

**STUDY
REVISE** **AND**
for AS/A-level

The Duchess of Malfi

by John Webster

- ▶ Written by experienced teachers and examiners
- ▶ Learn how to respond critically to your text
- ▶ In-depth analysis of all aspects of the text

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Using this guide



Why read this guide?

The purposes of this A-level Literature Guide are to enable you to organise your thoughts and responses to the text, to deepen your understanding of key features and aspects, and to help you address the particular requirements of examination questions and non-exam assessment (coursework) tasks in order to obtain the best possible grade. It will also prove useful to those of you writing an NEA piece on the text as it provides a number of summaries, lists, analyses and references to help with the content and construction of the assignment.

Note that teachers and examiners are seeking above all else evidence of an *informed personal response to the text*. A guide such as this can help you to understand the text and form your own opinions, and it can suggest areas to think about – but it cannot replace your own ideas and responses as an informed and autonomous reader.

How to make the most of this guide

You may find it useful to read sections of this guide when you need them, rather than reading it through from start to finish. For example, you may find it helpful to read the 'Contexts' section before you start reading the text, or to read the 'Scene summaries and commentaries' section in conjunction with the text – whether to back up your first reading of it at school or college or to help you revise. The sections relating to the Assessment Objectives will be especially useful in the weeks leading up to the exam.

Key elements

This guide is designed to help you raise your achievement in your examination response to *The Duchess of Malfi*. It is intended for you to use throughout your AS/A-level English literature course. It will help you when you are studying the play for the first time and also during your revision.

The following features have been used throughout this guide to help you focus your understanding of the play:

Context

Context boxes give contextual evidence that relates directly to particular aspects of the text.

Build critical skills

Broaden your thinking about the text by answering the questions in the **Build critical skills** boxes. These help you to consider your own opinions in order to develop your skills of criticism and analysis.

Taking it further ►►

Taking it further boxes suggest and provide further background or illuminating parallels to the text.

CRITICAL VIEW

Critical view boxes highlight a particular critical viewpoint that is relevant to an aspect of the main text. This allows you to develop the higher-level skills needed to come up with your own interpretation of a text.

TASK

Tasks are short and focused. They allow you to engage directly with a particular aspect of the text.

Top ten quotation

A cross-reference to **Top ten quotations** (see p. 90 of this guide), where each quotation is accompanied by a commentary that shows why it is important.

Top ten quotation



Writer's methods: Form, structure and language

Target your thinking

- How does Webster develop his themes, settings and characters as the dramatic action unfolds? (AO1)
- What dramatic methods does Webster use to shape the audience's responses at crucial points in the play? (AO2)

Form

Principally, a play is written to be performed; it is meant to be a spectacle. A performance is far more direct and multisensory than when we simply read the script. Theatre audiences are meant to be exposed to the presence of professional actors who have a mastery of dialogue, expression, gesture and movement. In addition, there is the enthralling impact of costume, scenery, lighting, sudden plunges into darkness, music and the additional psychological dimension of being part of a group dynamic. If it is not possible to see the play performed exactly as the author originally intended, as is the case with any Jacobean drama, then readers have to fall back on the script because that is what is left to them. Characterisation, action, settings, the language of the play and, of course, the stage directions can all provide us with clues to inform possible interpretations.

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, there are fewer stage directions than we would find in a modern drama; this was the norm for play scripts from this period. As a consequence, this leaves considerable scope for a director (and a modern editor!) to interpret how best to convey the play. Having said that, there are still many clear indications within the script as to how Webster wished particular scenes to be staged, and this could be part of your focus when responding to an examination question regarding Webster's intentions.

Thus, you might consider elements such as:

- ▼ The impact of the entrances and exits, such as in Act III scene 2 when Antonio comes out of hiding holding a pistol only *after* Ferdinand has disappeared, which makes him appear distinctly unheroic. Similarly, the impact of Bosola's sudden entrance in Act V scene 5 immediately after the Cardinal has related his terrifying vision of seeing 'a thing armed with a rake / That seems to strike at me' (V.5), the effect of which is clearly to create excitement by dramatically foreshadowing forthcoming events.
- ▼ The use of other stage directions, such as the explicit instruction regarding the use of light and darkness in Act IV scene 1 when Ferdinand deceives his sister with the severed hand. The impact of this is to contribute to the sense

Context

In the 1623 first published edition of the play, the names of all participating characters were grouped at the beginning of each scene and so modern editors have had to locate exits and entrances at points that seem most appropriate to them.

of hopeless gloom, create suspense, make Ferdinand's deception credible, and create empathy and pathos for the Duchess by simultaneously shocking the audience with the sudden exposure of the horrifying hand.

