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DUCHESS OF MALFI

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

This course forms a part of the many core courses devoted to the development of English Literature through the ages. The 17th and 18th centuries encompass three major chunks in British Literary History: The Renaissance - or really, the end of it. The early 17th century is also known as the 'Jacobean era' in England. The Caroline and Restoration periods filled up the latter half of the 17th century. The first half of the 18th century is also known as the 'Augustan Era' or The Age of Reason. This course will offer a study of Milton, Webster, Pope and Dryden.

The Course BEGC -107, British Poetry & Drama: 17th & 18th Centuries is divided into four blocks.

Block I: John Webster: *The Duchess of Malfi*

Block II: John Milton: *Lycidas*, *Sonnet XIX*, *L' Allegro*, *II Penseroso*

Block III: John Dryden: *Mac Flecknoe*

Block IV: Alexander Pope: *The Rape of the Lock*



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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Study of the play *Duchess of Malfi*.

Analysts of British Drama have explored the source material for *The Duchess of Malfi* and the play's reception over the last 200 years, and have come out with the opinion that Webster uses the tragedy to offer a vision of human existence as chaotic and unstable. In this block, we try to offer you a complete view of this drama/Play through four units.

The first unit is designed in such a way to offer a brief introduction to Jacobean Drama and offer insights on major phases in John Webster's dramatic career and literary landmarks in Webster's biography so that his achievements as a dramatist can be examined against the background of his time and various influences governing it.

In the second unit, an attempt has been made to (1) understand the underpinnings of John Webster's concept of tragedy, (2) his contribution to the tradition of 'revenge plays', (3) identify the dominant tendencies of his age, (4) critically analyze the factors that lead to decline of drama during his age.

In Unit three, we will be analysing the play *The Duchess of Malfi* from a critical point of view. We will begin with a brief explanation on how to read the play by discussing John Webster's skill in plot- construction and the sources, setting and themes of the play. This will help us in understanding the play and appreciate its dramatic appeal. This will be followed by a brief summary of the play. In addition to this, we will also discuss John Webster's art of characterization.

The last Unit of the block is aimed at providing a deeper understanding of the play by analysing the major characters and their function in the play that allows us to critically examine issues pertaining to gender, nobility, abuse of power and prevailing corruption. Finally, we will end with a few questions, which will help us to encapsulate what we have studied so far.

In an oft-quoted line, T S Eliot said that Webster was 'much possessed by death'. But *The Duchess of Malfi*, like *The White Devil*, is much more than a procession of morbid horrors. You will be able to acquire complete understanding of all the myriad facets of the important drama.

Enjoy reading the play to begin with followed by all the units.

UNIT 1 THE JACOBEOAN DRAMA AND JOHN WEBSTER: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Influences on Jacobean Drama
- 1.3 A Brief History of English Drama and Tragedy Before Webster
 - 1.3.1 Medieval and Marlowian Tragedy
 - 1.3.2 The Senecan or Horror Tragedy
 - 1.3.3 Shakespearean Tragedy
- 1.4 John Webster: A Short Biography
 - 1.4.1 Literary Achievements of John Webster, his Age and Influences
- 1.5 John Webster and his Works
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

Our primary objective in this unit is to offer a brief introduction to Jacobean Drama and offer insights on major phases in John Webster's dramatic career and literary landmarks in Webster's biography so that his achievements as a dramatist can be examined against the background of his time and various influences governing it.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

John Webster (1580-1632) is associated with the age of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) and that of James I (1603-1625). England produced a number of poets and dramatists, uniquely, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) who could be unmatched by any of those who were the product of the Jacobean period. Webster who was born in the Elizabethan age, but his literary career ostensibly began and ended during the period when James I had been ruling over England. The age of John Webster can be called-the age of transition because it constitutes the last decade of the 16th century and early decades of the 17th century. The Renaissance urge had fatigued itself, the Elizabethan frolic for life had disappeared, and the Elizabethan spry and hood had been succeeded by a mood of vexation, disappointment and defeat. The literature of any age cannot remain unstirred by political condition of that specific timescale. **R.Sundra Raju** says, "The mood and the tone of Jacobean drama were to a great extent influenced by the political situation in England during the first quarter of the seventeenth century. The glamour of the spacious times of Queen Elizabeth was over nearly a decade before the great Queen's death end a nervous feeling of political uncertainty and a vague feeling of apprehension of a possible civil war over succession gradually took the place of joyous contentment in the minds of the people. There seemed to be a large number

of contenders for the English crown: James of Scotland, Lady Arbella Stuart, The Infanta of Spain and certain English nobles of royal blood.” In 1602, it was considered that James I’s - the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and Lord Darnley, and the great grandson of Margaret, daughter of Henry VII claim to produce himself as probable heir was stronger than anyone else and his claim was based upon the right of descent. By his elevation, the Crowns of England and Scotland were united under one king.

Being ruled by unworthy favorites, well-read and shrewd James I gained the title of the “Wisest fool in Christendom.” Therefore, during his reign, the Court of England lost all its traditional dignity. State business was a secondary business to the king, the primary being hunting. His wife had no love for her husband. By nature, she was profligate and spent a lot of money on mirth. She was a Catholic. Because of his unpleasant tastes, ways of living and policies, James I had to face many problems and plots. First unsuccessful conspiracy to depose James was hatched by Lord Cobham in 1603. Second unsuccessful conspiracy, in order to force James to grant religious toleration to the Catholics was formed by Weston, a Roman Catholic priest. Third unsuccessful gun-powder conspiracy to blow up the King and Parliament together was planned by the Catholics, Robert Cates and Guy Fawkes in 1605. This resulted in the framing of more severe laws against the Catholics and the people in the country started feeling themselves more and more quondary and mystifying. These constant conspiracies against the king created differences between him and the religious circles and the wise Elizabethan religious ties broke down. His continuous ignorance of the English tongue and the consequent failure to communicate with people, his uncouth appearance and awkward manners, his theory of the Divine Right of kings advanced as a justification of his despotic rule, and the fact that his queen was a catholic, all contributed to his unpopularity and the antagonism of the people. In this connection **G. B. Harrison** observes: “Sober observers were disgusted by the blatant scrambling for the many offices and emoluments which were now vacant. Court officials took bribes to introduce dubious candidates for the knighthoods so lavishly bestowed. In his first year the King knighted more than nine hundred, and it was a court joke that an usher had pushed aside the Knights to make room for gentlemen”.

Neither the Puritans nor the Roman Catholics were favoured by the king. In fact, he attested his faith in Episcopacy, i.e., government of the Church by bishops because of his firm belief in the motto- “No bishops, no kings”, if Episcopacy was overthrown, the monarchy would be endangered. It might be his doubt that a democratic Church might pave the way for a democratic State therefore he did not like ‘the Presbyterian’, democratic in character, form of religion. The critical temper of the age is reflected in its almost all the forms of literature-prose, poetry and drama.

1.2 INFLUENCES ON JACOBAN DRAMA

In ‘The Cambridge History of English Literature’, **G.C. Macaulay** writes, ‘The court of James I had lost the chivalrous aspirations of the earlier time and the moral corruption which had been held in check, atleast to some extent, by noble ideals had become alarmingly prominent in the life of the upper classes of society. Shallowness and frivolity characterized the manners of the court, even where

these were not tinged with gross vices, and a certain superficial brilliancy had taken the place of more estimable qualities.

In the Jacobean age, the literary condition shows a curious complexity and diversity. A number of writers like Bacon, Shakespeare, Daniel and others although belonging to the age of Queen Elizabeth, continued to produce works even during the following period of James I. The coming generation of writers was bound to be influenced by the great masters like Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Drayton, of the preceding age. In the hands of Shakespeare, English tragedy had touched its zenith of perfection and excellence, but after making resounding success, drama had reached its verge of decline in the seventeenth century. With the advent of Webster on the literary scene this languishing form got a new ray of hope and life.

Seneca and Machiavelli are the names who influenced the drama of this age. The Italian philosopher and dramatist Seneca greatly influenced Webster in Nero's time. Webster and his contemporaries found the Senecan theme of revenge most exciting and catchy for their works. For the early Elizabethan tragedians like Kyd, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, it was Seneca who provided the model. Seneca's plays were mostly based on Greek mythological stories and also, exhibited much of the formal characteristics of Greek drama. However, the tone and spirit of his plays were entirely different from Greek plays. In his plays "human motive of revenge" took the place of the "overmastering fate". Barbaric and reprisal actions were reported in stylistic and moralizing speeches.

In England with the publication of the English translations of Seneca's plays from 1559 to 1581, dramatists started writing on the theme of revenge. In imitation of Senecan tragedy Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton produced *Gorboduc* (1561), first English tragedy. On the same theme Kyd wrote *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587) and Marlowe produced *The Jew of Malta* (1590) and after these two, Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (1599) projected the theme of 'Revenge' a philosophical grandeur. This tradition of revenge was later on followed by Chapman in *Bussy D'Ambois* (1603), by Tourneur in *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607), and by Webster in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Another influence on the Jacobean drama was that of Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), widely read but its teachings were largely misunderstood. He was understood to provide a materialistic and satanic interpretation of the world order. This advice of Machiavelli led the Jacobean dramatists, particularly Webster, to create characters highly manipulative and intriguing. *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* abound in such characters. The invasion of the old cosmology by the new philosophy brought a sense of disorder and decay. It was an age of transition in which the old order collided with the new, and Webster was virtually suspended between two worlds, the old world of decay, and the new world of progress. Webster's writings tried to search for a new moral system, for a new set of values and ideals to replace the old and crumbling ones. He was unable to give any answer to the baffling problems of life and life after death but he was quite certain that he regards the Supreme Power, a power which cannot endure evil for any length of time that finally expels evil, though at the cost of much that is good. On speaking of Webster's morality and vision of life, David Cecil writes, 'Such then is Webster's tragic vision of the world: a fallen place in which suffering outweighs happiness and all activities are tainted with sin; where evil is the controlling force, and good- just because it is good-is inevitably quietest; hoping

at best all with luck, to slip through the tempest of existence, unnoticed. Yet it is also a place where the moral law cannot be thwarted indefinitely. So that finally evil destroys itself; justice is vindicated,

Let guilty men remember their black deeds,

Do lean on crutches made of slender reeds.

