

M.A. ENGLISH

SEMESTER I PAPER

II

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THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

MCQs :-

1. John Webster was born in 1580.
2. The Age of Webster comprises the last decade of the Sixteenth century and early decades of the Seventeenth.
3. The Age of Webster is the Age of Transition
4. The two worlds of Webster are the disintegrating medieval world of scholastic philosophy , science and metaphysics and the rising world of the new philosophy.
5. Seneca, the great tragic dramatist, introduced the element of horror in the revenge play.
6. The influence of Seneca passed into the Elizabethan theatre through Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy
7. Webster is the greatest figure among Jacobean dramatists
8. The Duchess of Malfi is a tragedy in the tradition of the Elizabethan revenge play.
9. In the Jacobean age tragedy had degenerated into melodrama
10. The Duchess of Malfi is a revenge tragedy

11. The Duchess of Malfi depicts the story of a young and beautiful widow.
12. The Duchess has two brothers, the cardinal and duke Ferdinand
13. The Duchess marries her steward, Antonio
14. The Duchess got married when she was twelve years old
15. Her husband died when she was about twenty
16. The Duchess, the central personage, is a stoical figure who bares misfortune with calm resignation and fortitude .
17. The setting to the play is provided by contemporary Italian court life.
18. Bosola is a “Machiavellian mediator ” a tool villain
19. Webster’s genius was essentially tragic
20. The White Devil and The Duchess of Malfi are the greatest tragedies written by Webster.
21. Webster transformed the revenge play, by adding poetry to it.
22. In the final act Bosola becomes the agent through whom the spirit of the Duchess is made to permeate the world
23. Bosola plays a triple role in the play
24. Machiavelli’s influence on Webster is seen in the character of Bosola and the Cardinal.
25. The Duchess is shown the waxen figures of Antonio and his children.

WEBSTER’S CONTRIBUTION TO ENGLISH DRAMA

John Webster occupies an important position among the writers of the revenge plays. Thomas Kyd, Marston, Tourneur, etc., are the eminent revenge playwrights. Duchess of Malfi of England. Kyd’s The Spanish Tragedy, Marston’s Antonio’s Revenge and Malcontent, Tourneur’s The Revenger’s Tragedy, Shakespeare’s Hamlet, and Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi are important plays continuing the tradition of revenge plays.

John Webster greatly contributed to the tradition of the revenge play. As regards the revenge motif, moral vision; supernatural element and pathos, Webster's tragedies, particularly, *The Duchess of Malfi*, stand uniquely. It is pointed out that his great tragedy, *The Duchess of Malfi* is a revenge play. Revenge undoubtedly plays an important part in this play; however, Webster's moral instinct makes him degrade the revenge motif from, its original supremacy. In this play revenge is a nominal theme; and it is again twisted, so as to show its double aspect. In the words of Hazlitt, "Up to the end of the fourth Act the revenge is for an alleged outrage on the insensate pride of family, combined (it appears as a second thought) with avarice, later it takes an altogether different turn when the instrument of all the atrocities turns to be the avenger of wrongs, which he himself had perpetrated, under the pressure of a necessity." Ferdinand and Cardinal, the brothers of the Duchess, take revenge on her because of the fact that she has married Antonio, her steward, against their wishes. Bosola, the instrument of revenge, takes his own revenge on the Cardinal for his being ungrateful to him, and incidentally Ferdinand is put to death. Unlike the earlier 'revenge plays', in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, it is not the avengers, Ferdinand and Cardinal, who gain sympathy from the audience, but it is the Duchess, the victim, who is sympathized by all.

Webster makes the revenge not a repugnant, horrible affair, but invests it with a moral tone. The whole of the last act of *The Duchess of Malfi* is devoted to the nemesis which falls upon the avengers. In this way, Webster, by introducing the tone of moral justice at the end, has elevated the original theme of revenge. His *Duchess of Malfi* ranks very high in the development of this class of tragedy.