- ▼ The use of props such as the waxworks, which is clearly indicated in the stage direction in Act IV scene 1: 'Here is discovered behind a traverse the artificial figures of ANTONIO and his children, appearing as if they were dead'. This is clearly visually electrifying and simultaneously contributes considerable impact to the overwhelming sense of evil that pervades the latter part of the play.

You might also consider the impact of the dramatic features that were an integral part of theatre at the time when Webster was writing:

Context

A dumb show is a mimed dramatic performance and they were extensively used in medieval and Renaissance drama. One of their main functions was to present details necessary to the development of the play's main action in as economical a manner as possible.

- ▼ The dumb show in Act III scene 4, in which the Cardinal is invested with his new military status and the Duchess, Antonio and their children are banished, for which Webster has provided fairly detailed stage directions. The overall effect is to convey with considerable theatrical force the great increase in the Cardinal's power, thus making the Duchess' sudden fall seem even more perilous.
- ▼ The 'ditty ... sung to very solemn music, by divers churchmen' during the above ceremony, which 'the author disclaims'. It nevertheless has a considerable impact on the audience as it overwhelms their auditory sense with rapturous praise for the Cardinal in his new role as warrior general, yet again emphasising the comparative weakness and extreme vulnerability of the now-powerless Duchess and her family.
- ▼ The song set to 'a dismal kind of music' in Act IV scene 2, which produces an appropriately brooding atmosphere through its both sonic and lyrical discordancy. This foreshadows Ferdinand's total mental collapse into lycanthropia with its opening line, 'Oh let us howl'.
- ▼ The antimasque of the madmen in the same scene, which is intended to introduce some appropriately grim comic relief so as to provide a brief respite from the tension. This may also symbolically represent the general 'madness' and chaos of such a badly managed society, and the consequent immense frustrations of the emergent middle class, as is suggested by the fact that such key social figures as a lawyer, a priest, a doctor and an astrologist are included in the line-up.

Above all, the essential ingredient of great drama is conflict, so when studying the play script look out for the many conflicts that Webster has deliberately created in order to generate the suspense necessary for carrying his audience through to the denouement.

Renaissance versus medieval drama

From the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, Classical humanism became an unstoppable intellectual force throughout Western Europe. This period has become known as the Renaissance and one of its presiding characteristics was

a revival of interest in the cultures of Ancient Greece and Rome. This resulted in a revolution in thought and ushered in great advances in such areas as science, technology, philosophy, literature, architecture and art. There was also considerable expansion in business, commerce and international exploration.

By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when Webster and Shakespeare were writing, a new type of drama had been established. This was clearly influenced by Classical models and was significantly more sophisticated than the medieval plays that had preceded it. Ten of the major developments include:

- ▼ An overall structure that is clearly influenced by the great dramatists of Ancient Greece and Rome, especially Seneca.
- ▼ Much longer and infinitely more complex plays, often with highly sophisticated use of subplot or double plot.
- ▼ A shift of focus from a theocentric universe to one in which mankind literally takes centre stage. Thus, for example, the tension between good and evil becomes a driving force in human psychology rather than primarily a supernatural encounter.
- ▼ A presentation of a world in which God's order is often much less apparent than had been the case in medieval drama.
- ▼ A consequent focus on man's capacity for creating chaos and upon the survivors' struggle to restore order.
- ▼ An exploration of relationships between individuals, and between individuals and society, rather than just between man and God.
- ▼ A much greater emphasis on secular themes such as society, politics, money, romance and human sexuality, although religion still remained an extremely important element.
- ▼ A focus on universal human problems, which makes Renaissance drama still so relevant today, especially the exploration of the tension between desire and moral or social responsibility.
- ▼ Fully realised characters with extremely sophisticated psychology, as opposed to the two-dimensional characters of medieval drama who might, for example, simply represent a single vice or virtue.
- ▼ An emphasis on providing entertainment rather than just religious or moral instruction.