In this, the final couplet of *The White Devil*, Webster, states the moral truth which the whole preceding drama has been designed to illustrate. In the end virtue is glorified, but only beyond death.'

The result, of the collision of these two worlds was the major change in in the university curriculum. The study of Astronomy, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and other Sciences replaced the study of logic, rhetoric and theology etc. This is so much so the case that it has become natural to speak of, 'the two worlds' of Webster, one is the fragmented medieval world of Scholastic 'Philosophy, Science and Metaphysics' and other is the rising world of the New Philosophy. Faith in the older world-order was thus shaken, but a new and more stable order had not yet developed. Man was literally caught between 'two worlds'. Such uncertainty gave birth to distressed, phobia and anxiety among the people. **Una Ellis Fermor** says, 'Webster brings passionate curiosity to a consideration of these questions and it is for this reason that he concentrates upon the moments of high crisis and sufferings, most of all upon the moments of death. He brings his characters to the verge of death and holds them there, suspended, subject to his questioning.'

1.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH DRAMA AND TRAGEDY BEFORE WEBSTER

From the eleventh century, not only the English Drama, but also Dramas of other nations as well were deep-seated/entrenched in the religious/reverent proneness of mankind. Even the ancient Greek and Roman dramas were mostly worried with religious ceremonials of people. The earliest dramatic portrayal in England is believed to have been the performance of a Latin play in honour of St. Katherine at Dunstable in 1110. By the time of the Roman Conquest (1066), a form of religious drama had already entrenched itself in France, and it soon found its way into England. Its purpose was directly heuristic, or edifying; it was the work of priests who used it as the means of conveying the truths of their religion to the unlettered masses.

In the beginning, this drama was completely controlled by the church; the church buildings were used for the performances; the priests were the performers and Latin was the language employed. This form of Drama was known as the Miracle or mystery play. The Material for the Mystery plays was drawn from the Bible and these plays expounded the mysteries bound with religion. In the 14th century, this religious drama outstretched its height in nearly all larger English towns at the festival of Corpus Christi. These Corpus Christi plays were also known as 'collective Mysteries', which were displayed the whole story of the fall of man and of man's redemption. In spite of crude in literary quality, these plays strike both - the note of pathos and the note of tragedy.

The third stage, in the history of English drama, is the rise of Morality play. Like

the Miracle play, this was didactic in purpose but its characters were personified concepts not being taken from the Bible or from the legends of saints. Early in the 16th century, the late product of the dramatic development of the Morality play was 'Interlude - It was a short dramatic piece of a satiric rather than of religious or ethnic nature, and purpose far less serious than the morality play. The interludes were often acted by the household servants of lords. The Interludes dealing with the Old Faith gave place to others that set forth the teaching of Reformation, e.g. *Hyche Scorner*, *Lusty Taventres*, *New Custom* etc. Others concerned the New Learning, *Nature of the Four Elements*, *The Trial of Treasure* etc.

It was, however, under direct impact of the Renaissance that English comedy and tragedy alike passed out of these preliminary phases of their development into forms of art. The Moralities with their mystical characters led to greater attention being paid to the plot, whilst gradually the abstract personification began to emerge into real people with individual idiosyncrasies (a strange or unusual habit). The Moralities, like the Miracles, were adapted to the audience. Comic scenes were introduced to relieve the seriousness of these medieval "problem" plays. A number of plays exist in which the transition stages of the Morality can be plainly discerned as Comedy and Morality in *Town Tiler and his Wife*, Tragedy and Morality in *King Canbysses* and *Apius and Virginia*, History and Morality in Bales's *King Johan*.

1.3.1 Medieval and Marlowian Tragedy

In pre-Shakespearean drama, Christopher Marlowe, certainly is the greatest figure. Four powerful tragedies: Tamburlaine, Dr Faustus, The Jew of Malta and Edward II, were left behind by him. These tragedies carry one central figure that is consumed by the lust for power, beauty or knowledge. For the middle ages, tragedy was a thing of kings and princes, but for Marlowe it is a matter of individual heroes. In the old conception, tragedy delineated the fall of the hero under the control of fate. It was brought about by the gods and was regarded as a punishment for his sins. The element of struggle or conflict was introduced by Marlowe. The medieval conception of tragedy was a decidedly moral one. By this way, He revolutionised the old conception of tragedy and made it fit for the needs and new urges of the Renaissance. Marlowe added poetic grandeur and poetic excellence to tragedy. In place of rhyming lines, he introduced and perfected the blank verse. He gave English tragedy its true metre and diction. It can easily be said that Shakespearean tragedy would not have been possible without the Marlowian blank verse. Marlowe has written no drama of love; he can be called a poet of love in no sense. The tender emotions and the sentiment of love were external to his temper. It may even be doubted, if sexual pleasure had any powerful attraction for him. Dr Faustus' desire for beauty beyond human reach is a form of the soul's desire for power. It's not a trivial thirst for pleasure but a longing to achieve the unattainable, and hold in human grasp the bliss reserved for a god.

In brief, Marlowe's tragedies are essentially one-man plays. It is about the mastering passion of the tragic heroes for the impossible, which causes them terrible suffering and which ultimately drives them to their doom.

1.3.2 The Senecan or Horror Tragedy

In the Elizabethan Age, there was an unequalled revival /amelioration of ancient learning and masterpieces of Greece and Rome were much studied and translated. The influence of Seneca predominated and his ten tragedies were translated into English. The first tragedy of the Senecan school to be written in England is *Gorboduc* or *Ferrex and Porrexin* 1562 of Thomas Sackville and Thomas Norton. The first unrelieved but immense popular English tragedy is *The Spanish Tragedy* by Kyd in 1587. It is very important for it gave rise to the trend of the revenge play. These tragedies have the following features:

- A. Images are used in plenty with very little of action and much narration.
- B. The idea of tragedy is associated/equated with crime.
- C. Use of chorus to explain.
- D. There is no dramatic relief because it is an unrelieved tragedy.
- E. The motif for crime is revenge. In the end, there is retribution, divine punishment for the same crime.

1.3.3 SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

Shakespeare has penned a number of plays which end in tragedy but among them four- *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are called 'Pure' tragedies and they rank with the greatest tragedies of the world, both of ancient and modern times. His tragedies are tales of suffering resulting in death, and suffering that are not caused by fate, destiny or some other outside agency, but by the action of the tragic hero himself. The 'tragic flaw' in his character makes him commit error after error and these errors spell his doom. That is why a Shakespearean tragedy has been called 'the apotheosis of the human spirit'. His tragedy is never gloomy while it soothes, strengthens and enervates. Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural. He introduces ghosts and witches who have supernatural knowledge. The supernatural is always placed in the closest relation to character and action. There is no poetic justice in Shakespearean tragedy and this is also the case with Webster. In other words, there is no poetic justice, there is partial justice. Such was the tradition of tragedy which Webster inherited. He worked upon it, and made it entirely his own. In this way, he created a tragedy which is the pride and glory of post-Shakespearean tragedy in England.

1.4 JOHN WEBSTER: A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

John Webster, is among those few, who have secured a place in the hermitage of fame by producing only a few works in the English Literature. It is not much known about John Webster, one of the greatest dramatists of the Elizabethan age which generated a number of poets and dramatists abjectly, William Shakespeare. Being brought into comparison with the greatest dramatist of all time itself is recognition of Webster's greatness. He attempted his skills to write comedies but could not get success. His prowess was essentially tragic. In the words of **Bogard**, "Shakespearean tragedy is individual, with a suggested generality of application. Websterian tragedy is broadly social, with individuals serving as

normative examples of Webster's conception of life, in this it is like the tragedy of Chapman. And it is like Chapman's further, in that it is not a record of spiritual growth through suffering, but of tenacious resistance to oppression." It is worth noticing that this eminent position of his is attained merely from two of his plays, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Within his so-called narrow limits, Webster shows a profound knowledge of human character and a keen sense of tragic issues of human life.

Nothing certain is known of his parents, wife and children. He may be Johannes Webster's son or heir of Johannes Webster of London, who was recorded to have been admitted to the Middle Temple in 1598. In the preface of 'Monuments of Honour', he says that he was born free of the Merchant Taylor's company. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, which printed in 1623, Ford describes him:

Crown Him a poet, Whom Rome, nor Greece,

Transcend in all theirs, for a master-peace

In the words of Legouis, "Of all the Elizabethans, it is John Webster who, after long oblivion, was most belauded by the Romantics. About the man it has been possible to discover hardly anything. It was quite certain that he was born somewhere between 1570 and 1580 and he disappeared in 1624." In the words of David Cecil, "Webster seems to many critics to be a dramatist of blood and thunder, and a writer of revenge plays and horror dramas, one who is saved from absurdity by the magnificence of his language and the intensity of individual scenes. But far from being a mere flamboyant sensation-monger, an unthinking composer of eloquent melodramas, he is a stern moral teacher whose plays are carefully designed to enforce the philosophy of human conduct in which he believes. His vision is a moral one. Webster sees life as good and evil. Here we come to one of the key facts about him. He was a child of his age; the age of Reformation: and he conceived morality in religious terms. An act to him was wrong, not because it interfered with the happiness of man in this world, but because it was a sin; a breach of the eternal laws established by the God who created man. Moreover, it was a voluntary breach. Here again he reveals himself the child of a Christian society. Men to him are not the helpless sport of an indifferent fate as they were to the Greeks. Possessed of free will, his villains sin deliberately. These evil voluntary acts are the cause of human tragedy. Indeed, his subject matter may be summed up as a study of the working of sin in the world... The world as seen by him is, of its nature, incurably corrupt. To be involved in it is to be inescapably involved in evil: all its apparent beauties are a snare and a delusion."