THE DUCHESS OF MALFI AS A REVENGE TRAGEDY

The Duchess of Malfi as a Revenge Tragedy: This drama contains so many elements of horrors or which it can be classified as a melodrama. From the beginning to the end of this drama, there are a lot of elements of horrors. The last two acts of the play have an abundance of them. However melodramatic episodes are seen earlier too. The Duke in order to horrify the Duchess gives a dead man's hand to her and she kisses it taking it to be the Duke's hand. The spectacle of waxen images of the dead bodies of Antonio and children presented before the Duchess is another horrid scene. The unruly dance of the mad men before the Duchess, the appearance of Bosola as a tomb maker and a bell man and the appearance of the executioners with bell and core in procession, too are intended to create horror. The next horror is mentioned in the series of murders committed by Bosola. The last horror comes when Julia is poisoned in a most cold-blooded manner. Antonio is killed and Ferdinand, Cardinal and Bosola all meet their death at the end. So, there are the ten murders

Revenge and murders: Taking revenge and murdering people are the integral part of revenge tragedy. In this drama, we find people taking revenge and are murdering others. But Webster sets his play in a different manner, the revenge and murders are committed in a different manner from the traditional manner. The revengeful brothers are both villains. They are the victims of an insensate fury that blinds the eyes, maddens the brain, and poisons the springs of pity. The piteous sufferings of their victim from the hard heart of Bosola who says:

You may discern the share of loveliness,

More perfect in her tears than in the smile.

We have seen that there was a love affair between the Duchess and Antonio and at last they marry and they produce three children. On hearing the news of their secret marriage and their children, the cardinal and The Duke Ferdinand react angrily. And from the beginning to the end of Act two, scene five, we see the reaction of the two brothers for the action of their sister. They think that the Duchess has destroyed the reputation and status of their family. The Cardinal says, "Shall our blood/ The royal blood of Aragon and Castile, Be thus attained?" So, they don't want to destroy the family reputation and wants to kill her. Here Ferdinand says, "I'll find scorpions to string my whips/And fix her in a general eclipse". Hence their deeds of revenge are not a wild kind of justice but monstrous wrong. Ferdinand gives her the command. He had threatened to use in the play's first scene:

"Die, then quickly."

The Duchess of Malfi differs in a number of ways from the traditional revenge play. It doesn't become clear why revenge is taken on the Duchess. Her only fault is that she has married below her rank and status and thus the two brothers think, she has disgraced the family. She has certainly not committed any heinous crime for which she is subjected unjustified. That the weak revenge motives is clearly brought out by the fact that for more than two years her two brothers do nothing to punish the Duchess.

Supernatural elements: In presenting the supernatural too, Webster deviates from the tradition or modifies the tradition. He doesn't present any of the conventional omens and objective portents found in typical revenge plays. There is absolutely nothing unrealistically supernatural in the play. The sorrowful answers which she echoes to Antonio's words are the result of a natural phenomenon. Antonio's words: "and on the sudden a clear light/presented of a face folded in sorrow" (Act V Scene III) come only from his fancy born out

of his affection for the Duchess. No ghost appears on the scene. In this Webster has shown vital concern for an artistic atmosphere of supernatural.

Madness shown on the stage: It's a tradition of Elizabethan revenge tragedy to show madness on the stage. In this play we see madness of these mad people. However, there is some psychological interest too present in it. The Duke advises the scheme to torture the Duchess with the intention of turning her mad. But ironically he, not the Duchess, becomes mad. This madness of the Duke has still greater significance.

In summing up we can say that "The Duchess of Malfi" is a revenge tragedy. Although Webster wrote this drama following the tradition of revenge tragedy, he has modified some of its aspects to make it unique. And he is perfect enough drawing the art in his own style that makes it more acceptable to the readers to accept it as a true revenge tragedy. So, in a word we can say that it is a perfect revenge tragedy.