There were also, linked to these, certain practical developments: the rise of professional acting companies; the emergence of writers with shareholders and financial backers; the construction of purpose-built theatres; the rise of a mass audience drawn from all social strata.

When considering the form, structure and language of the plays written during this period, you should recognise that without the Renaissance this exciting and incredibly sophisticated new form of drama could not have arisen.

TASK

Discuss the ways in which Webster's play meets the criteria in this list.

Taking it further ►

The Renaissance is a huge topic and its influence can still be felt today. You might wish to research it further online.

CRITICAL VIEW

'...the scenes of the madhouse ... and the interview between her and her brother, where he gives her the supposed dead hand of her husband ... exceed the just bounds of poetry and tragedy'

(William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth*, 1821).

Aristotelian Tragedy

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle (384_{BCE}–322_{BCE}) defined the two most important elements in tragedy as being plot and character, and explained that the purpose of tragedy was to provide catharsis. The audience would find healthful emotional release through observing 'incidents arousing pity and fear'. In order for this civilising psychological purge to take place, Aristotle argued that the hero should be 'a man who is highly renowned and prosperous, but one who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgement or frailty...'

Aristotle terms this 'hamartia'. The Duchess' hamartia is that she succumbs to a young woman's desire for romantic love and so places personal happiness above duty. This is much more an error of judgement than a serious moral flaw. Aristotle writes that our 'pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves.' This 'unmerited misfortune', the tragedy, will arise out of the climactic interaction between the hero's hamartia and unkind circumstance dictated by fate (or the will of the gods).

TASK

Re-read the section on the Duchess in the 'Characters' chapter (p. 36) and make a list of how far she fulfils Aristotle's criteria.

Context

The influence of Classical drama during the Jacobean period can be discerned from the playwright John Ford's commendatory verse to the 1623 first published edition of *The Duchess of Malfi*: 'Crown him a poet, whom nor Rome, nor Greece, / Transcend in all theirs, for a masterpiece...'

Context

Seneca: his tenne tragedies, translated into English was published in 1581, although translations of Seneca's work had appeared before this.

The influence of Seneca

Webster's characterisation of the Duchess very accurately conforms to Aristotle's definition (see above), in that she deserves so much better than she receives and she is so recognisably human. Most critics, however, agree that Webster and the other dramatists of the period were more directly influenced by tragedies written nearly four centuries after Aristotle, by the Roman dramatist Seneca (4_{BCE}–AD65). In 1589, the playwright, poet and pamphleteer Thomas Nash observed: 'yet English Seneca read by candle light yeeldes manie good sentences ... he will affoord you whole Hamlets, I should say handfulls of tragical speeches.' Webster even reveals his own familiarity with Seneca when he has Bosola declare near the beginning of the play, 'What creature ever fed worse than hoping Tantalus?' (I.1), Tantalus being the character who opens Seneca's classic revenge drama, *Thyestes*.

Most critics believe that Seneca's tragedies are meant to be recited rather than performed. The characteristics of Senecan tragedy are:

- ▼ a division into five parts
- ▼ blank verse and much use of metaphorical language
- ▼ a chorus, which provides essential background information and which comments upon the action
- ▼ long reflective soliloquies
- ▼ sententious philosophy and moral maxims
- ▼ a morally indifferent universe
- ▼ stoicism and a sense of hopeless fatalism
- ▼ ghosts
- ▼ sexual transgression and obsessive desire
- ▼ detailed accounts of horror and violence
- ▼ revenge and deceit as central themes
- ▼ a bloody denouement.

Referring to the work of John Marston, Cyril Tourneur and Webster, L.G. Salingar remarks, 'like most drama of the time, it draws heavily from Seneca, by way of Kyd and his *Spanish Tragedy* (c.1589) – both Seneca the moral sage and Seneca the fabricator of ghastly revenges' ('Tourneur and the Tragedy of Revenge' in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Volume 2*, 1963). Although Seneca was plainly a great influence on Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, by adopting aspects of Seneca's style these dramatists were also clearly influencing each other. (For more on the key form of Jacobean revenge tragedy see pages 33–5 of this guide.)

Structure

The dramatic arc

When we talk about the structure of a play, we mean the manner in which it has been constructed. *The Duchess of Malfi* has often been criticised for its apparently 'random' structure and for its collapse into anti-climax after the Duchess' death. Webster's departure from the norm, however, could instead be regarded as both radical and courageous.

