

Identification of the Unique Features of Elizabethan Dramas: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: Thousands of plays have been written in the history of literature and will be written in the future. Therein, the Elizabethan drama itself is unique and there will be no denying it. In that, the analyzed selected dramas from the Elizabethan age are Christopher Marlowe's **Doctor Faustus**, Thomas Kyd's **The Spanish Tragedy**, and John Webster's **The Duchess of Malfi**. These three writers were sometimes called the —University Wits, as they have studied either at Oxford or Cambridge. The prominent playwrights of the Elizabethan period tried to write new genera of drama that were unknown to contemporary society. This research aims to analyze the unique features of these three plays as morality play, involvement of supernatural elements, tragi-comedy, Senecan revenge tragedy, Renaissance effects, uses of soliloquies, uses of irony, uses of blank verse, uses of allegory, the theme of law, order, and justice, the theme of play with-in-play, the theme of love and marriage, the theme of violence, betrayal, and murder, the theme of social discrimination, the theme of evil, etc. However, contemporary society did not know these characteristics, so the plays were highly regarded by the audience of the Elizabethan age.

Introduction

Among all English dramas, the period of Elizabethan (1558-1603) drama has a great appeal all over the world for its unique features. These characteristics in which were unknown and new to contemporary English society as well as all over the world. Among the famous playwrights of the Elizabethan era, an English poet and playwright, **Christopher Marlowe** also known as **Kit Marlowe** (baptized 26 February 1564 – 30 May 1593), contemporary famous English tragedian, **Thomas Kyd** (baptized 6 November 1558 – 15 August 1594), and **John Webster** (c. 1580 – c. 1632) and also their world-famous dramas of the Elizabethan era were analyzed expressly. Among all the dramatists of English literature, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, and John Webster innovated a new genus of drama called Elizabethan Drama. **Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus** is a tragi-comedy as well as it gives us the flavor of morality play and supernaturalism. **Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy** is the perfect combination of Senecan revenge play, play-within-a-play, and supernaturalism. **John Webster's The Duchess of Malfi** is all about secret love, social discrimination, the theme of evil, the theme of law, the theme of marriage and incest, and the theme of revenge, violence, and oppression. Most of the dramatists of the late 16th century were educated either at Oxford or Cambridge. Among them, Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, and Thomas Nashe all graduated from Cambridge. Similarly, Thomas Lodge and George Peele both graduated from Oxford. Though another dramatist, Thomas Kyd was not university-trained. Another enlightened scholar John Lyly also graduated from Oxford. Thus wise, these dramatists had prepared the way for William Shakespeare. For this reason, a 19th-century Scholar named George Saintsbury named them —University Wits as they highly contributed to the English drama. They tried to write a new kind of drama, that dramas were exceptional from the medieval period. To make their writing different, they followed the classical style and theme of drama and adapted the classical style and theme to their own time.

Methodology

This work attempted to research depending on the primary source of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, those are the original works by three authors, which I read, explained, and analyzed critically. The objective of this work was to know how the three authors characterized their dramas during the Elizabethan period. So, Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, and John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, these dramas related works were the source of the secondary data. The fundamental characteristics of Elizabethan drama like morality play, supernatural elements, anti-Semitism, disguise, revenge play, play-with-in-play, comedy of senses of humor, Renaissance effect, etc. were critically explained in this article. The main theme of this article was the analytical study of these selected three dramas. This article was not written based on any fieldwork. So, this paper is based on secondary data. Secondary data were collected from different books, journals, articles, critical analyses, reviews, and web materials published on these selected three dramas.

Result and Discussion

During the work, I have found some crucial features or characteristics in Elizabethan drama that we must put in our discussion. The characteristics or features of Elizabethan drama are as follow:

Morality Play: Morality play is an allegorical popular form of European drama. It was used first during the 15th and 16th centuries in the Elizabethan period. In the morality play, the protagonist is met by personifications of various moral attributes who try to prompt him to choose a godly life over the evils. In which the personification of various morals meets the protagonists. The protagonist represents the entire human species, Everyman, and Mankind. The stories usually follow a path where the antagonists are tempted to sin against the protagonist. And it is only God who gives peace, salvation, or hope to the protagonist.

Supernatural Elements: The involvement of supernatural elements is one of the pioneer characteristics of Elizabethan Drama. If we find some supernatural elements in any writing, we can call it supernaturalism. Supernatural elements are magic, miracles, demonic possessions, souls, spirits, ghosts, angels, devils, demons, legendary creatures, Gods, etc.

Revenge Tragedy: The theme of revenge plays a vital role in the Elizabethan drama. The dramatists followed the revenge theme of Seneca, a Roman philosopher of the 1st century. Seneca's plays were reworking chiefly the dramas of Euripides and the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles and as well as Thomas Kyd and William Shakespeare.