1.4.1 Literary Achievements of John Webster and his Age and Influences

His career of literary activities and achievements began from 1602. About him, one of the renowned critic **Emile Legouis** comments, "He wrote for the stage from 1602 onwards, serving for five years a sort of apprenticeship as collaborator with Heywood, Middleton, Marston and especially, Dekker, but his part, doubtless a subordinate one, in the works to which he contributed cannot be distinguished. His two masterpieces were produced between 1611 and 1614. He relapsed after them to mediocrity, and of his later work only his Roman play *Appius and Virginia*,

which dates from about 1600, has some merit. His authorship of it is today disputed, certain critics assigning it to Heywood.”

According to **Vaughan**, his literary activity falls, into three periods: *the first*, that of collaboration and apprenticeship (1602-1607); *the second*, that of the two great tragedies (1610-1614); the third, that of the tragi-comedies, and, probably, of *Appius and Virginia* beginning about 1620, the probable date of the Devil’s Law Case. and ending at a time unknown to us.”

During the **first period** of his career (1602-1607) Webster did not produced independent work as he was in collaboration with other dramatists namely - Heywood, Middleton, Marston, and especially Dekker. He is supposed to have collaborated with Middleton and others in the writing of two plays *Caesar’s Fall* and *The Two Harpies* which are not in existence today. *Lady Jane* is another play, which he wrote in collaboration with Dekker, Heywood and Wentworth. He also contributed to the second edition of Marston’s *Tin’s Malcontent* (1604). By 1607, he had produced two citizen comedies, *West-Ward Hoe* and *North-Ward Hoe* in partnership with Dekker.

The **second period** (1610-1614) marks the top of Webster’s achievements in the field of literature. It was during this period he produced his original and world-famous works. These works were *The White Devil* or *Vittoria Corombona* (about 1619) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (about 1612) and it was first staged in 1614 by The King’s Men, Shakespeare’s company. It entrenched Webster as a prime dramatic voice of his age. His genius as a dramatist is best shown in these two plays. Both these plays are based on the material drawn from the court-life of Italy. **Legouis says**, “Webster’s genius’ is seen in *The White Devil*, especially in his portrait of Vittoria, the courtesan, whose license scandalized Rome at the end of the sixteenth century. It is she who is the white devil. He makes her guilt clear, but at the same time conveys an impression of her fascination, which he seems himself to feel. He is all admiration for this woman’s beauty, the energy of her ambition and the presence of mind with which she faces desperate situations. As the wife of a poor gentleman, ‘she is courted by Brachiano, Duke of Padua and she convinces him that he must marry her, first ridding her of her husband and himself of his virtuous wife. The double murder is accomplished, but suspicion rests on those who profit by it.’ Vittoria faces a trial and is nonetheless condemned to seclusion in a house of convertites, but escapes from it with her lover’s help. They are pursued by the vengeance of the Duke of Florence and killed one after the other, Vittoria holding out until she has exhausted every resource of invention, cunning, and courage. Even in her First hour she defends herself haughtily and, counting on the effects of her beauty, bares her bosom and walks to meet her assassins. She dies at last, confronting Fate with her last words:

My soul like to a ship in a black storm,

Is driven, I know not whither

Beside her is her brother Flamineo, her tool, who has debauched her to advance her fortunes and whom she uses for her for love-affairs. It is he who causes her unwanted husband to disappear. He is vice incarnate, but his intrepidity in ill-doing, his lucid-intelligence and his moments of real valour make him, abject as he is, not altogether mean.”

The death of Brachiano's wife shows her true and intense love for her husband. She would kiss the portrait of her husband every evening. One evening, while kissing his poisoned portrait, she breathes her last.

Another important work, which belongs to the second period of Webster's literary career is *The Duchess of Malfi*. In his Cyclopaedia of English Literature, Robert Chambers says: "The Duchess of Malfi abounds more in the terrible graces. It turns on the moral offence which the lady gives to her two proud brothers, Ferdinand, Duke of Calabria, and Cardinal, by indulging in generous though infatuated passion for Antonio, her steward." Like *The White Devil* it is also a revenge play. "The avengers are, however," says Legouis, "moved by blind, unreasoning considerations, as, for instance, fury at a misalliance, or they have low motives, like the desire to get possession of their victim's fortune. The victim, The Duchess of Malfi (or Amalfi), is all goodness and innocence, and is driven to madness and death by her brothers because she has secretly married her steward, the virtuous Antonio." In the words of Vaughan, "The plot of this play is perfectly simple, the characters, if we expect that of Bosola, are drawn with an unfaltering hand; in unity of tone the play surpasses all others of the period, save those of Shakespeare." *The Duchess of Malfi* is marked advanced upon the earlier one because the impulse of revenge is bogarted but in a softer, a more human form. This is because the impact on the imagination is entirely differently.

During the third period (1620-1624) Webster produced five plays out of which only three could survive. The two lost ones are *The Guise* and *A Late Murther of the bonne Upon the Mother*. They were written in unison with Ford and published in 1624. The three extant plays are *The Devil's Law Case* (1623), *Appius and Virginia* (published in 1654), and *A Cure for a Cuckold* (published in 1661). None of these plays could reach the heights of perfection to which his two masterpieces-*The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*-had attained. In the words of Vaughan, 'All however, contain occasional flashes of the genius which created *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, though rather of its poetic, than its dramatic quality. Save in *Appius*, which owes much to the Roman tragedies of Shakespeare. Webster is now working under quite other and less inspiring influences. With him as with other dramatists of the period, the star of Fletcher is in the ascendant.' Over all, Webster penned twelve plays few of which have been lost and he composed a number of poems, an Elegy and a Pageant.

1.5 JOHN WEBSTER AND HIS WORKS

Chronology:

A. Writings of John Webster:

1. The White Devil published in 1612.
2. The Duchess of Malfi, performed in 1614 and published in 1623.
3. The Devil's Law Case, staged in 1620 and 1623.

B. Partly by Webster:

4. The Malcontent collaborated with Marston.
5. The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt collaborated with Dekker.
6. North-Ward Hoe collaborated with Dekker.

7. A Cure for Cuckold collaborated with Rowley.
 8. Appius and Virginia collaborated with Heywood.
- C. Plays conjectured to be that of Webster:
1. The Weakest Goeth to the Wall.
 2. The Thracian Wonder.
 3. Additions to the Spanish Tragedy.
 4. The Revenger's Tragedy.
 5. Anything for a Quiet life.
 6. The faire Maide of the Inne.
- D. Lost Plays:
1. Caesar's Will.
 2. Christmas Comes but Once a Year.
 3. The Guise.
 4. The late Murder of Whitechapel.
- E. Non-Dramatic writings
1. Commendatory verses to Munday's translation of palmer in England.
 2. Ode Prefixed to Harrisons' Arch's of Triumph.
 3. Commendatory verses prefixed to Heywood's Apology for Actors.
 4. New Characters of several persons, in several qualities.
 5. A Monumental Column.
 6. Monuments of Honour.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have learnt about the history and development of **Jacobean drama**. Special focus has been given to various stages in the development of **tragedy**, with comparisons and differences drawn between the Medieval and Marlowian Tragedy, The Senecan or Horror Tragedy and Shakespearean Tragedy, to give an overall awareness about tragedy. We have also been introduced to **John Webster** and his literary achievements and influences, thereby allowing us to understand the tradition beyond **John Webster** and have offered us an appreciation on the diversity and range of tragedy as a dramatic form.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term Jacobean Drama?
2. What do you think is the origin of Tragedy?
3. Name some of the prominent Jacobean dramatists and attempt critical analysis of their works.

UNIT 2 JOHN WEBSTER: THE PLAYWRIGHT AND HIS DRAMATIC ART

Structure

2.0 Objectives

- 2.1 John Webster's Concept of Tragedy and his contribution to the Tradition of the 'Revenge Plays'
- 2.2 John Webster's Contribution
- 2.3 John Webster and Jacobean Drama: Dominant Tendencies
- 2.4 John Webster's Satire
- 2.5 John Webster's Pessimism and Morbidity
- 2.6 John Webster and the Decline of Drama
 - 2.6.1 Loss of Universal Appeal
 - 2.6.2 Absence of the sense of moral values
 - 2.6.3 The inferiority of dramatic technique
 - 2.6.4 Characters
 - 2.6.5 Puritan Opposition to Drama and Other Factors
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Hints to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit an attempt is made to (1) understand the underpinnings of John Webster's concept of tragedy, (2) his contribution to the tradition of 'revenge plays', (3) identify the dominant tendencies of his age, (4) critically analyze the factors that lead to decline of drama during his age.

2.1 JOHN WEBSTER'S CONCEPT OF TRAGEDY AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE TRADITION OF THE 'REVENGE PLAYS'

John Webster's concept of tragedy was styled by various factors, conditions and influences. By his talent and temperament, he was essentially a tragic artist. The decline of the drama and the renaissance spirit (during his times, i. e., Jacobean period), the pessimism of the age, and the shattering of old beliefs and ideals intensified the morbidity of his temperament, all these things collectively made Webster a tragic artist of worldwide prominence and recognition. The credit of his success as a dramatist goes to his two great tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. His comedy, *The Devil's Law Case*, could bring him neither success nor fame.

Seneca, the Italian philosopher and dramatist, the Elizabethan revenge playwrights, and Machiavelli, the author of *The Prince*, were among those who greatly influenced Webster as a tragic artist. However, all these influences could not mark his originality. In traditional revenge plays, we find too much of horror, terror, murder and bloodshed, and also, we sympathize with the avenger, not

with the victim. But in Webster's plays, particularly *The Duchess of Malfi*, we feel sympathetic towards the victim, the Duchess, instead of the avengers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal. The melodramatic element is also closely related to the central theme. It will not be an overstatement to say that his Duchess remains the greatest tragic figure in Elizabethan drama, excluding, of course, Shakespeare.