From the title, it is clear that the play's central character is meant to be the Duchess. There is the danger, though, that by having her killed in Act IV Webster deflects attention from her in his departure from the conventional use of the five-act structure. Although Webster and his contemporaries did not subdivide their dramas into five acts, this having been done by editors and publishers at a later date, they were conforming to a five-part structure originally advocated by the Roman poet and literary critic Horace (65–8BCE) in his *Ars Poetica*, which

TASK

Make a list of the ways in which Webster's play conforms to the Senecan model.



▲ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, or Seneca the Younger, c.4BCE–AD65

CRITICAL VIEW

The influential Scottish drama critic William Archer referred to *The Duchess of Malfi*'s 'ramshackle looseness of structure and barbarous violence of effect' (*The Old Drama and the New: An Essay in Re-valuation*, 1922).

CRITICAL VIEW

'In *The Duchess of Malfi* ... the heroine dies well before the end of the play so that the significance of her death can be explored...' (Professor Jacqueline Pearson, *Tragedy and Tragicomedy in the Plays of John Webster*, 1980).

went on to influence Seneca. The German author and literary critic Gustav Freytag (1816–95), having analysed Classical and Renaissance drama, noted a commonality of structure that did indeed break down into five distinctive phases. As a result, he developed a brilliant analytical tool that is sometimes referred to as the 'dramatic arc':

- ▼ **Exposition:** the main characters are introduced and any necessary background information is provided so as to set the scene for later events.
- ▼ **Rising action:** these are the events that occur after the exposition and, as a result of a complication or conflict, they create rising tension and so power the play through to its climax.
- ▼ **Climax (or crisis):** this is the main turning-point in the story, in which an event takes place that will drastically alter the protagonist's fate. In the case of tragedy, this will be the beginning of a catastrophic decline in the protagonist's fortunes.
- ▼ **Falling action:** the conflict between the protagonist and antagonist becomes fully exposed and at the end of the act, the ultimate outcome is still in doubt, hence generating a considerable degree of suspense.
- ▼ **Denouement (or catastrophe):** the conflict culminates and, in a tragedy, this generally results in the death of the hero or heroine and a great deal of fall-out for those around him/her.

It is artificial to apply the above formula too precisely to the division into acts of any Elizabethan or Jacobean play because those divisions were not created by the dramatists of the day. Nonetheless, these playwrights were educated men who were well versed in the ideas and writings of the ancients. Webster's play clearly does largely conform to Freytag's dramatic arc – but with the notable exception that the heroine dies at the end of Act IV, and not Act V!

So, does this add to or detract from the success of the play as a whole? Well, the Duchess' premature death certainly dominates the rest of the action. It generates enormous suspense and one can honestly say that the conflict set up in the falling action is not fully resolved until the audience's thirst to see justice done has been satisfied by the end of the play, at which point all of the Duchess' antagonists have gained exactly what they deserve.

Parallel scenes

Another interesting structural aspect of the play is Webster's use of parallel scenes. For example, the abortive affair between Julia and Bosola parodies the genuine love story of the Duchess and Antonio. Julia too woos and 'wins' Bosola, but here it is a matter of unabashed lust. As Julia states, 'Now you'll say / I am wanton; this nice modesty in ladies / Is but a troublesome familiar / That haunts them' (V.2). This contrasts with the Duchess' bashful confession

of her love for Antonio: 'Oh, let me shroud my blushes in your bosom' (I.1). Bosola's response is to accept Julia's advances, just as Antonio accepts those of the Duchess. Bosola's purpose, though, as we learn in an aside, is to 'work upon this creature' (V.2) to help him gain information from her other lover, the Cardinal. These events all mirror the earlier scene of the Duchess and Antonio, offering a clear contrast between pure, selfless love and the unbridled lust of the entirely self-motivated. Ironically, Webster shows the outcome to be the same for all, thus 'proving' the thesis introduced in the opening speech of the play that any corruption at the 'head' of the fountain will rain down destruction on all, regardless of whom they are or what they represent.

A second example of this technique of parallel scenes is when Webster has the Cardinal confine everyone to their room in Act V scene 4 so that he can conceal his murder of Julia and the intended murders of Antonio and Bosola. This mirrors Act II scene 2 where Antonio, acting on Delio's advice, has concocted a strategic lie in order to keep everyone in their chambers throughout the night so as to hide the Duchess' labour. Again, we are dealing with polar opposites, this time between birth and death.

