Do you think Marlowe’s *Edward II* is a historical play? Justify your answer

Christopher Marlowe is the brightest constellation of the constellation that is called “University Wits”. The atheist Marlowe displays all his artistry in the play *Edward II* which is essentially set against the backdrop of history. Marlowe’s main source is Holinshed’s Chronicle. Moreover he has also drawn from the Chronicle of John Stowe, which was first published in 1580. But Stowe’s chronicle is rather short in comparison to that of Holinshed and does not contain a good many details which is found in Marlowe’s play. It is, however, certain that the scene, in which Matrevis and Gurney are shown to wash the king and shave his beard away in ditchwater, is taken from Stowe.

*Edward II* is unanimously acclaimed as a tragedy. However, Aristotle, in his Poetics, has shown a clear demarcation between a tragedy and a history play. Tragedy, he defines, is an imitation or representation of a serious action, which involves problems and evils, and includes pain and death and serves to excite thereby pity and fear. In light of this definition *Edward II* is certainly a tragedy, in which materials are taken from history, but the tragic force issues not out of political situation or historical affair, but distinctively from individual lapses and deficiencies, errors and omissions.

If we analyse the character of Edward II who happens to be the protagonist of the play, we see that he fails and suffers, mainly for his own doings---for his thoughtlessness, unwise approach to the world around him and even to his own family. Unlike his *Tamburlaine*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Doctor Faustus*, we here have a protagonist who in spite of being a king, is a weak person. And in Machiavellian sense to be weak is wrong for a king.

As a matter of fact, *Edward II* well bears out the great incompetence of a king who fails to hold his scepter firmly and to use his power shrewdly and capably. He is thoughtless, callous and rather cruel. He annoy the common, alienates the nobles and even provokes the Church by his foolishness. He even is rude and hard in his conjugal relationship and he treats his own wife cruelly and odes not hesitate to exploit her to secure his own base love for his minion. He pays no heed to the griev-
ance of his army, allows the foreign power to gather and penetrate into and occupy English possessions. All such acts of weakness follow from his personal attachment to his French minion, Gaveston, for whose company he is found to long for ever. Such a character is never adorable, likeable, or even serviceable as a monarch.

Actually Marlowe’s play is a study in the weakness of a man who happens to be the king and a historical character. Edward II belongs to history, and not to any historical phase. Thus, Edward II is a tragedy in which the main emphasis is on the personal weakness of a historical character. Apart from the historical facts and materials, out of which the play might have been formed, there remains a good deal of personal and human touches, and this is what elevates the play as a tragedy and brings in it a universal appeal in its poetry and tragic pity and poignancy.