In Webster's tragedies, there is no divine power to bring ruin and death to the hero. It is some social circumstances and the Machiavellian villains, like Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who in order to satisfy their feeling of revenge and to serve their personal ends, bring the virtuous and innocent to brink of end. How Webster took the world and the affairs of man has been summarized by Bogard in the following manner "Man's world, as Webster sees it, is a deep pit of darkness, and mankind is 'womanish and fearful', in the shadow of the pit. The causes of the fear are many but chief among them are oppression and mortality. Oppression is a social cause; man's inhumanity to man, the destruction of the individual by society, represented in the tragedies by a corrupt court of law, perhaps, or the vicious social system where able men are forced to sycophancy to obtain rewards from their Prince. Mortality is the natural cause. It too means destruction—the decay of the living body of disease and the destruction of the dead flesh by worms and the festering rot of the churchyard."

Like Chapman's, the characters portrayed by Webster cannot be designated as good and evil ones. Their characters are the blend of both the Machiavellian and the Senecan qualities; and therefore, they are more complicated figures than those of Chapman or any other of his contemporaries. In this regard Bogard observes: "The intermingling of good and the evil in the central figures undeniably gives to Webster's characters a complexity that suggests the profound studies of good and evil of Shakespearean tragedy, but Webster's method of creating character is not that of Shakespeare." Unlike Shakespeare, Webster studies mankind as a whole instead of the individuals. Comparing the tragedies of Shakespeare and Webster, Bogard writes "Shakespearean tragedy is individual with a suggested generality of application. Websterian tragedy is broadly social, with individuals serving as normative examples of Webster's conception of life."

John Webster's tragedy has no tragic hero in the real sense of the term. In *The White Devil* or *The Duchess of Malfi* there is no such character that may deserve the title of the tragic hero. Differentiating between Webster's and Shakespeare's tragedies Bogard says: "Webster's tragedy is strikingly different from Shakespeare's because in the large view no one character stands out as spiritually most significant; it might almost be said that Websterian tragedy has no tragic hero. For Webster, a character is important not in terms of the well-being of his thoughts and actions but in terms of his relationships, the effects of his thoughts and actions on his fellowmen. Shakespeare's tragedies were born of splendid, unwavering acceptance of humanity. Chapman's characters offer an austere yet noble pattern of conduct to an ignoble world. Webster's characters are didactic, satiric, harshly critical of man's society. Their core is the condition of that society, not the growth of the human spirit, and character is important not in itself but with respect to the relationships which are a formative part of an excoriated world."

As a tragic artist, the chief concern of John Webster is with the action rather than the characters of the play. It means that he is more and more interested in the development of the plot. Whatever methods and means he uses in his plays; he does in order to reveal the story rather than to expose the inner qualities of his

characters. Shakespeare uses soliloquy with a view to reveal the inner being of a tragic hero, while Webster makes a use of this device to assist the development of plot by clarifying certain obscurities. It may be said that in spite of his paying too much attention to his plots, Webster's handling of his plots is generally imperfect. Both in *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* there are structural weaknesses which marks the greatness of these plays. In this regard, H. J. C. Grierson remarks, "his plots are so clumsy that Lamb himself could not have made tales from Webster, and his construction is so defective that Vittoria, The White Devil, she almost fades out of the play after the third act." Of his greatest work *The Duchess of Malfi*, Clifford Leach says that there are several structural weaknesses in this play. Also, he is of the view that it is the weaknesses of the plot construction that are responsible for Webster's inferior place as a dramatist in comparison to Shakespeare. The fifth act in this play 'has been regarded as superfluous' by critics like George Addington Symonds; who observes: "After the murder of the Duchess, the fate of Antonio, the miserable end of the persecutors and their accomplices are of little interest. Had the play ended with the fourth act, the tragic impression would have been yet deeper and more harmonious than it is. I admit that the fifth act deepens the gloom of the atmosphere still further and we see nemesis overtaking cruel avengers, yet we must admit that the dramatic art is badly managed in the last act."

With all his originality and genius, Webster as a tragic artist is much inferior to the Colossus of the Elizabethan and the whole of the English drama-Shakespeare. John Webster's best and greatest creation, *The Duchess of Malfi* is reminiscent of Shakespeare and his works. In this connection, Emile Legouis's remark is worth quoting; "The tragedy is full of Shakespearian reminiscences; the Duchess recalls Desdemona, and Cariola, her woman, Emilia in Othello. Bosola, the master, the tool of the two brothers is modelled on Iago. The anger of Ferdinand, the criminal brother, against Bosola, after the murder he himself has ordered, is like that of King John against Hubert when he believes him to have put Arthur to death. The remorse of the other brother, the Cardinal, who can no longer pray, is a parallel to that of Claudius in Hamlet. Every such comparison would merely show "Webster's extreme inferiority, were it not that he substitutes for the psychology, at which Shakespeare principally aims, a search for the pathos inherent in situations and even in material effects".

Check Your Progress 1

1. What is John Webster's concept of tragedy and his contribution to the tradition of the 'revenge plays'?

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2.2 JOHN WEBSTER'S CONTRIBUTION

John Webster occupies an important position among the writers of the revenge plays. Thomas Kyd, Marston, Tourneur, etc., are the eminent revenge playwrights

of England. Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Marston 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.

The Revenge Tragedy, as it is clear from its name, used to be based on taking revenge by the wronged or the wrongdoer. Such type of tragedy had its beginning in the ancient Greek tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides; but they exhibited no trace of horror in them, which, later on, became very prominent in English revenge plays of the Elizabethan age.

Seneca, the great tragedy-writer of ancient Rome, was first to introduce the element of horror in the revenge play. Revenge, in the Senecan tragedy is considered as something necessary and desirable. It is regarded as the pious duty of the survived to take revenge on the wrong-doer. It is generally the ghost of the murdered who appears and reveals the secret of his murder to some of his close friend or relative with a view to instigating him to revenge on the murderer.

Thomas Kyd was the first English dramatist to have been influenced by Seneca. It was through him that the Senecan influence passed into the Elizabethan theatre. It was from Seneca that Kyd took over the ghost, the motive of revenge, and the soliloquy. The common features of this type of plays are the strong revenge motif, the use of supernatural terrors, violent imagery, Machiavellian manipulations, murder and bloodshed.

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 clarity of his moral vision is the thing that pronounces Webster's superiority to the earlier dramatists of the "revenge school". Referring to his two great tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, it can be concluded that "characters

are often cynical and pessimistic, but his own eyes are never blind to moral truth.” The virtuous and the innocent are destroyed in his plays, but at the same time novices are allowed to go unpunished.

The Jacobean revenge playwrights knew nothing about pathos. It was Webster who first introduced it in his plays. By introducing pathos in *The Duchess of Malfi*, he has successfully made the tragedy of the Duchess, her children, Cariola and Antonio highly pathetic and touching. In this connection Charles Lamb observes: “The death of Duchess moves us more deeply than anything else in English drama.”

John Webster has beautifully used horror for dramatic purposes. He employs at times the sensational episodes and the paraphernalia of terror like murder and execution, the dagger, the pistol, the cord, and the coffin, together with the skull and the ghost. The devices that he introduces to terrify the Duchess are the dead man’s hand, the artificial figures of Antonio and his children, and the dance of madman. All these objects are very gruesome and horrible. However, they serve dramatic ends. In the words of Allen, “Only the greatest of the world’s dramatists have succeeded in making physical violence serve the ends of dramatic atmosphere. Most of the so-called ‘revenge dramatists’ had found it easy enough to be revolting and some had been at pains to exceed all limits, in repulsiveness. Webster set himself the infinitely harder task of impressing violence into service of poetry.”

Thus, Webster through his two great tragedies-*The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*-has contributed a lot to the tradition of revenge plays. The revenge plays, before John Webster, used to be the mere tales of terror, horror, bloodshed and murder. But with Webster’s plays, revenge plays ceased to be merely the tales of revenge and murders, they had morality and poetry in them. Schelling observes: “The power of Webster, at his best, is the revealing power of the highest order of poetry.” In a word, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, we have the poetry of love, the poetry of sadness, the poetry of pathos, the poetry of ruin. These poetic touches take off the edge of the various frightful murders.

Check Your Progress 2

1. **Discuss John Webster’s treatment of tragedy vis-à-vis *The Duchess of Malfi*?**

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**2.3 JOHN WEBSTER AND JACOBEOAN DRAMA:
DOMINANT TENDENCIES**

The Jacobean drama stands nowhere in comparison with the comedies, historical plays and tragedies produced by the Elizabethan masters, particularly by Shakespeare. As regards their plots, characters, themes and approaches, Jacobean

plays greatly differed from those of the preceding times. **The chief characteristics of Jacobean drama** are as under:

The plots of the Jacobean plays were well-constructed and systematically developed. The plays of most of the writers, particularly those of Middleton, Fletcher and Massinger, were harmoniously welded. The harmonious development of plot can well be marked in the domestic dramas of Heywood and Dekker. But this over attention to the plot-construction was later discovered to be causing a lack of spontaneity and imagination in the plays of this period.

In the Jacobean drama realism took the place of fancifulness of the Elizabethan plays. The depiction of the woes and weaknesses of the London society rather than enjoying in the imaginary world of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It* was the popular area to write upon by the writers of this age. Acclaimed among the realistic writers are Ben Jonson, Heywood, Dekker, Middleton, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Ford. These writers were enclosed to become satirists because they have to depict such an evil society of that time. In most of their works they satirically referred to various vices of their times. Ben Jonson, Marston, Middleton, Beaumont and Fletcher were chief among those who attacked the evils of society.