As well as providing a satisfying aesthetic, such plotting creates a sense of déjà vu and thus reinforces the strong sense of fatalism within the play.

Horror and violence

Writing in 1898, George Bernard Shaw harshly condemns 'the opacity that prevented Webster, the Tussaud laureate, from appreciating his own stupidity...'. In his poem 'Whispers of Immortality', published in 1918, the year in which the brutal carnage of World War I finally ended, T.S. Eliot remarks: 'Webster was much possessed by death / And saw the skull beneath the skin'. Writing in 1924 in his essay 'Four Elizabethan Dramatists', however, Eliot is far more effusive about Webster's literary merit, if not about his vision: '*The Duchess of Malfi* will provide an interesting example of a very great literary and dramatic genius directed towards chaos.'

Extreme horror and violence are definitely aspects of Webster's style but they are also integral features in other classic 'revenge tragedies'. Rather than the crass sensationalism and cheap thrills that Shaw perceives, or the nihilistic disorder to which Eliot alludes, others see a deeply moral intent. According to this interpretation, Webster graphically displays human nature at its worst while simultaneously portraying the inevitably tragic outcome of such behaviour, both on the Earth plane and in the next. Aristocrat and English literature professor Lord David Cecil, for example, views Webster's drama as 'a study of the working of sin in the world' in the context of 'the supremacy of that Divine Law against which they have offended' (*Poets and Storytellers*, 1949).

Build critical skills

To what extent is the presentation of a world progressively spiralling into chaos an essential element of tragedy?

CRITICAL VIEW

'Though earnest critics have tried to present him as a Christian moralist, a proto-feminist and even a daring existentialist, what clearly turned Webster on was cruelty.' (Charles Spencer, theatre critic for *The Telegraph*, reviewing a 2003 production of the play at the National Theatre starring Janet McTeer).

CRITICAL VIEW

'If we present a tragedy we include the fatal and abortive ends of such as commit notorious murders ... to terrify men from like abhorred practices' (Thomas Heywood, *An Apology for Actors*, 1612).

Build critical skills

Consider whether great literature must always have a moral purpose. Must moral literature always have an unambiguous conclusion?

Build critical skills

Gamini Salgado refers to 'the revival of a medieval notion that the world was running down and civilisation on the brink of destruction' (*Three Jacobean Tragedies*, 1985). Do we see any evidence of this in Webster's play?

CRITICAL VIEW

'Life, as it appears to Webster, is a moral chaos. Ultimately no clarifying philosophy is possible.' (Travis Bogard, *The Tragic Satire of John Webster*, 1955).

CRITICAL VIEW

'In Webster's plays, salvation and damnation are ever-present realities.' (David Gunby, *John Webster: Three Plays*, 1972).

Black comedy

There is also the thorny issue of humour in the horror scenes. In terms of the plot, the function of the madmen in Act IV scene 2 is deadly serious. Here, Ferdinand's intention is to advance the destruction of his sister's sanity by depriving her of sleep: 'let them practise together, sing and dance / And act their gambols to the full o'th'moon' (IV.1). Webster may also, however, have designed their ludicrous ramblings to amuse, by tapping into the popular contemporary public pastime of seeking entertainment by observing the mentally ill inmates in London's Bethlem Royal Hospital ('Bedlam'). Of course, to a modern sensibility this is crass insensitivity.

Build critical skills

Travis Bogard appears to see Webster's worldview as nihilistic, i.e. that life is ultimately bleak and pointless, whereas David Gunby argues that Webster writes from a deeply Christian perspective in which life is a test of one's moral character. What do you think?

There are, though, aspects of Ferdinand's own insane antics that are genuinely comical even today, e.g. the Doctor's line that 'he howled fearfully; / Said he was a wolf, only the difference / Was, a wolf's skin was hairy on the outside, / His on the inside' (V.2). Equally humorous is the doctor's over-confident assertion that he will 'buffet his madness out of him', only then to be thrown to the ground and pummelled himself:

PESCARA. Doctor, he did not fear you throughly.

DOCTOR. True, I was somewhat too forward.

