price one must pay for ambition's fulfillment. The exploration of the themes allows us to reflect on our own desires, the potential consequences of pursuing them single-mindedly and the moral dilemmas that arise in our quest for power. When examining the theme of power and ambition in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, it is important to consider the impact of decision-making on the characters' ultimate fates (Smith 2017).

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1.1. Objective

The objective of this article is to analyze and compare the exploration of power and ambition in these two iconic plays in the Elizabethan age. By examining the motivations, choices, and outcomes of Macbeth and Faustus, we gain insight into the human condition and the universal struggles of those grappling with power and ambition. The themes of these plays resonate with audiences across time, reminding us of the alluring temptations and devastating consequences that come with unbridled ambition. Through a careful examination of the characters, their motivations, and the consequences they face, this article will provide a comprehensive analysis of the themes of power and ambition in Macbeth and Doctor Faustus. However, Macbeth's insatiable desire for greater and greater achievements leads him down a path of damnation and eternal suffering. Marlowe delves into the intricate web of power dynamics, depicting how the relentless pursuit of power can be both alluring and destructive. By exploring the depths of these complex emotions and desires, we gain a deeper understanding of human nature and the universal truths that Shakespeare and Marlowe sought to convey.

2. Methodology

The present study has been conducted by combining both primary and secondary sources data. Primary data has been collected from text and secondary data has been formulated from journal, paper and online. This study is qualitative type research which is concerned with meaning making (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006; Rod well, 1998) study for exploring the unquenchable thirst for the ambition and power of Doctor Faustus and Macbeth.

3. Literature Review

Power and ambition are pivotal themes in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, driving the tragic protagonists towards their inevitable downfalls. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare portrays power as a corrupting force intertwined with Macbeth's unchecked ambition, which ultimately leads to his moral degradation and tragic demise. The witches' prophecy, foretelling Macbeth's ascent to kingship, triggers his ambition, prompting him to commit regicide and seize power (Shakespeare 48-50).

According to critic A.C. Bradley, "Macbeth is fatally steeped in crime, and therefore unable to stop: he cannot draw back, for to do so would involve confession and repentance, and would cancel the gain for which he sold his soul" (Bradley 115). This interpretation underscores the transformative nature of power in *Macbeth*, illustrating how ambition, fueled by the allure of authority, drives Macbeth into increasingly ruthless acts that estrange him from his own humanity.

Emma Smith argues that, "Macbeth's tragedy is that he confuses ambition with action" (Smith 112). This observation underscores the central theme of ambition in the play, as Macbeth's ambition compels him to take increasingly drastic measures to secure his throne. His initial reluctance gives way to ruthless ambition, leading him to betray his king, friends, and ultimately himself.

Similarly, in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, power is depicted as both a catalyst for ambition and a symbol of Faustus's tragic downfall. Faustus's insatiable thirst for knowledge and worldly power leads him into a pact with the devil, exchanging his soul for magical abilities and temporal authority (Marlowe 1.1. 80-100). *Doctor Faustus* is a play about a man who seeks to achieve power, wealth, and omnipotence through magic, rejecting all other knowledge and turning to magic for satisfaction (Gardner 1969).

As stated by a literary critic David Scott Kastan, "Marlowe's play offers a powerful critique of the limitless ambitions of Renaissance individualism" (Kastan 45). This critique is embodied in Faustus's character, whose ambition drives him to seek not only knowledge but also dominion over the forces of nature and the spiritual realm. Faustus's pact with Mephistopheles represents the pinnacle of his ambition, granting him extraordinary powers but ultimately leading to his moral and spiritual downfall. *Macbeth* explores themes of ambition, power, and glory, with a focus on the play's history, politics, and witchcraft. (Brown 1982)

Critic David Bevington argues, "The central dilemma in *Doctor Faustus* is Faustus's desire to attain power and knowledge without acknowledging moral or spiritual constraints" (Bevington 92). This perspective illuminates how Faustus's ambition for limitless power drives him to make a pact with Mephistopheles, illustrating the consequences of ambition divorced from ethical considerations and spiritual values.

Both *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* serve as cautionary tales about the corrupting influence of power and ambition. Through the tragic narratives of Macbeth and Faustus, Shakespeare and Marlowe explore how the relentless pursuit of

authority and dominance can lead to personal ruin and societal upheaval, highlighting the moral complexities inherent in the quest for power.

4. Analysis of Macbeth and Doctor Faustus

In *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus*, Shakespeare and Marlowe explore the themes of power, ambition, and corruption through the tragic descents of their protagonists. While *Macbeth* emphasizes political ambition and the supernatural, *Doctor Faustus* delves into intellectual ambition and moral dilemmas. Both plays serve as cautionary tales about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the moral and spiritual consequences of yielding to corrupting influences. By mastering all the subjects he is 'still but Faustus, and a man'. He can neither make man live eternally nor 'raise them to life again'.

