

Discuss "the duchess
of malfi" as a revenge
tragedy. essay



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"The Duchess of Malfi" is a macabre, tragic play, written by the English dramatist John Webster. It begins as a love story, with a Duchess who marries beneath her class, and ends as a nightmarish tragedy as her two brothers exact their revenge, destroying themselves in the process.

The play is sometimes ridiculed by modern critics for the excessive violence and horror in its later scenes. But the violence and horror scenes give it the touch it needs to be a revenge tragedy. The Cardinal and Ferdinand, the brothers of the Duchess, are very much against their sister's re-marriage. Ferdinand urges her not to marry again. He condemns it because he thinks that it shows a lustful nature. He doesn't want to give any other reason.

But it is obvious that Ferdinand doesn't want to their inheritance. Ferdinand even warns her by showing his father's dagger and that he would use it to take revenge for not listening to him. But the Duchess is a free natured woman. She doesn't change her decision to re-marry. She marries her steward Antonio though the Duchess assures that she will not marry again.

But her brother is right when he thinks that she will go against his will. So, on the Cardinal's advice, he hires Bosola as a spy. The undoing of the Duchess starts when Bosola suspects her to be pregnant. He is a very cunning man. He waits for signs that confirm his suspicion.

He even gives the Duchess apricots to see if she eats them eagerly as any pregnant woman might. His suspicion is confirmed when the child's horoscope falls in his hand which was mistakenly dropped by Antonio. He immediately informs the two brothers by sending them a letter. After getting the letter the Duke burst into anger. He couldn't control his rage.

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He starts shouting and cursing his sister. He refers to the Duchess, his own sister, as a “notorious strumpet”. He is determined to take revenge just because she didn’t listen to him. He says that he would destroy the Duchess’s palace, her forests, her pastoral lands, her general territory.

Ferdinand was so eager to take revenge that he said that he would put the Duchess and her lover in a coal-pit to burn them and close the chimney so that the smoke from burning them couldn’t go heavenwards. He also wants to dip their bed-sheets in pitch or sulphur, wrap them in those bed-sheets and then set fire to them to burn like a match stick. The horrific way in which he describes torturing and killing his sister shows the revengeful attitude in which he is. Though the Cardinal is not in a rage like the Duke, he doesn’t defend his sister or the cruel intentions the Duke has against their sister. Rather, he tells him to cool down and plan the revenge with a calm head. The Duke pays a visit to the Duchess.

But he doesn’t show any type of anger. Rather he dismisses the rumour that was circulating about the Duchess. But he acquires a key of the Duchess’s bedroom through Bosola to spy on her. The Duke enters her room at night and overhears her talking to Antonio though Antonio is not present there.

He tells her that it is good that he doesn’t know the identity of her lover or the situation would have been much worse. He gives her a dagger suggesting that she kill herself for degrading the honour of the family. Thus again the revengeful nature of the Duke is in front of us. As the Duchess is afraid of the well-being of Antonio, she discharges him of his duty and tells

him to flee to Ancona. But she makes the mistake in believing Bosola and reveals to him that Antonio is her husband.

Bosola immediately informs the brothers. At this time the Cardinal is invested by the Emperor as a soldier at Loretto. Here he takes the part of a revengeful brother by banishing Antonio, the Duchess and their children from the State of Ancona. Ferdinand sends a letter to the Duchess through Bosola which, on the surface offers reconciliation, but is a threat to her and her family.

Antonio flees with their eldest son to Milan on the Duchess's request. Bosola comes wearing a mask bringing a guard with him to arrest the Duchess. The Duchess has endured her imprisonment with great fortitude. Ferdinand meets the Duchess in the dark because he had vowed not to see her again. In the dark he promises her pardon and peace, and offers her a hand to kiss. The Duchess makes the dreadful discovery that she is holding a dead man's hand which, she is told is Antonio's.

A curtain is then drawn, revealing figures of Antonio and the children, appearing as if they were dead. This provokes her to suicide which the Duke wanted in the first place. He is happy that his sister is in distress upon seeing the wax figures. He further wants to torment her by letting loose a group of madmen upon her. From the point where he gave her the dagger to this point, Ferdinand didn't want to be blamed for the death of his sister.

He was hoping that the torture he was doing to his sister would ultimately make her take her own life. But, as this didn't work, he sent Bosola as a tomb-maker. Then he sends executioners with coffin, cords and a bell. These <https://assignbuster.com/discuss-the-duchess-of-malfi-as-a-revenge-tragedy-essay/>

things don't scare her a bit. At last when the Duchess doesn't take her own life, she is strangled to death.

But after seeing the dead body of his sister Ferdinand is full of remorse for killing her. "Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young" He didn't have any problem when he tormented her to take revenge or if she had committed suicide. But when the murder of Duchess falls directly in his hand, he becomes insane and remorseful.

But the revenge doesn't end there. The Cardinal hires Bosola to kill Antonio. He is totally ignorant of the death of his sister. Bosola suspects that Cardinal is hiding something and uses Julia to find out the secret that the Cardinal was behind the plot to kill the Duchess. But after realising that his secret is no more a secret, the Cardinal takes revenge on Julia by poisoning her for making him confess his involvement in the killing of the Duchess. Bosola begins to repent for his works after killing the Duchess.

He was made to kill her and was again being used to kill Antonio. He realizes that he could never prosper through the evil ways he has chosen and feels angry at the Cardinal for making him pursue the evil way of life. As a result he takes the life of the Cardinal to avenge for the condition he is in. On the other hand Ferdinand has developed a horrible disease called "lycanthropy" which makes him imagine that he is a wolf. He goes to graveyards and digs out dead bodies like wolves.

In the last scene we see that the Cardinal is reading a book which contains a description of the fire of hell. He was feeling the pricks of his conscience.

Looking into the fishponds in his garden, he sees a figure armed with a rake
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ready to strike him. Revenge tragedy is different from other tragedies in the sense that the whole part of the tragedy will be based on revenge.

In Shakespeare's "Macbeth" though Macduff kills Macbeth to avenge the killing of his family, the play can't be called a revenge tragedy because Macbeth was the reason for his own tragic end. He initiated the dreadful killings which led to his downfall. But in "The Duchess of Malfi", the Duchess's only fault was that she married against the will of her brothers. Another aspect of a revenge tragedy is that the persons involved in the revenge ultimately feel remorse for what they have done and in most cases it leads to their damnation.

In the play Ferdinand goes mad, the Cardinal sees images, Bosola repents for his evil-doings and ultimately they face death in an unnatural way. So from the above aspects it is clear that John Webster's "The Duchess of Malfi" is a revenge tragedy.