(V.2)

But as Dominic Dromgoole's four-hundred-year-anniversary 2014 production of the play at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, Shakespeare's Globe, proves, the audience reaction to some of the more extreme gruesomeness can be problematic. Writing for the *Times Higher Education* website, Liz Schafer's review of the performance includes the following observation:

The sometimes confrontational intimacy of the playhouse may be one reason why this Duchess of Malfi generated a lot of laughs. Waxworks, a dead man's hand, a reviving corpse, a poisonous book, lycanthropy and a pile of corpses – some aspects of The Duchess are always going to seem borderline Hammer House of Horror. But although some of the laughter arose from embarrassment and shock, laughter is itself under scrutiny in this play.

(www.timeshighereducation.com)

Webster definitely pushes the boundaries when dealing with such serious themes as murder and torture, but his was a society that made public spectacles out of such incredibly barbaric acts as beheading, burning at the stake and, worst of all, being hanged, drawn and quartered. In our society, the moral perspective is refined and our human rights are respected. If some of the audience laughs during these scenes then, as Liz Shaffer suggests, it may be out of discomfort or it may be because our reality is so different from Webster's that we are fortunate enough to regard the kind of excessive brutality that he depicts as primarily a vicarious cinematic experience rather than as a visceral everyday reality.

Language

Poetic language

In *The Age of Shakespeare* (1908), the eminent author and literary critic Algernon Charles Swinburne defines Webster's greatness as being the product of his sublime use of language. When commenting on the 'many poets in the age of Shakespeare', Swinburne declares that 'Mere literary power, mere poetic beauty ... was given – except by exceptional fits and starts – to none of the poets of their time but only to Shakespeare and to Webster.'

Webster's work undoubtedly is intensely poetic and thus resonates with numerous emotive and highly vivid imagery patterns. These are seamlessly woven into the fabric of the play and are, as with all true poetry, expressed in beautifully condensed language, thus enabling them to explode with multiple layers of meaning. A perfect example is when Antonio declares of the Duchess: 'She stains the time past, lights the time to come' (I.1). This image is as beautiful as it is complex. Editors generally read this as suggesting that the metaphorical luminosity of her physical and spiritual essence is so great that she eclipses the past and puts it into shade. The image is even more poetic, however, if read as signifying that she is pure white light, which shines radiantly into the future from the prism of the present and leaves a gorgeous rainbow spectrum of colour in its wake (see the Context box at the bottom of page 60). The Duchess continues to be associated with light throughout the rest of the play. On seeing her strangled body, Ferdinand declares 'Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle' (IV.2), and in her death scene Webster strongly suggests that she is going to heaven, which, of course, is resplendent in God's glory.

CRITICAL VIEW

Timothy Fox asks, 'is "the skull beneath the skin" the vision of a moralist or a purveyor of horror?' (*A Discussion of Morality and Horror in The Duchess of Malfi and Edward II*, 2002).

Build critical skills

Assuming that Webster is 'a moralist' rather than 'a purveyor of horror', Act IV needs very careful staging so that the horror achieves its intended purpose of portraying the terrifying excesses of tyranny. If the audience laughs, then is it a fault with the play, or with the players?

CRITICAL VIEW

'The Duchess of Malfi contains a network of imagery related to light and darkness ... There are a number of uses that this range of patterns serves, one being to illustrate character ... Significantly, the language of light surrounds the descriptions of the Duchess ... Ferdinand, by contrast, is cloaked in darkness.'
(Dr Farah Karim-Cooper)

Another facet of Webster's poetry, as L.G. Salingar notes, is that he 'is highly ingenious in the rendering of sensations...' ('Touneur and the Tragedy of Revenge' in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Volume 2*, 1963). Salingar's observation is related to Webster's depiction of physical sensation but it is equally valid for his presentation of emotional experience. This is perfectly exemplified in Act IV scene 2 when the Duchess declares, 'Th'heaven o'er my head seems made of molten brass, / The earth of flaming sulphur...' It is the intense physicality of these images of extreme heat and entrapment that enables Webster so vividly to portray the intensity of her despair.

(For more on Webster's poetry, see Extended commentary 2 on page 88 of this guide.)

Charnel house imagery

One of the more emotive of Webster's imagery patterns, as both George Bernard Shaw and T.S. Eliot note, reverberates with images of death and physical decay. Bosola provides many of the contributions to this motif. As he declares to the Old Lady, 'Though we are eaten up of lice, and worms, / And though continually we bear about us / A rotten and dead body, we delight / To hide it in rich tissue...' (II.1).