In the plays of this period, there was an abundance of the elements of horror and revenge. To satisfy the tastes of kings and courtiers, most of the playwrights of this period were writing on the themes of horror and revenge. The chief horror, revenge and blood tragedies of the time are *Busy D'Ambois* and *The Revenge of Bussy D'Ambois* by Chapman; *Revenge of Antonio* and *Antonio and Mellida* by Marston; *The Atheist's Tragedy* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Tourneur; *The Yorkshire Tragedy* by Heywood; *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* by Webster, *The Roman Actor* by Massinger; and finally *The Cardinal and Traitor* by Shirley. All these plays abound in the scenes of blood, murder, horror and revenge.

Most of the artificial and stereotyped characters are created during this period. The dramatists were more interested in producing plays with striking situations rather than with original and individualized characters. The lustful tyrant and headstrong monarch are the conventional characters that appear again and again in the plays of this period. The clown that figures prominently in the Elizabethan plays seems "to have disappeared from the English stage of the Jacobean period."

In the Jacobean period, national history ceased to be the source for the themes and characters of English plays. Most of the plays of this period were based on Italian, French and Spanish themes and personalities. Webster's *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* also have an Italian background.

The world of Webster's tragedies is one of unrelieved gloom. We do not get in him that dramatic relief in the form of the jests and quibbles of the Fool which is such a marked feature of Shakespearean tragedy. However, there are variations of mood and emotion which constitute a sort of dramatic relief. Says Una Mary Ellis-Fermor, "In Webster's plays, the elasticity of the emotions is preserved by variations of mood, tempo and force. Again, and again, after a tempest of rage, the rushing together of two whirlwinds, there is a sudden pause; the speech that follows seems barely audible by contrast with the thundering passions that have passed, but it falls into the silence with incalculable pathos, solemnity or awe.

Sometimes this is no more than a line, a half-line even, as where Ferdinand, looking on his dead sister, perceives her truly for the first time since his rage possessed him, or where later on, in the madness that the realization brings, he moves unnoticing through the crowd of courtiers, his mind turned inward upon the thought "Strangling's very quiet death". The quiet echo-scene just before the final catastrophe serves a similar purpose.

The only contemporary of Webster who makes such subtle use of contrasts is Shakespeare. He also in tragedy gives these intervals of gentle, low-toned speech in the midst of tempest; he alone can at once suspend and emphasize the tragic tension by the half-heard murmurs of a mind moving absorbed upon the path of self-discovery that may lead to madness. "I did her wrong", says Lear in the midst of the Fool's babble when the gates of the castle have been closed against him. Ferdinand echoes it; 'She died young'."

John Webster's is a style that, when the emotion grows intense and the tragic issues approach their climax, passes into that lucidity, those inevitable phrases that distinguish the great poetry of the Greek drama, or, in English, the closing scenes of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. It is characteristic, too, of the bitter force of Webster that some of his finest remarks are found in his jests, concentrated flashes that illuminate the gloom with devastating revelation; the laughter in these plays like Duke Ferdinand's, 'A deadly cannon/ That lightens ere it smokes'. So deeply is Webster's style and imagery woven with the concept of the play, so essentially is its function of the whole drama, that in the great closing scenes of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, it is impossible to isolate passages without losing that essentialness of their effect which they draw from their dependence upon the whole preceding drama. Una Mary Ellis-Fermor says, "It is thus the range and interplay of mood, thought and imagery which gives them their richness and their variety, arriving at last at that impression and universality of implication which is an essential of great tragedy".

Check Your Progress 3

1. What are the dominant tendencies of Jacobean drama?

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2.4 JOHN WEBSTER'S SATIRE

All through Webster's plays there are scattered comments on life expressed in true condensed verse. Such maxims and epigrams are at expression of his reflections on life, and of his efforts to build up a moral system of his own, at least to bridge the gulf between "the two worlds", the old that was dying out and the new that was struggling to be born. Such are his comments, often satirical, on kingliness and the fate of princess upon statecraft and the nature of nobility, upon adversity and virtue, upon women, upon policy, and upon a hundred other aspects of man and his life. Webster's satire is wide-ranging. His comments make it quite clear that it is the virtue of resolution which he admires most of all. It

does not matter whether a character is good or evil, what matters is that he must ever remain true to himself. For him, as Delio tells us at the end of the Duchess, “Integrity of life is fame’s best friend”.

2.5 JOHN WEBSTER’S PESSIMISM AND MORBIDITY

Literature mirrors the age and this is more so in the case with drama which has to take into account the tastes and attitudes of the audiences. The age of Webster was an age in which the old values, ideals and beliefs were breaking down and had not yet been replaced by new ones. Thus, there was a conflict between the old and the new, and melancholy and pessimism are the natural consequences of such a conflict and loss of faith. Webster was literally a man caught between “two worlds” and he shares the pessimism and gloom and melancholy of his age. Though the “stars may shine” now and then, there might be occasional flashes of light, but on the whole the atmosphere of his tragedies is morbid, it is one of unrelieved darkness and gloom. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola again and again voices the dramatist’s pessimism in such remarks as the following:

- (1) “Our bodies are weaker than those paper-prisons boys used to keep flies in: more contemptible since ours is to preserve earth worms.”
- (2) “O, this gloomy world! In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness, doth womanish and fearful mankind live.”
- (3) “We are merely the star’s tennis balls, struck and handed which way please them.”

Check Your Progress 4

1. Critically comment on John Webster’s dramatic art.

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2.6 JOHN WEBSTER AND THE DECLINE OF DRAMA

In spite of suiting the tastes of the audience and winning loud acclamation at the theatre, the genetic appeal that can be observed in Shakespearean drama is missing in the drama written in Jacobean age because these were over balanced, presented absurd and monstrous situations and unconvincing characters. The golden days of English drama had passed away with Shakespeare, the greatest of English dramatists. There was none among his contemporaries or successors who could shape the plastic material of drama in the flask of his imagination with the Shakespearean mastery and knack. The period following the great Elizabethan age witnessed a sheer decline of drama. Barring a few plays by Beaumont, Fletcher and John Webster no

important dramatic work was produced during the early seventeenth century. Shakespeare had used the clown with great skill but after him clownish parts are over done; hence the clown disappears from the English stage. Legouis says, "The characters and situations tend to be less true to nature, the knowledge of human nature is less correct and has less insight, and so there is great use of sensationalism. Externals replace reality and truth of characterisation. They draw nearer to reality in externals while in essentials they become more remote from it. Comedy shows a preference for eccentricity and anomalies, and tragedy passed from the epic to the romantic."

2.6.1 The following reasons are said to have been responsible for the decline of drama in the age of John Webster:

In the Jacobean period, **drama lost its universal appeal** as drama based on national history is no longer written and even content of the drama is now provided by Italian, French and Spanish romances. John Webster's two masterpieces; *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, have Italy as their setting. In the preceding age, it was patronized by feudal lords, but in this period, dramatists mostly depended on the king and the queen. They would write to amuse the king and his courtiers. They had nothing to do with the tastes and interests of the common people. Most of the plays were the mere depiction of court life and manners. It can safely be said that Beaumont and Fletcher wrote for the courtiers and Ben Jonson for the educated people. The nation-wide appeal of Shakespearian drama was not to be found in the drama of this period. The greatness of Shakespeare lay in the fact that he was able to mix in his plays the temporary demands of the popular taste with the permanent requirements of great literature. The dramatists who followed Shakespeare failed to contain his greatness and dramatic skill. They were great in their own sphere and during their own age but closed their eyes to the future. They lack universality of appeal; they are transitory products of the hour having nothing of the permanence of great art. While Beaumont and Fletcher were writing, the theatre was gradually, but surely, losing its hold on the middle and lower classes. In Shakespearean plays, the spirit of England had found full expression; he had spoken for all classes and all classes had been among his audience.

2.6.2 Absence of the sense of moral values

Was another factor which was responsible for the decline of drama in the past. In the Shakespearian period a Dramatist's chief concern was to entertain the theatre-goers and the courtiers whom their plays were based on. To them chastity and morality had no value. They in order to please the riff-raff freely adopted the unpleasant themes such as incest and sexual infidelity. Intrigues and murders, being the powerful instruments of the kings and courts, had become very common in the plays of this period, also, the plays were written on the lives of prostitutes and concubines. The plays, *The White Devil* and *The Honest Whore*, are among the most popular ones of this period.

The drama was bound to decline after Shakespeare. There was no real genius of the stature of this great master. In the hands of his successors comedy became eccentric and tragedy lost its epic grandeur. In the field of tragedy, Ben Jonson could not succeed. Shakespeare, in spite of his writing about kings and princes,

was the writer of the common men and the admired of his audience, but the dramatists of the following period could make no appeal to the masses. They lacked in art. The rapid decline of the drama was because of mainly three reasons: Shakespeare left no true successors—none who had the ‘high seriousness’ of genius. The tastes of the city had become vulgarised. The court had set up a new standard of its own, false and demoralising.

2.6.3 The inferiority of dramatic technique

Can also be said to have been responsible to a great extent for the decline of drama during the age of Webster. The successors of Shakespeare, in spite of their advance in construction and sometimes in dialogue could not keep up the ‘mighty line’ of Marlowe. Their blank verse was weak and tasteless because they failed to maintain the vital quality of the dramatic blank verse of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

2.6.4 Characters

Created by the Jacobean dramatists were neither new nor impressive. Certain stock characters were represented again and again in the plays of this period. Heroes, lustful kings and manipulative courtiers were certain wooden characters that were mechanically repeated in various plays. The portraits of kings are neither from English history nor real or convincing. The monarchs and their courtiers grow exotic and imaginary, and so also unreal and fantastic. Characters degenerate into mere theatrical personages; they are missing life and reality. The main characters of Elizabethan drama are endlessly repeated and carried to excess.