4.1. Ambition and Power

Ambition and power are integral ideas in both Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, driving the actions of the main characters and ultimately leading to their downfall. In *Macbeth*, the character of Macbeth is initially portrayed as a noble and loyal warrior, but his ambition for power consumes him as he encounters the prophecies of the witches. This ambition is further fueled by the manipulations of his wife, Lady Macbeth, who pushes him to seize the throne by any means. Masculinity plays a crucial role in gaining power and authority in *Macbeth*, with Lady Macbeth and the three witches influencing Macbeth profoundly. (Ferdous 2017) Macbeth's unchecked ambition leads him to commit regicide and descend into a spiral of paranoia and guilt as he struggles to maintain his power. Shakespeare's portrayal of Macbeth's ambition (Act 1, Scene 4) highlights the corrupting influence of power and the consequences of unchecked desire for dominance.

"Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires".

Similarly, in *Doctor Faustus*, the titular character's insatiable ambition for knowledge and power drives him to make a pact with the devil, selling his soul in exchange for magical abilities and worldly pleasures. Faustus's desire for power blinds him to the moral implications of his actions, leading him down a path of self-destruction. Marlowe's exploration of Faustus's ambition emphasizes the dangers of pursuing power without regard for the consequences, ultimately illustrating the fleeting nature of earthly power and the price of hubris.

"By him I'll be great Emperor of the world, and make a bridge thorough the moving air, To pass the ocean with a band of men: I'll join the hills that bind the Afric shore, And make that country continent to Spain, And both contributory to my crown." (Sen 98)

Both *Macbeth* and *Faustus* serve as cautionary tales about the seductive allure of power and the destructive consequences of unchecked ambition. The characters' relentless pursuit of power leads to their downfall, highlighting the tragic consequences of sacrificing morality and humanity in the pursuit of dominance. Furthermore, the ideas of ambition and power in *Macbeth* and *Faustus* also raise questions about the nature of authority and the ways in which individuals navigate the complexities of power dynamics. Both *Macbeth* and *Faustus* grapple with questions of morality and agency as they seek to assert their influence over their respective domains, ultimately revealing the fragile nature of power and the fleeting nature of earthly dominion. Overall, the ambition and power in *Macbeth* and *Faustus* serve as a reminder of the dangers of succumbing to the temptations of power and the ways in which unchecked ambition can lead to moral and psychological destruction.

4.2. Moral Consequences

The exploration of motifs surrounding power and ambition highlights the moral consequences of unchecked desires. In *Macbeth*, the protagonist's insatiable ambition leads to his downfall as he becomes consumed by his desire for power. When the three witches prophecy that Macbeth will become king, he becomes fixated on achieving this goal at any cost. This unbridled ambition drives him to murder King Duncan and others in his quest to maintain his position of power. However, as Macbeth's ambition grows unchecked, he becomes increasingly paranoid and isolated, leading to his eventual demise. The play serves as a cautionary tale about the destructive nature of unchecked ambition, showing how it can corrupt individuals and ultimately lead to their downfall. Similarly, in *Doctor Faustus*, the title character's insatiable thirst for knowledge and power drives him to make a pact with the devil in exchange for his soul. Good angel,

"Sweet Faustus, leave that execrable" (Sen 104))

Faustus boasts about his newfound powers and abilities, using magic to impress others and fulfill his every desire. However, as Faustus's ambition goes unchecked, he begins to lose sight of his moral compass and succumbs to a life of debauchery and sin. Despite having the opportunity to repent and avoid damnation, Faustus continues down a path of self-destruction, ultimately facing a tragic end as he is dragged to hell by Mephistopheles. Both *Macbeth* and *Faustus* serve as cautionary tales about the moral consequences of unchecked ambition. The characters' relentless pursuit of power and status leads to moral decay, destruction, and ultimately, their demise. By exploring these themes, both Shakespeare and Marlowe shed light on the dangers of succumbing to one's ambitions without considering the ethical implications of one's actions. The exploration of themes of power and ambition in *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* highlights the moral consequences of unchecked desires. Both plays serve as cautionary tales about the dangers of allowing ambition to consume one's moral compass, leading to corruption, tragedy, and ultimately, downfall. Through these powerful narratives, audiences are reminded of the importance of maintaining a balance between ambition and morality, lest they suffer the same fate as the tragic protagonists in these timeless works of literature.