Context

Seneca, the first century Roman dramatist whose work greatly influenced the Renaissance 'revenge tragedy' genre, expressed a fascination with prisms in his *Natural Questions* when he referred to his observations of 'the dispersion of the sun's rays through glass...'

Context

In Jacobean society, the Sumptuary Laws reinforced notions of upper class superiority by dictating the quality of materials that could be used for the clothing worn by the various strata of society. Webster's reference to 'rich tissue' is a 'condensed' way of reminding his audience that even those at the top of the hierarchy are only mortal, and thus intrinsically the same as everybody else.

This theme is resumed in Bosola's vicious verbal attack on the Duchess after she has been imprisoned by her brothers: 'What's this flesh? A little crudded milk, fantastical puff paste: our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in – more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth worms' (IV.2). In what seems a dark parody of Shakespeare's famous 'What a piece of work is man!' speech (*Hamlet*, 1603), Webster does not allow Bosola to speculate on the noble and god-like qualities of man so extolled by Hamlet, but only on what Hamlet folornly referred to as 'this quintessence of dust'. But through 'This talk fit for a charnel' (IV.2), as the Duchess terms it, Webster advances the play's intensely moral dialectic. Firstly, as we are informed by

Antonio at the very outset, corrupt governance creates a corrupt society: **'but if 't chance / Some cursed example poison 't near the head, / Death and diseases through the whole land spread.'** Thus the language of physical decay is emblematic of a society in which moral corruption has become rampant.



Secondly, Webster uses 'charnel talk' to underscore the eternal truth stated in the Bible, that 'Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble' (Job 14:1). Thus Webster reminds his audience of man's essential mortality and, therefore, advances one of the major themes of the play, the meaninglessness of the ruthless pursuit of self-interest at the expense of one's immortal soul. As A.C. Swinburne triumphantly asserts, 'there is no poet morally nobler than Webster...' (*The Age of Shakespeare*, 1908).

Religious imagery

Politics and theology are closely linked in the moral landscape of the play and Webster reinforces his message through the use of semantic fields that reference the Bible. Thus in Antonio's opening speech, 'a judicious king' who rids himself of the 'flatt'ring sycophants' and other 'dissolute / And infamous persons', and who then replaces these with 'a most provident council' will have created 'a blessed government'. Webster must surely be referring to King James' own court here (see 'Contexts', p. 65).

The devil himself is not seen to be obviously at work within the play (unlike in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* or Shakespeare's *Macbeth*). Antonio's opening analysis, though, clearly suggests that a government not run according to the ideal cannot be 'blessed' and, therefore, it must perforce stand vulnerable and defenceless in the face of evil. The malevolent forces in the play, however, are not demons but men who are possessed by evil. Webster has Antonio say of the Cardinal's pronouncements that 'the devil speaks in them' (I.1), and towards the end of the play he has Malatesta say of Ferdinand "'Twas nothing but pure kindness in the devil, / To rock his own child' (V.4).

Through the use of yet another devil reference, Webster has Antonio highlight ambition, which is clearly one of the main impetuses to commit evil within the play. When the Duchess offers him her ring as she proposes to him, Antonio, being a virtuous man, immediately questions his own motives regarding such a dramatic rise in status: 'There is a saucy and ambitious devil / Is dancing in this circle' (I.1). Ambition is also what drives Bosola to oversee the brothers' evil and thus Webster similarly taints him, for example when the Duchess asks him 'What devil art thou that counterfeits heaven's thunder?' (III.5).

The Duchess, on the other hand, who rules a well-ordered court with Antonio's aid, is associated with goodness from beginning to end. In Antonio's initial eulogy of her, he extols her Christian virtue, stating 'her nights, nay more, her very sleeps,

Build critical skills

Is the play primarily 'directed towards chaos' as T.S. Eliot suggests, or is there clear evidence of God's providence as the governing force in human affairs?

Taking it further >

For an even-more-direct analysis of the toxic impact of 'vaulting ambition' on both self and society, read Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Act I scene 7.

/ Are more in heaven than other ladies' shrifts' (I.1). And at her death, Webster has the Duchess ask her executioners to 'pull down heaven upon me' (IV.2).