2.6.5 Puritan Opposition to Drama and Other Factors

Besides these wants and weaknesses, there were some other factors which caused the decline of drama in the age of John Webster. Most prominent among them was the Puritan opposition to drama. Puritans had been opposing drama since its becoming popular in England. In their opinion, drama or any other form of entertainment was devilish and unwanted. According to them those who wanted salvation had to relinquish their interest in drama and other forms of literature. In 1579, Stephen Gosson, through his *School of Abuse*, attacked all secular literature. To him there was no distinction between “poets, pipers, players, jesters”; and he called them “caterpillars of a commonwealth.” In 1583 Philip Stubbes claimed biblical support for the condemnation of drama. In 1632, Prynne attacked the stage. And the last and most powerful blow given to drama was by Parliament of England. In 1642, only twenty-six years after Shakespeare’s death, both the Houses of Parliament (House of Commons and House of Lords) voted to close the theatres condemning them as the ‘breeders of lies and immorality.’ A. Nicoll says, “The wheel in ford has come full circle. The manly temper of that age which saw the battered ships of the Armada scudding helplessly northward, that age which produced Shakespeare and Spencer, has given way to a period of effeminacy, of degenerate thought, of maddened sensuality.” Blood-curdling scenes of crude horror, bloodshed and violence are wildly introduced. Even so great a dramatist as John Webster has enough of such sensationalism in his masterpiece *The Duchess of Malfi*.”

Check Your Progress 5

John Webster: The
Playwright and his
Dramatic Art

1. Discuss the various factors that led to decline of drama in John Webster's age?

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit has foregrounded John Webster's art of characterization, his concept of tragedy and his contribution to the tradition of the 'revenge plays'. In this discussion, an attempt has been made to provide a view of John Webster's literary background that would enable us to understand the larger context of Jacobean drama, its dominant tendencies and the factors that ultimately led to the decline of drama.

2.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Read Section 2.1

Check Your Progress 2

1. Read Section 2.2

Check Your Progress 3

1. Read Section 2.3

Check Your Progress 4

1. Read Section 2.4 and 2.5

Check Your Progress 5

1. Read Section 2.6 to 2.6.5

UNIT 3 THE DUCHESS OF MALFI: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 John Webster's Skill in Plot-construction
- 3.3 Sources, Setting and Major Themes of the Play
 - 3.3.1 Sources of the Play
 - 3.3.2 The Setting of the Play
 - 3.3.3 Major Themes: Power, Corruption and Nobility
- 3.4 *The Duchess of Malfi* in a Nutshell
- 3.5 John Webster's Art of Characterization
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will be analysing the play *The Duchess of Malfi* critically. We will begin with a brief explanation on how to read the play by discussing John Webster's skill in plot- construction and the sources, setting and themes of the play. This will help us in understanding the play and appreciate its dramatic appeal. This will be followed by a brief summary of the play. In addition to this, we will also discuss John Webster's art of characterization.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The Duchess of Malfi is so great a work of genius that its author, John Webster, would have been among the greatest dramatists in the world even if he had not written anything else. It is both astonishing and unfortunate that the date of birth of such a renowned dramatist and the date of composition of such a great piece of art are still unknown. These dates have approximately been fixed on the basis of certain available evidence and facts.

The White Devil, Webster's first great tragedy, was produced between 1610 and 1612. And there is indirect evidence to the effect that his second great work, *The Duchess of Malfi* was written later than the former. It also has been discovered that this play was first performed on the stage in 1614. In this performance, the role of Antonio was played by the actor named Ostler, who died in 1614. Thus, this is natural to infer that *The Duchess of Malfi* was written between 1612 and 1614. It was first printed in 1623 in Quarto form.

3.2 JOHN WEBSTER'S SKILL IN PLOT CONSTRUCTION

The success of two great tragedies- *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* in spite of the fact that these were produced in the age of decline of English Drama

are the best example of John Webster's greatness as dramatist. Even the best plays of the Jacobean period were found with several weaknesses and faults because after William Shakespeare, there was no dramatic genius who could continue the tradition of Drama as successfully and gloriously as he did in the Elizabethan age. There are several structural weaknesses which make Webster inferior to Shakespeare.

Clive Hart comments on the structure of the play:

'The structure is excellent to start with, but falls away at the end. The first Act not only establishes the characters of the principal figures, but also in the king disquisition on the French Court, lays the foundation for the analysis of the corruption in public life which accompanies the private tragedy. Throughout Act I and II the action moves rapidly to establish the Duchess in her precarious position and Ferdinand in his state of furious impotence. The gap of two or three years between Acts II and III does nothing to disrupt the dramatic sequence, but, on the contrary, emphasises Ferdinand's tense, inhibited, emotional state. Act III brings a splendid climax: The Duchess's secret is revealed to Bosola in a scene of great psychological realism which once again raises the theme of public disregard for private worth. Act IV is a brilliantly integrated whole, but in Act V, Webster finds himself with too many major characters to dispose of, and too many minor characters involved in the plot. As a result, the action is diffuse and insufficiently focuses on the tragedy of the Duchess to allow her personality to brood, as it should, over the events. The concept of "the well-made play", which is almost ineradicably rooted in the minds of modern critics and most modern audiences, was not, however, of great concern to Jacobean theatre-goers, who would certainly have been pleased with the ingenious handling of the death of the Cardinal and with the tragi-farce of Ferdinand's madness.'

The Duchess of Malfi is parted in two: A main plot and a subplot. The Main plot consists of the story of the Duchess of Malfi, who secretly marries Antonio, a person of no rank and status in the society, despite the warning of her brothers, Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand. This marriage is taken by her brothers as a disgrace to their family. Ultimately Duchess of Malfi and her two children are brutally strangled. The 'sweetest innocent' murder causes a reaction. Ferdinand goes mad and the tool-villain Bosola decides to avenge her death by saving the life of Antonio and killing both Ferdinand and the Cardinal. He killed Ferdinand and the Cardinal however Antonio is killed erroneously by him but he himself does not abscond his own death. Thus, through the story of the Duchess, John Webster embellishes the fact that sin is accompanied by sure and immediate nemesis.

The sub-plot of the play is the story of Julia who makes a silent and furtive entry in the Act I. Apart from that she is seen only three times. First in Act II, Scene IV visiting the Cardinal in Rome as his mistress, and receiving attention and proposal from Delio. Second in Act V, Scene I, she obtains an estate of Antonio, begged on her behalf by the Cardinal. Third in Act V, Scene II she courts Bosola, presses the Cardinal to reveal his secret, and as a consequence is poisoned by him. Regarding the plot of *The Duchess of Malfi*, critics have various opinions as George Adington Symonds takes the fifth act of the play for a superfluous addition to the complete plot while David Cecil justifies the fifth Act from the moral point of view but for this Act, all the evil doers would have gone scot-free. In his book, 'poets and story tellers', David Cecil writes: "this last section of the Duchess of Malfi, it may be noted in passing illustrates how little Webster has been exactly

understood by his admirers because the play is called *The Duchess of Malfi*, she has been looked on as its key figure and her creator has been censured for continuing the play for another Act after her death. But though she is the heroine in the sense that she is the chief object of our sympathies, she does not provide the chief motive force in the action nor is it in her relation to that action, that the theme of the play is to be found. This theme, as always with Webster, is the fact of sin and its consequences. Till these consequences are followed out to their conclusion, the dramatist's intention is not made plain. Moreover, the central figure, as far as that action is concerned, is the man who murders her, the man who was chosen against the prompting of his better self to be the devil's agent in the drama. Webster, then, was not as wrong about himself as at first sight he might appear. So far from being a mere flamboyant sensation-monger, unthinking composer of eloquent melodramas, he is a stern moral teacher whose plays are carefully designed to enforce the philosophy of human conduct in which he believes."

Both the two stories have been aptly interlinked to form a single whole. First, the same characters figure in the two stories. Julia is the mistress of the Cardinal who is one of the brothers of the Duchess. Bosola, whom Julia courts, is responsible for her death. Secondly, there are strong similarities and contrasts between the sexual behaviour of the Duchess and that of Julia. Clifford Leech rightly points out that, "both women are direct in their approach; both devise scenes with a hidden witness, both come to death through what they do." Yet the contrast is equally obvious. In Act II, Scene IV Delio's approach to Julia is contemptuous:

With good speed: I would wish you
At such time as you are non-resident
With your husband, my mistress.

And before that she had to undergo the Cardinal's observations on the unpredictability of women, she owes him for his favour. In Act V, Scene I, Delio refers to her as 'such a creature' and the good Marquis of Pescara echoes him with calling her a 'strumpet'. For Bosola she is 'this creature', While the Cardinal sees her as his 'lingering consumption' whom he would 'by any means be quit of', he is pleased to poison her for secrecy's sake using this as an excuse to free himself.

Thus, the general attitudes to Julia and the Duchess are quite opposite from each other. Antonio refers to his mistress' saintliness before her approach to him in Act I, and whatever his limitations he never slackens in his homage. Cariola, until her nerves fail, wants to die with the Duchess. Bosola admires her courage, and his adoring care for her dead body contrasts with the Cardinal's edgeless directions for the removal of Julia's. The two women are opposed also in their respective fidelity and promiscuousness, in the family relationship established at Main and the casualness of the Cardinal's treatment of Julia. "The introduction of Julia, and the fragments of action that involve her, thus help to govern the direction and degree of our sympathy in the play. At the same time, we are made to see how fully involved in the world's duplicity the Duchess and Antonio become through their secret marriage, and how erroneous it would be to regard the Duchess as outside the normal sphere of sexual passion. The Duchess approaches Antonio with enormously more dignity and grace than Julia has in approaching Bosola,

but there is enough similarity between the two actions of the play to keep strongly in our minds the force of the passion that urges the Duchess to speak.” Thirdly, the Julia-story may be taken to be a kind of spoof of the Main plot. Both Shakespeare and Fletcher introduce such comic parallelisms in their plays, and Webster; too has done so in this play. J.R. Brown says, “The play also has unity of atmosphere, a dark sensationalism and menace, contrasted with softness, intrigue, madness, and moral sayings. It has also the unity of deeply perceptive concern for the society and characters portrayed.”