THEMES

POLITICS AND CORRUPTION

The Duchess of Malfi makes an argument about ideal government and the dangers (both physical and spiritual) of corruption. Though there are momentary gains and successes achieved by the brothers' plans, ultimately the play ends with the slaughter of nearly everyone involved in their web of influence. This ending suggests that corruption yields disastrous results; even beyond death, corruption can lead to damnation. This point is made explicitly when Bosola tells

Ferdinand that taking a higher position in exchange for spying on the Duchess would make him a traitor and Ferdinand a corruptor, thereby leading both of them to hell.

Finally, the death of all of the play's major figures of political power leaves a vacuum at the end of the play; there is no new leader to take over. To show this, the play's final lines, often reserved for the highest-ranking character, are spoken by a mere courier. Ferdinand and the Cardinal's positions aren't filled, but are merely left vacant at the play's end. Thus, political corruption and duplicitous behavior has the potential to lead to dire personal and religious consequences, and possibly to the collapse of government itself.

LOVE AND MALE AUTHORITY

The Duchess of Malfi explores love and male authority in a traditional society in which women are subjected to the wills of men. The Cardinal's illicit relationship with Julia provides an example of a woman successfully controlled by a man. Julia is depicted according to the stereotype of a fickle woman, while the Cardinal is the constant figure of authority. Webster even uses animal imagery to describe their relationship: the Cardinal is metaphorically a falconer who tames Julia, the falcon. Later, when Julia becomes infatuated with Bosola, she begs for him to tell her to do something so that she can prove that she loves him—clearly, she understands love to be an experience controlled by men. The Duchess, however, inverts the pattern of male authority over love. Refusing to remain a widow, she covertly goes against her brothers' order and marries for love. What's more, she does so outside of the normal confines of courtship in which the man pursues the woman; in part due to her high birth, she is "forced to woo" Antonio. This marriage between Antonio and the Duchess is figured as a true partnership; the Duchess married

Antonio purely out of love, in spite of custom and opposition, as he had no special status or nobility.

GUILT, DEATH AND SUFFERING

This play is filled with death and suffering. In a tragedy, the deaths of most of the main characters are pretty much guaranteed, but Webster achieves a spectacular level of horror with the way that characters are killed and the tortures they undergo beforehand. In light of the Duchess being subjected to imprisonment, torture, and execution, it's notable that death itself doesn't frighten her. The Duchess possesses composure and dignity in the moments leading up to her death, even to the point of asking for her violent death in order to put her to sleep. In this way, death is shown as an escape that is preferable to a life of suffering. Death, no matter how gruesome, leads to "excellent company in the other world," and it frees the Duchess from the control and torture of her brothers. We can also note that the Duchess' death showcases the play's exploration of the permanence of death, as an echo rises from her grave in an attempt to tell Antonio of her fate.

CHARACTER SKETCH

Duchess

The Duchess, a young widow and the ruler of the Italian town of Amalfi, is the intelligent, kind, virtuous sister of the Cardinal and the twin of Duke Ferdinand. Her brothers have prohibited her from remarrying because, they argue, her remarriage would ruin her honour and the honour of the family. The Duchess also seems to understand that her brothers have more nefarious aims, such as ensuring their own chances at inheriting her fortune, though her understanding is implied mainly by her actions rather than her

words. Independent and defiant of her brothers' wishes, the Duchess decides to secretly marry her steward, Antonio, for love, and has three children with him. She keeps both the marriage and the children secret because she understands the threat her brothers would pose to her family should they find out. And, in fact, once her brothers do find out the Duchess seems almost completely unable to protect herself or her children. Perhaps because she is a woman, she lacks her brother's political power, and they quickly banish and split up her family. They then imprison, torture, and strangle both her and her children. Through all of these trials, the Duchess remains virtuous and good, and she faces both torture and death with bravery and dignity.