The Comedy of Humor: The Elizabethan playwright, Ben Jonson developed a type of comedy based on the ancient physiological theory of the —four senses of humor that was still in the Elizabethan era. The humor was blood, phlegm, choler (yellow bile), and melancholy (black bile) — four primary fluids. Mental health was a function of the correct balance between these humor or bodily fluids like the humor of Ben Jonson. It is also referred to as the —comedy of humor.

Disguise: The theme of disguise is another twisting characteristic of Elizabethan drama. The characters disguised themselves for a specific purpose several times. As it has found the tendency of disguise in *As You Like It* and also in *The Spanish Tragedy*.

Renaissance's Effect: Some dramatists were very much influenced by the Renaissance. To make their drama unique, the dramatists tried to create the characters modern, as the readers consider this as the effect of the renaissance.

Anti-Semitism: Anti-Jewish tendency was found in the Elizabethan era's drama. Hatred towards Jews was another conventional innate of Elizabethan drama as the readers can find in Christopher Marlowe's —The Jew of Malta and William Shakespeare's —The Merchant of Venice etc.

Use of Blank Verse: Blank verse consists of iambic pentameter lines (five stresses iambic verse). In the blank verse, the lines are unrhymed. For this reason, the term 'blank' is used. The blank verse means

that the lines do not rhyme in any kind of writing. All the selected three dramas were written in blank verse.

Use of Soliloquy: Soliloquy means monologue. When someone talks to oneself silently or aloud we can call it to soliloquy. In drama, when a character alone on the stage utters his or her thoughts, feelings, or emotions aloud, we can call the situation a soliloquy. I observe the frequent use of the soliloquy in these dramas. Now I will analyze these themes in the selected three dramas.

Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* commonly known as "**Doctor Faustus**", was first written between 1589 and 1592, and first performed in between 1592–1593. *Faustus-buch* is the book and the English translation of this book appeared under the title: *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* published in 1592 and believed to be Marlowe's source for his play.

In *Doctor Faustus*, Marlowe excellently used religious fashion as well as religious crisis, which were undoubtedly Christian. Faustus broke the traditional law and sold his soul to Lucifer, the lord of evil. Here the readers witnessed the theme of morality play through the conflict between good and evil. In a morality play, characters were generally personified abstractions of vice and virtues. The prominent theme of this play was generally the struggle between vice and virtue. Its structure was always loose and the plot centered around the main character. Faustus was a man who was seeking not only knowledge but power also. I have come to know by the text that Faustus was a scholar overpowered by his intellectual power. As Chorus said in the Prologue,

—*Till swoln with cunning, of a self-conceit*

(*Doctor Faustus*, Prologue, Page: 96)

Faustus was full of cunningness and he was also arrogant. We, the readers, know cunningness and arrogance are the characteristics of Satan.

At the beginning of the play, it has found that Doctor Faustus surrounded his soul with the devil. By mastering the unholy art of magic, Faustus did so to gain superhuman power. He uttered to himself:

—*These metaphysics of magicians,*

And necromantic books are heavenly;

(*Doctor Faustus*, Act I, Scene I, Page: 98 & 100)

According to Christianity, there are two ways to open a sinner. One is leading to salvation and the other is the pit of hell. But the mind of Faustus swung between the two. As he says:

—*Faustus. My heart's so harden'd I cannot repent;*

Scarce can I name salvation, faith, or heaven,

But fearful echoes thunder in mine ears,

—*Faustus, thou art damn'd ! Then swords, and knives,*

(*Doctor Faustus*, Act II, Scene II, Page: 128)

Faustus became more and more ambitious to have more power. At last, he thought about the black art of necromancy because he thought:

—*A sound magician is a mighty God.*

(*Doctor Faustus*, Act I, Scene I, Page: 100)

The conflict between good and evil is a part and parcel of morality play. Conflict may be two kinds: external and internal or mental conflict. Faustus' mental conflict was very acute in the last scene when he was going to be damned forever. He gave an outcry:

—*My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!...*

Ugly hell, gape not! come not Lucifer!

I'll burn my books! – Ah Mephistophilis!

(*Doctor Faustus*, Act V, Scene III, Page: 178)

The conflict between the Good Angel and Evil Angel is another common phenomenon in this play. As it has been seen,

—*Good Angel: O, Faustus, lay that damned book aside,*

And Gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul, ...

Evil Angel: Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art

Wherein all Nature's treasure is contain'd.

