

Form, structure and language

Form

Principally, a play is written to be performed. We, the audience, unlike when reading a novel or poetry, share the same air space as the actors performing. We are the voyeurs, safe from physical involvement in the action on the stage but not divorced from it. Consider for a moment why it is that so many people enjoy watching horror films and you will understand exactly what is meant by this. With a film there exists, between the action and us, the layer of a substantial screen upon which images of people and their lives are depicted, but in a theatre this layer of separation is removed so the voyeur is placed that much closer to the action, in real terms. We have all experienced the feeling of walking into a room and 'sensing' an 'atmosphere'. Well, it is precisely this that the playwright is able to take advantage of: a direct manipulation of our senses. We in the audience are literally breathing in the same atmosphere as the actors on stage, and provided they play their parts with conviction, we cannot sit in the audience and witness the characters' laughter, their fear, their anguish or their brutal murder, unmoved. We are involved in the action as observers of it, in real time and real space. In this way, a good play, well performed, can move an audience to fear, anguish, laughter or disgust and any number of other emotions.

When we read a play, therefore, we are receiving the playwright's form in a way he or she did not intend. If it is not possible to see the play performed, we have to fall back on what is left to us in order to interpret what may have been the writer's intentions. Characterisation, the language of the play and, of course, the stage directions (instructions from the playwright), can all provide us with clues and cues to inform possible interpretations.

In a play such as *The Duchess of Malfi*, however, there are very few stage directions and so we need to consider two points. First, an audience's interpretations of possible authorial intentions will vary widely

depending to a great degree on the way in which it has been produced (how it is staged and performed). Second, where the very few directions do appear, this could be a signal that they were considered of huge importance to the playwright, so we should consider the effect of these directions on audience response. It should be remembered that at the time *The Duchess of Malfi* was written and first performed, it was usual for the playwright either to direct the play himself or at least to collaborate with the director, so that it was unnecessary to write down directions. In the modern theatre, a play is seldom directed by the writer and so directions from the playwright sometimes extend to whole pages and more in order that his or her intentions are accurately conveyed by the actors performing.

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Overlap of form, structure and language

It is vital that you fully appreciate that the division of Assessment Objective 2 (AO2) into three separate elements — form, structure and language — can be overly simplistic. Of course, there are distinct differences between the three but, equally, they often work indivisibly.

For example: the *visual impact* (form of the play) in Act IV scene 1, of Ferdinand's handing the Duchess a severed hand, would be shocking in itself but is made to seem even more cruel when accompanied with the words, 'Here's a hand/To which you have vowed much love: the ring/upon't/You gave' (IV.1.43–44).

Accompanied by these words, the Duchess will of course believe the hand to be that of her twin brother, Ferdinand himself, offered in a spirit of loving reconciliation.

**I will leave this ring with you for a love token,
And the hand, as sure as the ring and do not doubt
But you shall have the heart too. (IV.1.45–47)**

Here, as elsewhere in the play, the *language* and the *action* of the play work in conjunction with one another to convey a particular meaning to the audience. The audience will understand his double entendres as will the Duchess with hindsight, when he walks off leaving her holding the hand and then Bosola reveals to her the waxworks of Antonio and her children, appearing as if dead and states:

