

The theme of love and family in John Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi' and 'Antigone'...

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Family Kills

Inspiration can come from anything, but one of the most frequently used sources is the past. Pulling successful aspects of previous creations allows for the new artist to mold their own unique version. This is especially true for writers and playwrights. During the renaissance period playwrights primarily took influences from classical Greek and Roman theater and what was happening historically around them. These inspirations brought the works of Christopher Marlowe, John Webster and William Shakespeare.

In Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* you can see various influences from Sophocles' *Antigone*. Both of these plays have elements suggesting/referencing the time period in which they were written. Also the role of women and the portrayal of family in these two shows has it where the family is ultimately the demise of these leading ladies.

In *Antigone* by Sophocles there is a clear theme of cause and effect. At the beginning we see a determined young woman, fight for what she believes in. When Antigone refuses to leave her brother, Polyneices, unburied, she goes against the law, declared by King Creon, and sacrifices herself to save her family's honor. While in exile Antigone hangs herself in her cave dungeon. Due to this a chain reaction of suicides occurs; Haemon, Antigone's betrothed and Creon's son, takes his life, which causes his mother, Eurydice, to kill herself as well. Antigone's actions show how crucial and impactful the family relationship is and how in the end it was these relationships that killed not only her but other loved ones as well.

Antigone is reflective of the 5th because during this time there were big political and artistic growths occurring. Antigone combats authority and gets immediately and fairly punished, which could be Sophocles' way in saying that if you don't listen to these new political powers there will be consequences. With the artistic growth this allowed for writers to explore new things, Sophocles for instance introduced a third actor and created complex, more emphasized characters.

The Duchess of Malfi has similar tones to Antigone. In Webster's play we see the Duchess trying to re-establish her love life and family after the death of her first husband. Remarriage is viewed as an enormous sin in the eyes of her brothers, Ferdinand and The Cardinal, so they forbid her to do it. Similar to Antigone, the Duchess ignores the orders and runs away with her new love Antonio. They have a family in secret and when the brothers finally find out, with the help of DeBosola, they have the new family sentenced to death. At the end of the play the only surviving member is the Duchess' oldest son, being the next of kin he gains rule of the country. Many deaths occur throughout the play, a majority of which is caused by some other family member.

This show was written during the Renaissance period, which was a time of rebirth. Writers during this time were taking influences from classical theater and putting their own spin on the stories and structures. The Duchess goes through a rebirth period when she creates this new secret family, she is finally happy and feels like she's in the right place. There is also rebirth at the end of the show, when the family dies and the oldest son is left to rule,

the corruption is gone and he has the potential to bring the city to a better place. During this time period the state-sanctioned church changed four times, causing conflicts in religion. Webster using the Duchess to question the sanctity of marriage plays to these changes in a sly way, showing the differences in people's beliefs.

Both of these play's highlight a woman's need and journey to provide security for their family members; in the end it is their families that kill them. By standing up for what they thought was right, they unknowingly signed the death certificates to those closest to them. The small references both playwrights use, creates a relevance for these plays to bring across popular messages of their specific times.