4.3. The Supernatural Elements

The presence of supernatural elements plays a significant role in shaping the power dynamics and ambition of the main characters. The supernatural elements, such as witches and demons, serve as catalysts that propel the protagonists towards their ultimate downfall. In *Macbeth*, the witches' prophecies are a central driving force behind Macbeth's ambition and thirst for power. From the very beginning of the play, the witches foretell Macbeth's rise to kingship, sparking the initial seeds of ambition in his mind. The supernatural nature of these prophecies adds a sense of inevitability and fate, pushing Macbeth to take drastic actions to secure his position as king. The witches' manipulation and deception further cloud Macbeth's judgment, leading him to commit heinous acts in pursuit of power. Similarly, in *Doctor Faustus*, the demonic pact that Faustus makes with Lucifer shapes the trajectory of his ambition.

“Talk not of paradise nor creation; but mark this show (seven deadly scenes): talk of the devil, and nothing else” (Sen 120)

Faustus's insatiable desire for knowledge and power drives him to make a deal with the devil, exchanging his soul for unlimited power on Earth. The supernatural nature of this pact gives Faustus access to magical abilities and immense wealth, but ultimately leads him down a path of moral decay and despair. The presence of Mephistopheles, Faustus's demonic companion, serves as a constant reminder of Faustus's impending damnation, further fueling his internal conflict between his ambition and his conscience. The supernatural elements in both plays act as external forces that manipulate and influence the main characters, pushing them towards their tragic fates. By introducing supernatural elements, Shakespeare and Marlowe highlight the characters' vulnerability and susceptibility to dark forces beyond their control. The protagonists' interactions with these supernatural beings emphasize the thin line between ambition and obsession, as they become consumed by their desires for power at any cost. Furthermore, the supernatural elements in both plays serve as cautionary reminders of the dangers of unchecked ambition and the consequences of defying natural order. In *Macbeth*'s case, his relentless pursuit of power leads to his eventual downfall and death, as he becomes a tyrant consumed by guilt and paranoia. Similarly, Faustus's arrogance and hubris ultimately result in his eternal damnation, as he realizes too late the gravity of his actions.

4.4. Manipulation and Corruption

The study of power and ambition in both Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* delves into the dark and complex themes of manipulation and corruption. Both works depict how the pursuit of power can lead individuals down a destructive path, ultimately leading to their downfall. In *Macbeth*, we see how the thirst for power consumes the title character, driving him to commit heinous acts in order to satisfy his ambition. At first Macbeth was manipulated by the prediction of witches:

First witch. All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
Second witch. All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
Third witch. All hail, Macbeth! Shalt be King hereafter!” (Sen 74)

Finally he was manipulated by his ambitious wife, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth is fueled by a desire to become king at any cost. She told to Macbeth,

“Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it” (Alam 41)

This blind ambition leads him to betray his king, Duncan, and murder him in his sleep. As Macbeth ascends to the throne, his power hungry nature only grows stronger, leading him to take increasingly drastic measures to maintain his position.

Similarly, in *Doctor Faustus*, we witness the protagonist's descent into corruption as he makes a pact with the devil in exchange for unlimited power and knowledge. Faustus's insatiable thirst for power blinds him to the consequences of his actions, leading him to abuse his newfound abilities for selfish gain. As he becomes increasingly consumed by his own ambition, Faustus loses touch with his humanity, ultimately sealing his own fate. The characters in both works are ultimately manipulated by external forces, whether it be Lady Macbeth's influence on Macbeth or the devil's temptation of Faustus. This manipulation plays a key role in the downfall of both characters, as they become pawns in a larger game of power and ambition. Furthermore, the corruption that comes with power is a recurring theme in both *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus*. As the characters gain more power, they also become more morally bankrupt, willing to do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. This corruption not only affects the characters themselves, but also those around them, leading to betrayal, violence, and ultimately, tragedy. Through the exploration of manipulation and corruption in *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus*, both Shakespeare and Marlowe highlight the dangers of unchecked ambition and the perils of pursuing power at any cost. The characters in these works serve as cautionary tales, illustrating the destructive consequences of allowing power to corrupt one's soul.

4.5. Repentance and Redemption

As Macbeth and Faustus strive to achieve their desires, they are consumed by their own greed and lose sight of their moral compass. However, as the plays progress, we see glimpses of repentance and the possibility of redemption for these tragic figures. In *Macbeth*, the character of Macbeth is driven by his ambition to become King of Scotland. He is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his goal, even if it means betraying those closest to him and committing murder. As Macbeth spirals further into darkness, he begins to feel guilt and remorse for his actions. In Act 5, Scene 5, Macbeth reflects on the emptiness of his life and the futility of his actions, lamenting that

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage."