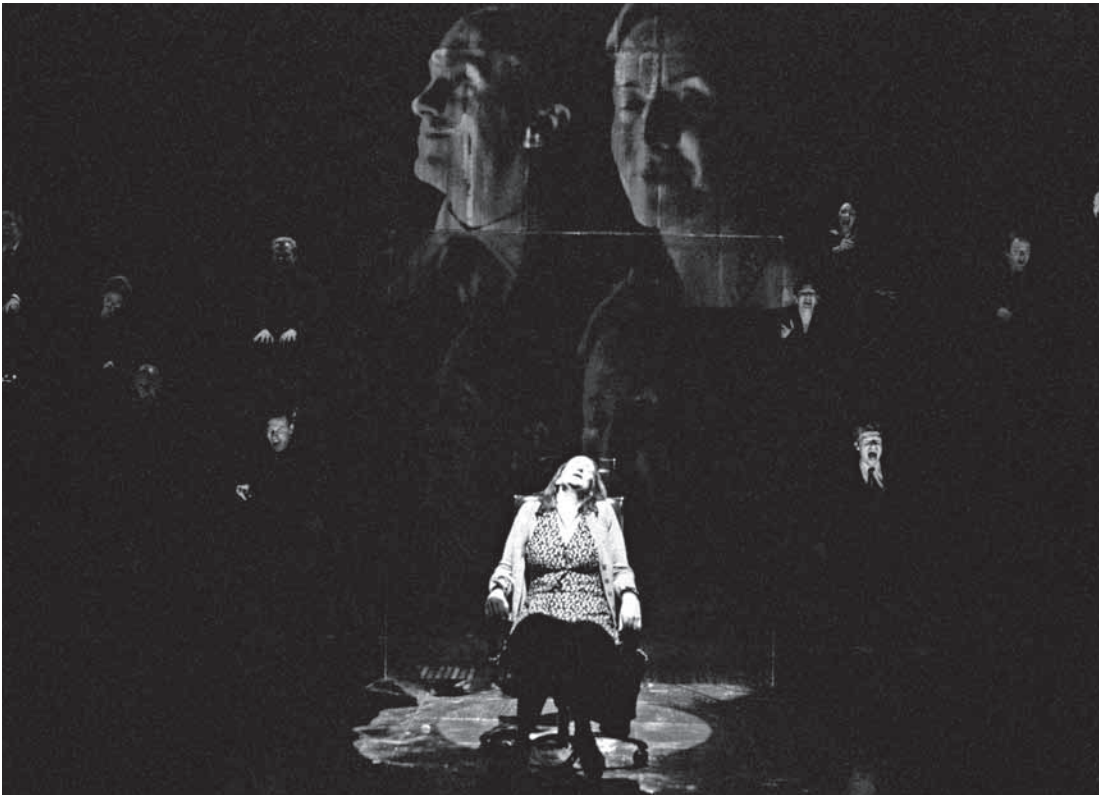
...here's the piece from which 'twas ta'en. (IV.1.55)

This has already been touched upon in the introduction to this section but, in simpler terms, your focus here should be on anything that occurs on stage that has a sensory impact on the audience that, in turn,



illustrates, underlines, highlights or reinforces an idea that Webster or subsequent producers of the play may be inviting the audience to consider. There are many parts of this play that producers over the years have staged in a variety of ways to emphasise their own interpretations of Webster's original. The language remains the same, but the stage set, the ways the actors deliver their lines, their accompanying actions, the lighting, music and props are varied to create effects evocative of a particular response from the audience. Some examples might include:

- the use of lighting and props in the scene where Ferdinand fools the Duchess into believing a dismembered hand to be his own, held out in a spirit of reconciliation (Act IV scene 1)
- the staging of the waxworks scene (Act IV scene 1)
- the staging of the madmen scene (Act IV scene 2)
- the tension created by the audience's witnessing the juxtaposed graphic strangulation of the Duchess and Cariola on stage and the very different manners in which they meet their deaths (Act IV scene 2)



Ivan Kymel/ARENAPAL

The madmen scene from the 2003 National Theatre production, where the madmen were replaced with a video of what was in the Duchess's mind. The scene was '...a sensual assault in terms of loud noise and changes of gear. We were looking at what might be her fears — her nightmares...' (Phyllida Lloyd, Director)

Structure

The Duchess of Malfi has often been criticised for its apparently ‘random’ structure, and for its collapse into anti-climax after the Duchess’s death. Perhaps an alternative view of the play’s structure might emerge if we forgot about its title. Reflecting on her performance as the Duchess in the 1989 RSC production, Harriet Walter concluded that the play is not actually the tragedy of the Duchess of Malfi, but of Bosola, ‘a kind of Everyman, who undermines his own capacity for good through cynicism, and comes to enlightenment too late. It is his story...that must arouse our pity, terror and moral anger’. Perhaps, therefore, if the play were titled *Daniel de Bosola*, or *The Malcontent*, its structure might be less often criticised. However, although the Duchess dies before the long final act of the play, the action still revolves around her life and her death even if Bosola has become the chief protagonist.

