

The duchess of malfi essay sample



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Lord David Cecil argues that John Webster views the world from a Calvinist perspective; 'The world as seen by [Webster] is of its nature incurably corrupt and to be involved in it is to be inescapably involved in evil.' The characters in the play seem to support this logic; no character has escaped the evil that pervades Webster's play. Some characters do possess redeeming features, but on the whole they are morally perverted; yet Webster manages to create characters that are not abhorred but remembered by Jacobean and present audiences alike

Immediately the play opens, the audience is thrust into a discussion into the differences between the French and Italian courts; he believes the French court is superior and almost completely free of corruption. The scene is written in blank verse, with unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter. However, although Line 14 is metrically quite even, line 15 is a bit different: it would be hard to read it without placing a fairly strong stress on the first word, 'death'. After that, the metre returns to iambic, but the brief deviation serves to draw the spectator's attention to the word 'death'.

In this way, Webster underlines the dire consequences of a degenerate court. The point is highlighted further by the sudden appearance of a rhyme between 'head' and 'spread' in lines 14 and 15, which makes the lines stand out even more. This show that even from the beginning of the play, Webster tries to show the moral corruption and depravity that was rampant in the late 16th and early 17th century; even in the courts which were theoretically supposed to contain only nobles with the best breeding and an excess of morality.

Similarly, in Shakespeare's 'Measure for Measure' Angelo aims to eliminate moral corruption in Vienna and he is believed to be the best man for the job; according to Escalus "if any in Vienna be of worth to undergo such ample grace and honour; it is Lord Angelo" yet Angelo who is held in highest esteem is shown to be morally corrupt as well. This seems to suggest that due to the Puritanical influences present during the 16th century; Jacobean audiences relished plays filled with moral depravity, seeing them as some sort of escape.

Furthermore, Webster's ability as described by Charles R. Forker, 'to create distinct psychological portraits of his characters' is what makes his exploration into the depravity of humans all the more profound. For example, the Cardinal, who is supposed to be the voice of moral reason in the play, is one of the most corrupt. He commits adultery with Julia, but has no qualms about killing her with a poisoned bible - which in itself is as ironic as a man of God fornicating with a married woman, but Webster uses this irony to enforce the Cardinals immorality.

Also, at the beginning of Act V, the Cardinal's theological soliloquy: "How tedious is a guilty conscience!" begs the question, how deeply does the Cardinals immorality lie? The complexity of this character is why I agree that Webster has indeed undertaken a profound study on human depravity; The Cardinals dying words: "let me / Be laid by, and never thought of" show that unlike in 'Hamlet' and other revenge tragedies, there is no moment of remorse for The Cardinal, he just wants to be dead and forgotten, this contributes to the complexity of the character and the play as a whole.

In contrast, Ferdinand does appear to exhibit repentance for his wrongdoings before his death, but he is unarguably the most depraved character in the book; when he shouts "'Tis not your whores milk that shall quench my wild fire, / But your whores blood!" His obsession with his sister's body is clear, as well as his powerful urge to do violence to her. His anger is not one of brotherly indignation, but a ferocious sexual jealousy that seems bent, not just on the destruction, but the obliteration of the loved object.

So, he imagines "hewing" the Duchess to "pieces". There is also a desire to punish the father for his lechery by making him eat his child - a form of retribution Webster would have known from Shakespeare's early revenge tragedy 'Titus Andronicus', in which the protagonist avenges himself on his enemy Tamora by killing her two sons and baking them in a pie which he feeds to her at a dinner party. By this point in the play, there can be no doubt in our minds that Ferdinand is the play's principal villain, albeit a fascinating one.

Yet, even here, Webster injects a moral dimension, suggesting that the Duke of Calabria's furious desire for revenge stems in part from guilt: "I could kill her now/ In you, or in myself, for I do think/It is in some sin in us heaven doth revenge/By her." These cryptic lines imply that Ferdinand's savagery derives in part from a self-loathing which he projects onto his sister. Critic John C. Kerrigan holds a similar view; violence in *The Duchess of Malfi* he argues "may be read as the frustration resulting from the lack of an outlet for expressing guilt and the inability to confess".

These intricacies in Ferdinand personality coupled with his slow descent into madness make him an exemplary study into the depravity of the human psyche, something Webster had in mind as he wrote the play. It has been argued that the origins of Jacobean tragedy derive from medieval morality plays, where characters were personified as sins or positive attributes such as 'Vice' or 'Virtue'; such plays were popular and were performed open-air and had a didactic purpose.

Webster and other dramatists such as John Ford were influenced by these tales; the Duchess of Malfi is reminiscent of these medieval plays in the sense that some characters can be seen as personifications of sin or at least, an allegorical representation of certain attributes humanity. The Duchess, however, seems to face her death with strength and a certainty that she will go to heaven, so there is definitely an emphasis - at least by the end of the play - that morality in humans is redundant - it is inner goodness that leads to the ultimate reward.

Finally, Webster's emphasis seems to be that human beings fall victim to their own follies and wrongdoings, and Bosola, the plays 'malcontent' appears to be the only character in the play that recognises the paradoxes of morality. He provides a summative epitaph of the play in this final scene, concluding with a view of his own position as "an actor in the main of all, / Much 'gainst mine own good nature" Although this statement manages to cast a shroud of ambiguity even as the play ends;

Irving Ribner's assessment describes Webster's ambiguity as "an agonised search for moral order in the uncertain and chaotic world of Jacobean

scepticism by a dramatist who can no longer accept without question the postulates of order and degree so dear to the Elizabethans". In Ribners vie, there is a moral balance to the play. On the one side are the " destroyers of life" Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Bosla; but while these forces dominate much of the action and atmosphere of the play, " this world is not the total picture", into it comes the Duchess of Malfi who stands for the values of life, and Webster's final statement is that life may have nobility in spite of all. The Duchess, not her brothers, stands for ordinary humanity, love and the continuity of life through children.