Besides skill in construction, the dramatist has succeeded in creating a number of scenes and situations whose potency on the stage cannot be questioned. Writes Frederick Allen in this connection, “As a piece of stagecraft the play has many arresting situations and moments. The whole of Act IV might be regarded as a theatrical *tour de force*. Not less wonderful is the management of the secret spouses with the sudden appearance of Cariola as witness to the marriage per verba de presenti.” The same “sense of the theatre” is revealed at many other points. The meeting of Antonio and Bosola in the courtyard of the palace on the night of the first child’s birth reminds one of the courtyard scenes in *Macbeth* with its sense of mystery, suspicion, and fear. Not less effective theatrically is Ferdinand’s violent appearance at the Cardinal’s palace with Bosola’s letter of intelligence, nor is that frenzied appearance less sound in psychological conception than in theatrical effect. There are other entries of Ferdinand that are managed with similar or even with greater skill. That in the bedchamber scene is a masterly piece of Stagecraft; there is nothing more tremendous in the play than the moment when the Duchess, in her surprise at the continued silence of her husband, whose return she had assumed on hearing the quiet tread behind her, turns about only to discover that the intruder is not her husband, but her brother, whose hand is already stealing to his poniard, as if to strike without a word. Another wonderful entry of Ferdinand is that in which the lycanthrope steals upon the stage, muttering, “Strangling is a quiet death.” These and many other situations prove beyond doubt that Webster had an eye extraordinary quick in seizing the right moment, the, “dramatic moment”.

All this is certainly true but as critics like **J.A. Symonds, Grierson, David Cecil** and many others point out, the plot of the play has glaring weaknesses and shortcomings. Some of these weaknesses may now be considered:

- The motif of the brothers in imposing such appalling torment and death on their sister is unclear. Family dishonour or concern for ‘degree’. i.e., rank and status does not fully account for it. It might have been sexual jealousy in the case of Ferdinand, but the Cardinal has no such motif. His malignity seems to be motiveless.
- The delay of two years on the part of the brothers in taking revenge is a serious flaw in the general design—a flaw that must be attributed either to carelessness or to lack of constructive skill.
- Too much importance has been given to chance and accident. It is by chance that Antonio drops the horoscope of his newly born son, Bosola picks it up and thus comes to know the whole secret. And why does Antonio not make any efforts to search and trace out the lost horoscope?
- There was no need for the Cardinal to tell Julia of his involvement in the murder of the Duchess, when he could have easily put her off by telling a porky.

- Whatever may be its justification morally, Act V is a mere plethora of horrors from the structural point of view. The main business of the play is over with the death of the Duchess in Act IV which is the climax, and Act V comes as an anti-climax and weakens the effect of the masterly Act IV. It is an abdication of art for the sake of morality.

To conclude it can be said that Webster's plays are not masterpieces of construction, and it is one of the reasons why he is considered inferior to Shakespeare.

3.3 SOURCES, SETTING AND THE THEMES OF THE PLAY

Let us try to unravel the various sources of the play in addition to a closer analysis of the setting and the themes in order to gain a fuller understanding of the various forces shaping and influencing the dramatist and his response to these forces reflected in the play.

3.3.1 Sources of the Play

As regards the sources of *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster, like most of the other Elizabethan dramatists, went to the works of art existing in his age. Instead of inventing stories himself he took them up from others' works. However, the plays produced by him had their originality because he moulded all the available material in the crucible of his tragic art and imagination. William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566-67) is the chief source of the main action of his *Duchess of Malfi*. In other words, *The Duchess of Malfi* is a dramatized version of a story from *The Palace of Pleasure*. This story of Painter intends to warn women against their inclination to sensual pleasures. A few scenes in the fifth act of this play seem to have owed their inspiration to Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*. **D. C. Gunby** summarizes the sources of *The Duchess of Malfi* as follows: "The story had a wide currency in Elizabethan and Jacobean literature-it occurs in George Whetstone's *An Heptameron of Civil Discourses* (1582), Thomas Beard's *The Theatre of God's Judgements* (1597), and Edward Grimestone's translation of Goulart's *Admirable and Memorable Histories* (1607), to name only works that Webster had read-but the dramatist's primary source seems to have been William Painter's collection of tales, *The Palace of Pleasure*(1566-67). Painter, in turn, derived his account from Francois de Belle forest, which included the story in the second volume of his *Histoire Tragique* (1565) ... From other prose works Webster borrowed sparingly. The device of the dead man's hand may well derive from Barnabe Rich's translation of The Famous Histories of Herodotus (1584), while other features of the torturing of the Duchess seem to come from Cinthio's *Ecatommiti* and Sidney's *Arcadia*. The latter is also Webster's richest source of verbal borrowings."

Down to the death of the Duchess, Webster has followed painter's narrative with little change and rearrangement. However, whatever additions or changes he has made, have added to the beauty and significance of its plot and characters. The following are some significant additions made by Webster to the original story by William Painter-(1) The brothers of the Duchess strictly instruct her not to marry second time; (2) the role which Bosola plays prior to his putting Antonio to death; (3) Duke Ferdinand's sudden visit to the bed-chamber of the Duchess;

(4) the spectacular ceremony at Loretto; (5) the Cardinal-Julia-affair; (6) the offering of a dead man's hand to the Duchess; (7) the presenting of the artificial figures of Antonio and his children before the Duchess to give her an impression that they are dead; (1) the madmen's song and dance; (9) the tomb maker and the bellman-episodes, etc.

3.3.2 The Setting of the Play

As far as the setting of *The Duchess of Malfi* is concerned, it is provided by the contemporary court life of Italy. The actions and reactions of the corrupt, intriguing and manipulative Italian courtiers form the plot of this play. The Italy represented in this play is like a hell full of murders, intrigues and manipulations. This Italy is in sharp contrast to the Italy that we find in a number of plays by Shakespeare.

3.3.3 The Major Themes of the Play: Power, Corruption and Nobility

The theme of this play can be said to be the persecution of the good and the virtuous at the hands of the greedy, the avaricious, and the Machiavellian manipulators. "The theme is persecuted virtue, a variant on the so popular one of revenge." (Legouis). Legouis continues to say, "There is again a question of vengeance, accomplished, as in *The Spanish Tragedy*, by strange means. The avengers are, however, moved by blind, unreasoning considerations as, for instance, fury at a misalliance, or they have low motives, like the desire to get possession of their victim's fortune. The victim, the Duchess of Malfi (Amalfi), is all goodness and innocence,"

3.4 THE DUCHESS OF MALFI IN A NUTSHELL

The Duchess of Malfi is Webster's most important play on which his greatness as a dramatist entirely rooted. This play profuse in horror, tantalize, manipulations and murders. The play opens with a discussion between two close friends - Delio and Antonio who has recently come back from France after a long stay over there. Antonio speaks very high of the French Court and King. When they are busy talking, Bosola, the villain, the Cardinal, the Prince of Aragon and brother of the Duchess arrive on the scene. After a brief interruption, Antonio and Delio resume their chat. Antonio has very bad opinion about Ferdinand and the Cardinal, while he eulogizes the Duchess their sister, too much.

The Duchess is a young widow of about twenty. With a view to capturing her whole property, her brothers strictly deny her to re-marry. They appoint Bosola, their spy to keep a non-stop watch on the Duchess. Being a lady who loves to act according to her own will, the Duchess reveals her intentions to her maid servant, Cariola. Antonio, her steward comes to her to get some documents signed. She offers to marry him. He is afraid of the Duchess's brothers. However, their marriage is solemnized without any formal ceremony. Cariola is the only witness to this marriage. This is kept secret to the extent it is possible but Bosola suspects the Duchess being pregnant. He confirms it by offering her apricots. The Duchess gives birth to her first child. Antonio somehow drops the horoscope of the newly born baby; and Bosola picks it up. The horoscope bears no name as the father of the baby. Castruccio is sent to Rome by Bosola to inform the Duchess's brothers of the birth of the baby to the Duchess. Hearing of the birth of a son to their sister both the brothers get angry and make up their mind to take revenge on her.

After some time, the Duchess gives birth to two more children - a son and a daughter. Antonio discloses this fact to his close friend Delio. All know of the birth of the children to the Duchess but they do not know about her husband. So, there are rumours about the Duchess's becoming adulterous. Ferdinand decides to enter the bed-chamber of the Duchess to find out who is really her lover or husband.

At night the Duchess and Antonio indulge in love-making. The Duchess feels excited and orders her maid-servant to leave them alone. She goes out. But with her Antonio has also gone out of the bed room. The Duchess, not knowing this fact, under sexual excitement expresses her feelings of love and talks about her secret marriage and her children. Ferdinand coming towards her bedroom has overheard all about her marriage and birth of the children. No response comes from Antonio. The Duchess is taken aback to find Ferdinand in her bedroom. He offers her a dagger to put an end to her life. Also, he abuses her husband.

The Duchess, thinking of danger to her husband's life, advises him to go to Ancona with her first child. She pretends to dismiss Antonio from his stewardship. When he is dismissed, all her courtiers and flatterers start abusing Antonio. But Bosola, the spy, is the only man who speaks very high of him. He does all this as a part of his trick. His trick succeeds. The Duchess, taking him into confidence, talks all about her plans to send Antonio to Ancona. Bosola, falsely sympathizing with the Duchess, advises her to feign a pilgrimage to the holy shrine of Loretto, which is hardly seven leagues from Ancona. Thus, he advises her to have a meeting with her husband at Ancona. Cariola does not approve of her jesting with religion. But the Duchess pays little heed to her faithful Cariola's objection.