This moment of introspection suggests that Macbeth is capable of feeling regret for the choices he has made. Similarly, in *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus sells his soul to the devil in exchange for unlimited knowledge and power. As Faustus indulges in his newfound abilities, he becomes increasingly desensitized to the consequences of his actions. However, as the clock ticks down on his pact with Lucifer, Faustus begins to question his decision and longs for redemption.

"Now hast thou but one bare hour to live

And then thou must be damn'd perpetually!" (Sen 162)

In Act 5, Scene 2, Faustus pleads with God for mercy and begs for a chance to repent before it is too late. This moment of desperation shows Faustus wrestling with his conscience and searching for a way to escape damnation.

Both Macbeth and Faustus demonstrate moments of repentance and remorse, suggesting that there is still hope for their salvation. However, the ultimate fate of these characters remains ambiguous. In *Macbeth*, Macbeth meets a tragic end as he is defeated in battle and killed by Macduff. Despite his moments of regret, Macbeth is unable to fully atone for his sins and ultimately pays the price for his ambition. In *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus is dragged to hell by the devils as his time runs out. Despite his pleas for forgiveness, Faustus is unable to escape his fate and is condemned to eternal damnation.

4.6. The Tragic Downfall

One of the most gripping aspects of both Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is the exploration of the consequences that ambition and power can have on individuals. In both plays, the main characters' relentless pursuit of power ultimately leads to their tragic downfalls. In *Macbeth*, we witness the titular character's descent into darkness as he becomes consumed by his ambition to become king. Macbeth's initial desire for power is spurred on by the prophecies of the witches, which fill him with a sense of invincibility. However, as he spirals further and further into a cycle of violence and betrayal, we see the toll that his ambition takes on his soul. Macbeth's lust for power blinds him to the consequences of his actions, leading him to commit heinous acts such as the murder of King Duncan and the ordering of Banquo's assassination. In the end, Macbeth's quest for power ultimately leads to his own demise, as he is overthrown and killed by Macduff. Similarly, in *Doctor Faustus*, we see the devastating effects of ambition and power on the main character, Faustus. Faustus makes a pact with the devil, exchanging his soul for 24 years of limitless power and knowledge. However, as Faustus becomes increasingly consumed by his desire for power, he neglects his moral compass

and engages in a series of sinful acts. Despite having the opportunity to repent and seek redemption, Faustus is unable to let go of his ambition, ultimately leading to his damnation and descent into hell. He says,

“Ugly hell, gape not! Come not, Lucifer!

I'll burn my books! Ah, Mephistopheles!” (Sen 120)

Both Macbeth and Faustus serve as cautionary tales about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the seductive lure of power. By choosing to prioritize their own desires for power above all else, both characters ultimately meet tragic ends. The plays serve as a reminder that while ambition and power can be intoxicating, they can also have dire consequences if not tempered by morality and ethics.

4.7. Comparison

The portrayal of power in *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* differs in the way that power is gained and its consequences on the characters. In *Macbeth*, power is achieved through deception, manipulation, and violence, resulting in a bloody path to the throne and eventual downfall. Macbeth's lust for power and inability to control it ultimately leads to his tragic demise, emphasizing the corrupting nature of power. On the other hand, in *Doctor Faustus*, power is obtained through a Faustian bargain with the devil, highlighting the consequences of selling one's soul for power. Faustus's pursuit of knowledge and power through the supernatural leads to his moral corruption and eventual damnation, illustrating the destructive nature of unchecked ambition. Both *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* serve as cautionary tales about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the corrupting influence of power. While their paths towards power may be different, the ultimate consequences of their actions are the same – a tragic downfall brought about by their own greed and ambition.

5. Conclusion

Both *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* illustrate the destructive nature of unchecked ambition and the corrupting influence of power. In *Macbeth*, ambition leads to moral decay, tyranny, and eventual downfall. In *Doctor Faustus*, the pursuit of power beyond human limits results in eternal damnation. The protagonists' descent into madness and self-destruction serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the destructive nature of power. While Macbeth's ambition leads him to commit heinous acts in order to secure his position as king, Faustus's insatiable thirst for power ultimately leads to his tragic downfall. Harold Bloom discusses in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Macbeth's psychological complexity and moral decline highlight the dangers of overreaching ambition and the resultant loss of humanity. Through their tragic arcs, we see how power can corrupt even the most noble of characters and lead them down a path of destruction from which they may never recover. Stephen Greenblatt, in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Macbeth and Faustus* draws parallels between Macbeth and Faustus, noting that both characters reflect the era's anxieties about the limits of human ambition and the ethical boundaries of power. Analyzing the tragic tales of the characters, we are reminded of the dangers of unchecked ambition and the consequences of succumbing to the lure of power

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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