



Tamburlaine the Great: A Critical Appreciation

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine a critical analysis of Christopher Marlowe's play Tamburlaine the Great (1587), which occupies a pivotal position in English literary history as one of the earliest exemplars of Elizabethan drama that elevates tragedy through its grand themes of ambition, power, and hubris. The principal objectives of this analysis include a thorough examination of the structure and plot, an exploration of predominant themes, and a consideration of the use of imagery and symbolism, among other critical facets of the play. The portrayal of the protagonist, Tamburlaine, embodies a timeless quality that invites an in-depth investigation into the complexities of human emotion and the unrelenting pursuit of dominion. Through this analysis, the study will illuminate the ways in which Marlowe's work not only reflects the socio-political anxieties of its time but also engages with notions of identity, authority, and the human condition that remain relevant across centuries. By scrutinizing the aforementioned elements, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of Tamburlaine the Great as a foundational text in the evolution of English tragedy, and to underscore Marlowe's enduring influence on the theatrical landscape.

I. INTRODUCTION

The character of Tamburlaine in Christopher Marlowe's play draws significant inspiration from the historical figure of Timur, commonly known as Tamerlane, a 14th-century Central Asian conqueror

renowned for his military prowess and expansive empire-building endeavors. In Marlowe's narrative, Tamburlaine is portrayed as an embodiment of immense ambition and ruthless power, serving as a reflection of the contemporary anxieties surrounding tyranny, authority, and the implications of unchecked ambition.

The depiction of conquest and imperialism within the play resonates profoundly with England's own burgeoning influence and colonial pursuits during the Elizabethan era. This parallel serves to highlight the dual nature of ambition — both as a driving force for greatness and as a potential catalyst for destruction. Marlowe's Tamburlaine, with his insatiable hunger for supremacy and dominion, encapsulates the tumultuous spirit of the age, as nations grappled with the complexities of power dynamics and the moral ramifications of conquest and colonization.

In essence, Tamburlaine's character not only reflects the historical grandeur and brutality of Timur's conquests but also acts as a commentary on the broader implications of ambition within the context of an expanding English empire. This thematic exploration invites audiences to consider the intricate relationship between power and morality, as well as the potential consequences that accompany the pursuit of greatness.

I. The Structure and Plot

Tamburlaine the Great is divided into two parts. The first part chronicles the rise of Tamburlaine, a Scythian shepherd who evolves into a ruthless conqueror, overthrowing monarchs and empires. The second part delves into his reign as a ruler, focusing on his increasing hubris, brutal conquests, and eventual downfall. Tamburlaine's transition from an underdog to a mighty figure provides the backbone for the plot, creating dramatic tension as his ambition pushes the boundaries of mortality and divinity.

The two-part structure allows Marlowe to explore not only Tamburlaine's rise to power but also the consequences of his excessive ambition. In the first part, Tamburlaine is portrayed as a dynamic figure whose audacity and energy lead him to success, while the second part reveals the tragic consequences of overreaching power, as his empire collapses around him.

- Sequence of conquests:**
1. Zenocrate (en route from Media through Turkey to Egypt;
 2. Lieutenants of Mycetes, imbecilic king of Persia;
 3. Mycetes;
 4. Cosroe brother to Mycetes;
 5. Bajazeth, Emperor of Turkey; 6. Governor of Damascus;
 6. Sultan of Egypt (father of Zenocrate) + King of Arabia

II. Characterization of Tamburlaine

Tamburlaine is one of the most compelling characters in early modern drama, defined by his insatiable desire for conquest and his belief in the supremacy of his will. Marlowe's depiction of him blends the heroic with the villainous. Tamburlaine is a man of boundless energy, eloquence, and vision, but his ruthlessness and cruelty set him apart as a deeply flawed figure.

Tamburlaine's defining characteristic is his unquenchable thirst for power. He represents the quintessential Renaissance overreacher, a man who defies the limits imposed by society, religion, and fate. He challenges kings, gods, and even nature in his pursuit of absolute dominion. Marlowe's Tamburlaine is a figure who refuses to be constrained by his humble origins or the traditional power structures of his time.

Marlowe's Tamburlaine is also notable for his verbal prowess. His speeches are filled with grandiose imagery and rhetoric, often invoking celestial bodies like the sun, moon, and stars to reflect his desire to rule over all creation. Through his eloquent speeches, Tamburlaine persuades, intimidates, and asserts his dominance. His language is as much a weapon as his sword, emphasizing Marlowe's mastery of blank verse.