Bosola

Bosola is the spy planted by Duke Ferdinand as the stable master at the Duchess' estate. He is a man who is used to doing the dirty work for others: before the events of the play he spent time in jail for murdering a man on the orders of the Cardinal. He is also aware that the men who do the dirty work seldom actually get the rewards promised them, as the Cardinal refuses to speak or be seen with him. Even so, though he feels guilty for all of his actions – and does not even want to become a spy when Duke Ferdinand offers him the payment to become one – he feels that it is his duty to obey the Duke and accepts that to follow orders he must become corrupt. After he participates in the torture of the Duchess, though, his guilt becomes so great, and Ferdinand's refusal to pay him for his services so outrageous, that he switches sides and plans to help Antonio and kill both Ferdinand and the Cardinal. That his plans go awry and he accidentally kills Antonio may suggest that it is not so simple to suddenly become good and moral, but he does willingly sacrifice himself and badly wound the Cardinal and kill Ferdinand.

Ferdinand

Duke Ferdinand is the brother of the Cardinal and the twin brother of the Duchess. He doesn't want his widowed sister to remarry, in part because of his pride and his greed for her wealth, but also because he harbors his own incestuous desires for her. It is Ferdinand who places Bosola in the Duchess's employment and then hires Bosola to spy on her activities. When rumors reach Ferdinand of the Duchess possibly giving birth to children (and thus also having sex), his anger is so overwhelming that his violent outbursts about the horrible ways he plans to revenge himself on her are too much even for the Cardinal. When he finds out that she has secretly married Antonio and had three children, Ferdinand acts decisively: he has her imprisoned, tortured, and killed. He seems to enjoy the torture, and act as if the torture he makes her endure is just payback for torture that she has made him endure, though the clear implication is that the "torture" he experienced was his sexual jealousy of the Duchess. Upon seeing the Duchess's dead body, however, Ferdinand almost immediately feels remorse, and his guilt eventually drives him insane. In his madness he stabs the Cardinal, and is killed by Bosola.

Cardinal

The Cardinal is the brother of Duke Ferdinand and the Duchess. Though he is a religious figure, he is in fact just as immoral and despicable as his brother, facts made clear by his attempt to bribe his way into being pope, the fact that Bosola once killed a man on his orders, and the affair he carries on with Julia, Castruccio's wife. Like Ferdinand, he tries to prevent the Duchess from remarrying in order to preserve his sense of his family's purity and honour as well as his access to the Duchess's wealth. Unlike the wild Ferdinand, though, the Cardinal is careful, calculating, and controlled: he refuses to interact personally with the spy Bosola, and he threatens to walk

away when Ferdinand becomes too overt about his plans for revenge on the Duchess. While it's never explained whether the Cardinal is upset by Ferdinand's violence or just trying to shut Ferdinand up in order to keep themselves looking clean while they plan their revenge, the fact that the Cardinal is entirely capable of murder – he later poisons Julia, after all, when she learns his secrets – suggests that it is the latter. Though he is aware of the religious consequences of his actions, he wields religion only as a tool to maintain his power. He never seems to feel true guilt for his actions, and there is a sense of poetic justice in the fact that ultimately the Cardinal dies after being stabbed by Bosola, the spy he used but refused to engage with or even pay, and his own brother, Ferdinand, who by the end of the play is guilt ridden and insane

Antonio

Antonio is the Duchess's steward, and very capably runs the Duchess's estate. Despite the fact that he is neither wealthy nor high-born, the Duchess considers him to be a "complete" man, and the two of them secretly marry. He clearly reveres the Duchess– he is marrying for love, not just money. He is also knowledgeable about people: even early in the play he knows that Ferdinand and the Cardinal are duplicitous and murderous. Despite his knowledge of their characters, though, he proves entirely incapable of protecting his family from Ferdinand or the Cardinal. And while that failure seems to stem from his lower-class status and lack of political power of any sort, and while Antonio never seems anything less than morally good, his plan to sneak into the Cardinals home at the end of the play in order to try to convince the Cardinal to make amends also seems incredible naïve. During this effort, he is accidentally killed by Bosola, who mistakes Antonio for someone else.