When we talk about the structure of a play, we mean the manner in which it has been constructed. In fact, a careful study of the structure of *The Duchess of Malfi* shows that its structure is anything but ‘random’. For example:

- The very first scene of the play opens with speeches from Antonio focusing on ideas of poison, poor rule, sycophancy and disaffected members of this society, all key themes of the play. It is not a coincidence: Webster is flagging up to his audience what the play is going to be about. These are the ideas that we are going to see repeated in various ways, throughout the play.
- Also consider that in this first scene we either meet, or hear about through the voice of Antonio, all the central characters in the story.
- Another example might be the timing of the entrance of Bosola in Act I scene 1, occurring directly after Antonio’s speech detailing at once the virtues of the French court and the dangers of a corrupt one through the metaphor of the ‘**fountain**’ poisoned ‘**near the head**’. Antonio’s words about things that ought to be foreseen as obvious consequences of a corrupt state are followed on the same line with ‘**Here comes Bosola,**’ who then enters, followed up immediately with the words, ‘**The only court-gall.**’
- This entrance is then followed up quickly by the entrance of the Cardinal, the most powerful and the most corrupt character in the play, directly on the heels of Antonio’s comment that, though Bosola complains bitterly of the corruption of the court, he would be ‘as lecherous, covetous, or proud,/Bloody, or envious, as any man,/If he

Task 8

Note in these examples how quotation is embedded to illustrate the point being made. This is a high order skill that comes within the scope of both AO1 and AO2. The first two examples of this are in bold. How many others can you find in this bullet list?

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Pause for Thought

How do Bosola’s entrance and Antonio’s comment work together to suggest that the government is less effective than that of France?



had means to be so.' The juxtaposing of the words 'If he had means to be so' and 'Here's the Cardinal' clearly signals to the audience a connection between these two characters. They might well wonder at this point whether the Cardinal could be the person who has the power to provide Bosola with these very 'means'.

- Think about how the abortive affair between Julia and Bosola parodies the love story of the Duchess and Antonio: Julia too woos and 'wins' Bosola, but here it is a matter of pure and unabashed lust where Julia states: 'I am wanton; this nice modesty in ladies/Is but a troublesome familiar/That haunts them' (V.2.164–66). This contrasts with the Duchess's bashful confession of her love for Antonio: 'Oh, let me shroud my blushes in your bosom' (I.1.490). Bosola's response is to accept her advances, as Antonio accepts those of the Duchess, but his purpose, we learn in an aside, is to 'work upon' Julia whom he calls a 'creature' to help him gain information from her other lover, the Cardinal (V.2.178). These events all mirror in parody much of the first half of the play, offering a clear contrast between the motives and actions of both 'sets' of characters: the well intentioned and the entirely self-motivated ironically showing the outcome to be the same for all and bearing out the idea introduced in the opening speech of the play — corruption at the 'head' of the fountain, will shower down on all equally, regardless of who they are or what they represent.
- We also need to consider how the play ends. Why does Webster choose to end his play with two members of the nobility agreeing that they should 'join all [their] force' to 'make *noble* use of this great ruin' (V.5.109–10)?

Task 9

Find two other examples of where the timing or juxtaposing of events works hand in hand with the language of the play to help to underline one of Webster's themes.

Top ten quotation >

Language

You have already seen some examples of how language often works together with structural devices, but also consider, for example, what might be the significance of the following language uses:

- Ferdinand speaking in disjointed prose in the scenes where he is clearly losing control of his emotional and mental faculties, when blank verse is the usual form for characters of a high societal rank:

The pain's nothing: pain, many times, is taken away with the apprehension of greater — as the tooth-ache with the sight of a barber that comes to pull it out. (V.5.58–60)

- the Duchess's and Antonio's often beautifully blended poetic verses and what this says about the nature of their union:

ANTONIO: And may our sweet affections, like the spheres,
Be still in motion —

DUCHESS: Quick'ning, and make
The like soft music —

ANTONIO: That we may imitate the loving palms,
Best emblems of a peaceful marriage,
That ne'er bore fruit divided. (I.1.472–76)

- the imagery that laces the play, highlighting the themes of poison, of disguise and hypocrisy and of the perversion of nature's laws by the ruling aristocratic class:

**Thou dost blanch mischief,
Wouldst make it white. See, see, like to calm weather
At sea before a tempest, false hearts speak fair
To those they intend most mischief.
(The Duchess to Bosola, III.5.23–26)**

**What devil art thou that counterfeits heaven's thunder?
(The Duchess to Bosola, III.5.98)**

- the eerie echo scene (Act V scene 3)
- and the poignant double entendres of the parting speeches between the Duchess and Antonio (Act III scene 2):

DUCHESS: I would have this man be an example to you all,
So shall you hold my favour. (III.2.187–88)

ANTONIO: I am all yours: and 'tis very fit
All mine should be so. (III.2.205–06)

More information on verse and prose, and on imagery, is provided as downloads on the website.