Cruelty and Hubris: Despite his magnetic charisma, Tamburlaine's brutal treatment of others underscores his cruelty. Notable examples include his humiliation of Bajazeth, the Emperor of Turkey, whom he imprisons and uses as a footstool, and his treatment of Zenocrate's father, whom he kills despite his love for her. His disregard for human life and the suffering he causes others, including his followers and family, paints him as a figure corrupted by power.

III. Thematic Exploration

Marlowe's Tamburlaine the Great is dense with themes that revolve around power, ambition, and the human condition. The play offers a rich analysis of the forces that drive individuals to transcend their circumstances and the moral consequences of such ambition.

a. The Theme of Overreaching Ambition

the term overreach describes a personality quality of extreme or excessive pride or dangerous overconfidence and complacency, often in combination with (or synonymous with) arrogance. The play is often seen as a study of overreaching ambition, a recurring theme in Marlowe's work. Tamburlaine embodies the Renaissance ideal of the self-made man, one who is not bound by the constraints of birth

or fortune. His desire for greatness leads him to topple monarchs and empires, and his ambition knows no bounds. In this sense, Tamburlaine is similar to other Marlovian protagonists like Doctor Faustus, who also defy traditional limits in their pursuit of personal glory.

Marlowe's depiction of ambition is both celebratory and cautionary. While Tamburlaine's rise to power is awe-inspiring, it also foreshadows his eventual downfall. His hubris blinds him to the consequences of his actions, and by the end of the second part, his empire begins to disintegrate.

b. Power and Its Corrupting Influence

Power is a central theme in *Tamburlaine the Great*, and Marlowe examines how the pursuit and acquisition of power can both elevate and corrupt. Tamburlaine's rise to dominance is fueled by his ambition, but once he attains power, he becomes increasingly ruthless and detached from humanity. His conquests become more brutal, and his treatment of those who oppose him grows increasingly merciless. Marlowe suggests that unchecked power has the potential to erode one's morality and sense of empathy.

c. Fate vs. Free Will

Throughout the play, Tamburlaine speaks of his destiny to rule the world. However, it is clear that his rise to power is driven primarily by his own will and determination. This raises important questions about the role of fate in human life. Is Tamburlaine's success preordained, or is it the result of his ability to shape his own destiny? Marlowe explores the tension between fate and free will, suggesting that human beings have the capacity to defy the limitations placed upon them by society or the divine.

d. Mortality and the Limits of Human Power

As Tamburlaine's power grows, he begins to see himself as more than human. He defies the gods, burns religious texts, and seeks to conquer the entire world. However, his eventual death serves as a reminder that even the greatest of men are mortal. Marlowe's exploration of the limits of human power underscores the tragic dimensions of Tamburlaine's character. Despite his boundless ambition, he cannot escape the inevitability of death.

IV. Use of Imagery and Symbolism

Marlowe's language is rich with imagery and symbolism that enhances the thematic complexity of the play. Tamburlaine frequently compares himself to celestial bodies, such as the sun and stars, which symbolize his desire to transcend earthly limitations and achieve godlike power. His grand speeches, filled with references to the cosmos, reflect his towering ambition.

Symbols of destruction and conquest pervade the play. The cities Tamburlaine conquers, the kings he humiliates, and the religious texts he burns all serve to illustrate the destructive nature of his quest for power. His treatment of Bajazeth as a footstool and the deaths of his own sons also symbolize the dehumanizing effects of his ambition.

V. Marlowe's Contribution to English Drama

Marlowe's use of blank verse in *Tamburlaine* was revolutionary for its time. His verse was characterized by its regularity, grandeur, and flexibility, allowing for a poetic rhythm that elevated the dialogue. The rhythmic quality of Marlowe's lines imbued the play with a sense of epic grandeur, particularly in Tamburlaine's speeches, which are often marked by their soaring rhetoric.

This play laid the foundation for the use of blank verse in later Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, influencing playwrights like William Shakespeare. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* was also one of the first plays to focus on a historical figure whose ambition leads to both triumph and tragedy, setting the stage for later tragic heroes like Shakespeare's Macbeth.

Conclusion

Tamburlaine the Great stands as one of Christopher Marlowe's most significant works, notable for its exploration of ambition, power, and human nature. Through the character of Tamburlaine, Marlowe examines the allure and dangers of overreaching ambition, the corrupting effects of power, and the inevitable limits of human mortality. Tamburlaine's rise and fall offer a timeless exploration of the complexities of the human condition, and Marlowe's innovative use of blank verse helped shape the future of English drama.

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