Aphorisms, parables and sententiae

In line with the Senecan model of tragedy, Webster further deepens the moral profundity of the play through the frequent introduction of wise sayings, which appear as aphorisms, parables and sententiae. Interestingly, he does not reserve these just for the use of characters with unquestionable moral stature.

Build critical skills

In your view, does the fact that Webster shares sententious wisdom with good and evil characters alike suggest insincerity on his part and thus undermine the credibility of the moral fabric of the play?

- ▼ An **aphorism** is a succinct statement that embodies an astute general truth, for example Castruchio says: 'It is fitting a soldier arise to be a prince, but not necessary a prince descend to be a captain!' (I.1).
- ▼ A **parable** is a short allegorical story that illustrates a moral or spiritual truth, for example the Duchess' dog-fish story at the end of Act III when countering Bosola's belligerent accusation that Antonio is a 'base, low fellow'.
- ▼ A **sententia** is very similar to an aphorism in that it is also a succinct saying that imparts a profound moral or philosophical truth. In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, sententiae often appear at the ends of scenes in rhymed couplets, for example Ferdinand's lines: 'That friend a great man's ruin strongly checks, / Who rails into his belief, all his defects' (III.1).

Prose versus blank verse

Many critics have noted that Webster often uses prose to frame Bosola's speeches, but exactly why he does this is uncertain. It might be to emphasise Bosola's lower status in society; or, as the other major characters generally speak in blank verse, it might be to set Bosola apart and so add a distinctive voice to his role as a satirical and extremely cynical commentator on events; or it might be because much of what he says was considered too coarse or too brutal for verse:

He and his brother are like plum trees that grow crooked over standing pools: they are rich, and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them. Could I be one of their flatt'ring panders, I would hang on their ears like a horse-leech till I were full, and then drop off.

(I.1)

Bosola's cynicism arises from the fact that he longs to be a beneficiary of the corruption that he affects to disdain. Bosola's prose, however, is far from prosaic because of Webster's rich use of metaphorical language. The image of the unhealthy stagnant pool beautifully contrasts with the free-flowing fountain simile through which Antonio characterises a well-run court at the beginning

of the play, and the animal imagery conjures up a powerful impression of a debased humanity. It should be remembered, though, that Webster does not confine the use of prose solely to Bosola and that Bosola also uses blank verse as well as occasional rhyming couplets.

Blank verse, which forms the majority of the dialogue, is verse that does not rhyme. It often has a definite metre, usually of iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is a pattern of five metric feet in which each metric foot consists of one short/unstressed syllable followed by one long/stressed syllable. It sounds rather like 'de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum'. In the example below, the first three lines are written in blank verse, but note the transition to a rhyming heroic couplet in order to emphasise the idea that is the play's main argument:

Consid'ring duly that a prince's court
 Is like a common fountain, whence should flow
 Pure silver drops in general, but if 't chance
 Some cursed example poison 't near the head,
 Death and diseases through the whole land spread.

(1.1)

In the above speech, the line lengths are regular as each one can be read so that there are exactly ten syllables, for example by shortening 'considering' to 'consid'ring' (as it has been spelt in the above quotation) and 'general' to 'gen'ral'. The final line, however, is a subtle departure from iambic pentameter as 'Death' is a heavily stressed syllable, and this unexpected break in the pattern enables the actor's delivery of the word to be even more emphatic.

It is the case, however, that much of the blank verse in the play is irregular and so cannot be made to conform to ten syllables per line. Passages of blank verse frequently consist of lines of clearly differing lengths, have irregular stresses and make great use of **enjambment** and **caesura**. Thus the boundary between blank verse and prose is often blurred. This has the effect of making the dialogue sound more conversational and naturalistic, thus enabling Webster to imbue his chilling tale with a shocking sense of realism. By the Jacobean period, Shakespeare and the other major dramatists of the age all used blank verse in this way.

Taking it further ▶

In order to appreciate how much more fluid and natural the use of blank verse had become by the Jacobean period, read the first few pages of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587), in which the use of blank verse is absolutely regular but also sounds rather artificial.

Top ten quotation

Enjambment: The continuation of a phrase or a clause beyond the end of a line of verse as opposed to end-stopping (concluding) the idea at the end of a line. Enjambment generally results in a medial caesura.

Caesura: A naturally occurring pause in a line of verse. A medial caesura falls in the middle of a line.