(*Doctor Faustus*, Act I, Scene I, Page: 100)

But the deputy of Lucifer, Mephistophilis instigated Faustus and Faustus became resolute. As it has been found:

—Then fear not, Faustus, be resolute,
And try the utmost magic can perform.—||

(*Doctor Faustus, Act I, Scene III, Page: 108*)

But when Faustus sometimes rescued his conscience and wanted to back to the path of God. Then for betraying God, he cursed Mephistophilis. As the author wrote:

—Faustus: When I behold the heavens, then I repent,
And curse thee, wicked Mephistophilis,||

(*Doctor Faustus, Act II, Scene II, Page: 126*)

The blank verse means that the lines do not rhyme in any kind of writing. Marlowe used the blank verse in his writing as:

—O, I'll leap up to my God!- Who pulls me down? -
See, see, where Christ's bloodstreams in the firmament!
One drop would save my soul, half a drop; ah, my Christ! -
Ah, rend not my heart for naming of my Christ!
Yet will I call on him: O, spare me, Lucifer! -||

(*Doctor Faustus, Act V, Scene III, Page: 176*)

Christopher Marlowe was the greatest poetic dramatist among all the dramatists. For the next 50 years, his handling of blank verse gave the theatre its unique characteristic voice.

Marlowe had no bent for comedy, and the comic parts found in some of his plays are always inferior and may be by other writers.

Involvement of supernatural elements is vastly found in the play *Doctor Faustus*. The existence of Mephistophilis, a fallen angel, proved it expressly. Mephistophilis was the bond between the lord of hell, Lucifer and Faustus. He bore the testimony of the agreement. He became the servant of Faustus after the agreement. He fulfilled all the desires of Faustus. The good angel and the bad angel were also supernatural components of the play. The conflict between the good angel and the bad angel played an eminent role throughout the play. I have also found the existence of Lucifer, Belzebub, and the Seven Deadly Sins in this play. The readers knew that Lucifer is the God of hell and Belzebub is a prince or demi-God.

This work witnessed a large number of soliloquies in *Doctor Faustus*. By mastering the black art of magic, the soliloquies sometimes revealed Faustus' dreams of becoming 'a mighty god'. They were sometimes showing the hesitation wavering in his mind. Sometimes they were a raging conflict between passion and conscience in his soul. And in the end, it wonderfully disclosed the different moods and deep anguish of a terrified soul.

Usually, the protagonist represented Mankind or Everyman. The other characters represented the personifications of virtues, vices, death, and angels and demons. For the prize of the soul of Mankind, the characters contested.

The Senecan play inspires **Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy***, where revenge was the main issue. Besides revenge tragedy, there were themes of violation, involvement of supernatural elements, use of blank verse, the theme of law, order, and justice, the theme of play within play, use of soliloquies, and the use of irony we can find. *The Spanish Tragedy* was probably written in 1587. In Thomas Heywood's *Apology for Actors* (1612) the world came to know about the authorship of this play.

At the beginning of the play, in the prologue, the author showed the supernatural powers, the Ghost of Andrea, a Spanish nobleman, and the spirit of Revenge. The Portuguese Prince Balthazar killed Don Andrea in the battle against Portugal. The Ghost of Andrea was seeking revenge on the spirit of Revenge. Revenge commented:

—Revenge: Then know, Andrea, that thou art arriv'd
Where thou shalt see author of thy death,
Don Balthazar, the prince of Portingale,

*Depriv'd of life by Bel-imperia
Here sit we down to see the mystery,
And serve for Chorus in the tragedy.*‡

(The Spanish Tragedy, Act I, Scene I, Page: 112)

In the opening scene, Andrea stated about many supernatural characters like Hades, Pluto, Charon, Avernus, Minos, Aeacus, Rhadamanth, Achilles, Hector, the spirit of Furies, Ixion, the Gates of Horn, and many more.

The readers witnessed extreme violence and murder throughout the play. Balthazar killed Andrea. Later on, Balthazar and Lorenzo, killed Horatio, son of Hieronimo (Knight Marshal of Spain) with the help of Pedringano (the servant of Bel-imperia) and Serberine (the servant of Balthazar). After Horatio's death, his mother, Isabella committed suicide, and his father, Hieronimo went mad. Loranzo ordered Pedringano to kill Cerberine. Hieronimo ordered to hang Pedringano after the trial. At last, Hieronimo killed Loranzo. Bel-imperia killed Balthazar and stabbed herself during the play—Soliman and Persedal. And thus, the vengeance of Andrea, Horatio, Hieronimo, and Bel-imperia accomplished. As the Ghost of Andrea stated:

*—Ghost. Ay, now my hopes have end in their effects,
When blood and sorrow finish my desires.*‡

(The Spanish Tragedy, Act IV, Scene V, Page: 294)

I have analyzed that the center of the circle of all love affairs was Bel-imperia. As Don Andrea loved Bel-imperia. Later, Bel-imperia fell in love with her ex-lover Andrea's friend, Horatio. At the same time, Balthazar fell in love with Bel-imperia.