Form, structure and language, and interpretation

Different uses of form, structure and language can inform our interpretation of what a writer is saying. The models of writing below aim to illustrate to you how to write effectively about some of the ways in which the form, structure and language of the play work, often together, to shape our understanding of Webster's themes.

Task 10

Search for further examples of imagery that highlight Webster's themes. You might work in groups and allocate one act of the play to each group. Each group might make a poster of two or three such instances for presentation to the others.

Task 11

What is the point of all of the imagery about disguise in the play? Think how you might approach this question in an exam.

Model 1: form (and language)

The Duchess's wooing of Antonio in Act I scene 1 provides a perfect example of how the form of a play enables a writer to blend together language and action to shape the meaning an audience may receive. Here, the language used by the characters makes it impossible for us to ignore the fact that Antonio would never have succeeded in rising thus high if not for being lifted into that sphere. He himself states:

**Ambition, madam, is a great man's madness...
...but he's a fool
That being a-cold would thrust his hands i'th'fire
To warm them. (I.1.411-19)**

Webster's use of metaphor here shows that he, as well as she, knows that what they are doing is against the rules of their society and as dangerous as thrusting one's hand into a fire.

In another beautifully appropriate metaphor, Webster highlights the notion of a social ceiling, set low for commoners and above which commoners could not hope to aspire. The Duchess has told him:

**Sir,
This goodly roof of yours is too low built,
I cannot stand upright in't...
Without I raise it higher. Raise yourself...**

but then adds,

Or if you please, my hand to help you: so. (I.1.408-11)

Model 2: structure (and language)

The order in which the dialogue in this part of the play unfolds is also important in illustrating just how far this society would view her marriage as an abomination. First, both Ferdinand and the Cardinal make it clear that they do not want her to marry again at all, let alone choose for herself out of personal desires, which they term 'lust'. The Cardinal, always shown as more astute than his brother, hints that she 'may flatter [her]self' and 'take [her] own choice' (I.1.309-10), but Ferdinand adds as a thinly veiled warning 'Such weddings may more properly be said/To be executed than celebrated' (I.1.315-16). These words are followed up by a significant action (dealing here with form also): Ferdinand's showing of his father's poniard with the words 'I'd be loath to see't look rusty' are clearly a threat should she choose to

Top ten quotation >

disobey them (I.1.324). It could be interpreted as 'rusty' with her blood that he would 'be loath' to spill, but would if necessary, or an expression of his eagerness to prevent his father's dagger becoming 'rusty' with lack of use, implying that he is very ready to find an excuse to use it. This part of the play is also open to different interpretations, depending largely upon the degree to which the Duchess is shown to respond to his comment and accompanying action with fear, or with contempt. For example, in the 1995/6 Cheek by Jowl production of the play, the Duchess smacked Ferdinand's face, grabbed the dagger and threw it back at him, by contrast with the National Theatre production of 2003 where Janet McTeer looked fearful, but shrugged it off as if she had seen him do this before and held herself together. However, that she has understood that her brothers are in earnest is absolutely clear when she states in the following soliloquy:

**So I, through frights and threat'nings will assay
This dangerous venture. (I.1.339–40)**

What might Webster's purpose be in introducing through Antonio that the Duchess's 'days are practised in...noble virtue' and that the way she looks at men quells all 'lascivious and vain' hopes they might harbour for her (I.1) before her brothers suggest that she is lustful and hypocritical?

- What would be the effect on the audience if this order of presentation were reversed?
- Or what if we were to see Julia's brash seduction of Bosola before the Duchess's coy wooing of Antonio?

In addressing these and other such issues regarding the structure of the play, we may begin to access many of Webster's possible meanings.

See also the sample essays on the website and in *Working with the text* later in this guide.

Pause for Thought



Does what we hear about characters before they appear on the stage predispose us in their favour or disfavour when we do see and hear from them directly? Why might Webster wish to do this?

Task 12

The dumb show and the short commentary of the two pilgrims in Act 3 scene 4 are often cut from modern productions. What is lost if they are omitted? Think how you would approach this question.