The role of law and order was very much fragile, which I have analyzed after observing all this chaos, betrayal, and murder.

About the use of blank verse, F. S. Boas stated:

—If so, Kyd seems to have just preceded Marlowe in making blank verse the instrument of tragedy on the public stage. But his success was not due, like that of Marlowe, to poetro genius.‡

In the opening lines of Act II, Scene V, Hieronimo stated:

*—Hieronimo. What outcries pluck me from my naked bed.
And chill my throbbing heart with trembling fear,*‡

(The Spanish Tragedy, Act II, Scene V, Page: 170)

The above lines were in blank verse. And throughout the play similarly, the readers observed many more examples of blank verse. As I have observed,

*—Horatio. If Cupid sing, then Venus is not far:
Ay, thou art Venus, or some fairer star.
Bel-Imperia. If I be Venus, thou must needs be Mars,
And where Mars reigneth. There must needs be wars.*‡

(The Spanish Tragedy, Act II, Scene IV, Page: 166)

Kyd employed soliloquy sometimes for giving information about the plot, sometimes for character revelation, sometimes for psychological analysis, and sometimes for depicting the secret designs of a villain. Hieronimo made six long soliloquies. But Bel-imperia, Lorenzo, Pedringano and Villoppo made few soliloquies. The use of soliloquy caused pity and fear in readers.

John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* was another most famous drama in the Elizabethan era. It is believed that the play was composed in between 1612 to 1614. In this drama, love played a central role. A love affair between two persons of unequal social ranks opened the door to conflicts, bloodshed, and revenge. The central character of the drama, the Duchess, was a young widow and forbidden by her two brothers, Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand of Calabria, not to marry again. But the Duchess expressed with coyness:

—...*This is flesh and blood, sir;
 'T is not the figure cut in alabaster
 Kneels at my husband's tomb....*||

(*The Duchess of Malfi, Act I, Scene I, Page: 126*)

As the duchess expressed, to survive, the body must need to fulfill thirst, hunger, and desires. As well as, the human mind needs some requirements, like love, sympathy, pity, affection, etc. Despite her brother's warning, she fell in love with her mere steward, Antonio. She had many social barriers. First of all, she was a widow. In contemporary society and religion, second marriage or offering love for a second time for a woman was forbidden. But she fell in love with Antonio, a servant. Secondly, her two brothers discouraged her to marry for the second time. Moreover, Antonio and her social rank was the biggest barriers. From the dawn of human civilization, in every age, it was forbidden to marry the upper and lower-ranked people. But despite all the barriers, she secretly married Antonio. Here love won over all obstacles. Thus, Webster portrayed secret love and marriage in the drama. As the Duchess stated:

—*We now are man and wife, and 'tis the Church*||

(*The Duchess of Malfi, Act I, Scene I, Page: 128*)

The two brothers appointed a paid villain, Bosola, as a spy at this stage. Bosola discovered the birth of the first child of the Duchess and informed the Duchess's brothers. The two brothers asked Bosola to persecute her sister. When the Duchess gave birth to the third child, Bosola discovered Antonio as the father of the children. After knowing the fact, the two brothers ordered Bosola to murder the Duchess, Antonio, and the innocent children. The persecution and the murders of the Duchess and the children were reflections of the theme of violence. Here the readers witnessed the theme of evil exists. As Bosola stated,

—...*we bear about us
 A rotten and dead body, we delight
 To hide it in tissue: all our fear,
 Nay, all our terror, is, lest our physician*||

(*The Duchess of Malfi, Act II, Scene I, Page: 133-134*)

Natural revenge also played its magic in Ferdinand, Cardinal, and Bosola. Duke Ferdinand has lost his mind by sinning and murdering the innocent. Bosola wounded Cardinal and later Ferdinand killed Cardinal and Bosola. Thus natural revenge played a role to serve justice.

The presentation of supernatural elements in the writing was not traditional. Like typical revenge tragedies, he didn't present ghosts. In Act V, Scene III, the readers observed the miserable replies and the echo created a supernatural environment for the audience. Antonio uttered:

—*and on the sudden a clear light
 Presented me a face folded in sorrow*||

(*The Duchess of Malfi, Act V, Scene III, Page: 272*)

Justice can be performed in many ways, such as, the law, revenge, service, and payment. These elements contributed to a concept. In a broader sense, this concept is reasonably described as a law in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Conclusion

From the above analytical discussion, it is clear that the three selected dramas contain the characteristics of morality play, revenge play, involvement of supernatural elements, uses of soliloquies, uses of blank verse, uses of comedy of humor, disguise, etc. These characteristics made the dramas unique from all the dramas of the world. Thus the plays win the admiration of every English literature reader. The characteristics that we have found in these plays have a universal appeal. In the modern age, we find these issues in our contemporary society.

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