The Duchess goes to Ancona, and Bosola to home to inform her brothers of all this. Accordingly, Ferdinand and Bosola reach Ancona. Ferdinand sends a letter to the Duchess asking her to send Antonio to him. She, apprehending danger to his life, sends him to Milan with her eldest son. Soon after Antonio's departure, royal forces of Ferdinand led by Bosola arrive on the scene. The Duchess is arrested.

Now the Duchess of Malfi is a prisoner in her own palace and is tortured in different ways. To frighten her Ferdinand visits her in the darkness of the night and offers her a dead man's hand. Wax images of her husband and her children are shown to her indicating the deaths of all of them. Madmen are placed around her palace to make unbearable noise to keep her in constant pangs and disturbance. All this drama of pains, horrors and revenge reaches its climax with Bosola's murdering the Duchess. He comes to her with executioners who with, a cord, strangle her to death. Cariola, her maid-servant, is also murdered.

Seeing her sister strangled, Ferdinand becomes sad and to repent for his act, he does not give any reward to the villain, Bosola and asks him never to come again to him. Bosola then goes to the dying Duchess and reveals to her that her husband, Antonio is not dead. She gets pleased, and dies in peace. Bosola then goes to Milan to seek reward from the Cardinal.

Bosola is asked to eliminate Antonio by the Cardinal and he concedes to do so. Cardinal kills Julia by asking her to kiss the Bible whose cover is spread over with poison. The Cardinal's planning is to kill Bosola when he will have performed the deed of putting Antonio to death but Bosola somehow overhears his plan. And therefore, in the darkness, taking a figure to be of Cardinal stabs

it. Mistakenly, Antonio is murdered by Bosola. He then kills the Cardinal. Ferdinand has gone mad. He while passing, cannot understand what the Cardinal actually cries for. Then Bosola kills Ferdinand who, in a scuffle, has already given death wounds to the Cardinal and Bosola. Thus, die Ferdinand, the Cardinal and Bosola. The play ends with the enthronement of the eldest son of Antonio and the Duchess.

3.5 JOHN WEBSTER'S ART OF CHARACTER-IZATION

Webster's greatness among Jacobean dramatists lies in the fact that he is usually bracketed with Shakespeare. It itself is a sign of great merit to be compared with the bard of Avon. **Saintsbury** says, "Of cheerfulness Webster himself knows nothing, his comedy whenever he attempts it, is forced guffaw, his passion of love, though powerful, has nothing bright or ethereal about it, but shares the luridness of his other motives, and he is most at home in the horror almost unmitigated."

The plays, by John Webster abound in characters of various types and natures, and moods and temperaments, without any doubt are the evidence of his great skill in character adumbration. Although not so great as Shakespeare, Webster must rank very high among the character delineators in Elizabethan tragedy. In spite of his ambit and uncluttered range, he has depicted male and female, lofty and sinful, and innocent and sneaky characters. As a dramatic artist; Webster is not so much concerned with formal beauty and technical perfection as with the creation of the picture of the world, consistent and accurate, in which his characters live and move. It is a world created of their thoughts and the deeds which are the outcome of those thoughts. His purpose is to make us intimately familiar with his characters and their world as quickly as possible and with this end in view a variety of techniques, such as set sketches of character, dramatic revelation or repeated analysis of one character by others, are followed. Mostly this familiarity is achieved by the end of Act I. Action and reflections go on simultaneously, illuminating and stimulating each other. "And ultimately", says Una-Fermor, "it is the reflections that are his main interest; those that his people, in moments of illumination, make upon their own discoveries, and those that he under the thinnest of choric disguises, makes upon them. This accounts in part for his habit of grouping his characters almost in series, returning to re-handle a certain study in fuller or modified form in the next play; it accounts also for the deep attention he gives to certain reflective types, for his tendency to examine some characters so exclusively from one aspect that he sometimes ends by making them appear inconsistent."

In the world of Webster, we get the interplay of thought, the meeting of mind and mind in the double and simultaneous expression of action and reflection. About his range Schelling observes: "His range of characterization may be narrow, but the intensity with which he has conceived strong and masterful human character. In the certainty of his touch in moving alike the deepest and the loftiest of human emotions, Webster must rank not below Shakespeare himself." His characters have been portrayed in such a way that they reveal his psychological approach to his heroes and villains, and to his female characters both good like the Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi* and evil like Vittoria in *The White Devil*.

“Webster’s genius,” observes **Emile Legouis**, “is seen in *The White Devil* especially in his portrait of Vittoria, the courtesan, whose licence scandalized Rome at the end of the sixteenth century. It is she who is the white devil. He makes her guilt clear, but at the same time conveys an impression of her fascination, which he seems himself to feel. He is all admiration for this woman’s beauty, the energy of her ambition and the presence of mind with which she faces desperate situations. As the wife of a poor gentleman, she is courted by Brachiano, Duke of Padua, and she convinces him that he must marry her, first ridding her of her husband and himself of his virtuous wife. The double murder is accomplished; but suspicion rests on those who profit by it. Vittoria is summoned before an imposing court, over which the Duke of Florence and his brother, Cardinal Monticelso, afterwards Sixtus V, preside. Accusations, precise and overwhelming, are heaped upon her, but she meets her judges superbly, and with head held high turns their attack against them, reducing their proofs to nothingness and causing more than one of those present to waver. Vittoria is none the less condemned to seclusion in a house of convertibles, but escapes from it with her lover’s help. They are pursued by the vengeance of the Duke of Florence and killed one after the other, Vittoria holding out until she has exhausted every resource of invention and courage. Even in her last hour hours, she defends herself haughtily and counting on the effect of her beauty, bares her bosom and walks to meet her assassins. She dies at last, confronting fate with her last words.

In sharp contrast to evil and shrewd Vittorias the good and innocent Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi*, she falls a victim to the ill-will and vengeance of her own brothers, Ferdinand and Cardinal, who drive her even to madness and death. This exhibits Webster’s different psychological approaches to different characters. Unlike Vittoria “her tone”, observes Frederick Allen, “to her executioner, is that of fearless command. She has not a temple for their instruments of torture. In the very moment of her horrible death, she stays at the hands of her executioners that she may bow her knees before the gates of heaven, and her last cry is a prayer of thanksgiving for the mercy of God.”

As regards the types of Webster’s characters, David Cecil remarks: “His characters are ranged in moral divisions. There are the good and there are the bad. But, since to act strongly one must believe in the value of worldly activities, only the bad are active and dynamic. They are of two types. The first-Vittoria, Brachiano, Ferdinand, the Cardinal, are the creatures of some ruling passion, lust, or ambition or avarice or hatred. Possessed by an insatiate desire to satisfy it, they break every law, shut their eyes to every scruple. The second group is actuated less by passion than by cynicism. Flamineo, Bosola are not blinded by the violence of their desires. On the contrary they are cold and calculating. But they have a Machiavellian disbelief in human virtues. Mankind to them is made up of fools and knaves all equally struggling for their own ends. The only solid goods are material wealth and success and, deliberately rejecting every moral consideration, they set to work to get them. Opposed to these two types of villains, stand the good characters, Isabella, Marcello, Cornelia, Antonio, the Duchess, noble, pitiful and courageous. In contrast to the bad, however, they are passive, they cannot identify themselves with the activities of the tainted world. Once she has married Antonio, the Duchess initiates no action. The other good characters never do anything at all. Helpless victims they are and are swept into the turmoil set up by the furious energy of the wicked. In the end, more often than not they are destroyed by them.”

Regarding characterization Webster seems to have followed Aristotle's views expressed in his *Poetics*. Aristotle pleads for the characters to be **life-like**. By life-like what he means to say is that the behaviour of a character should be in harmony with his nature and temperament. Most of the characters of Webster's are drawn from the court life of Italy. They are real and natural, but at the same time they are true to their own nature. His characters have a marked tendency to fall into series. This is so because he wants to explore fully some particular territory of the mind, and the exploration is carried on from one play to another. There are, first of all, the politicians or Machiavellians, as Flamineo in the *White Devil* and Bosola and the Cardinal in *The Duchess of Malfi*. There are strong, clear-minded masculine feminine figures like Vittoria and Julia, and the more passive feminine figures as Isabella and the Duchess. Then there are chorus characters like Delio and Pescara, just and honest, their rectitude running like a tonic-infusion through the nightmare world created by Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Of these the politicians or Machiavellians are the most interesting and considerable attention is devoted to their growth. Their Machiavellians is sharply distinguished. For example, Bosola stands for a reflective clearheaded politician, worthy to stand by Machiavelli's politician, Cesare Borgia (in *The Prince*). Though Webster's characters are types, they are also individuals. They are not monsters of wickedness or goodness, but complex living, breathing, human beings. Even the best has some weakness and the worst are humanised by a trace of good. Thus, the Duchess is a Machiavellian in as much as she marries secretly, Ferdinand is full of remorse and goes mad and even the Cardinal, at least once, feels a pang of remorse. Bosola is the only one of the characters of Webster who change and grow under the stress of circumstance, and he grows into an avenger from a tool-villain.

To conclude we can refer to **Una Elia fermor's** observation on Webster's characters: "When we think of Webster's characters we find that, even in the limited group of the three main plays there is a marked tendency for them to fall into series. This may be partly due to limitation in sympathy, but it is also, I think, due to a desire to explore a certain territory of the mind more fully than the compass of a simple play will allow; in nearly every case the later study is an extension or modification of the earlier and not a contraction. The true plot of his play is not the events which proceed upon the surface and are flung off, as it were, as a casual expression, but the progress of the minds of the central figures towards deeper and deeper self-knowledge, the approach to the impenetrable mystery of fate perceived in the moments of intense suffering and action, which are also the moments of clearest insight. Our interest in the figure of Bosola, for example, is not mainly because, in the services of Ferdinand's mania, he murders the Duchess and brings about unwittingly the death of Antonio, but because of the strange discrepancy between the man he appears, the man he would be, and the man that, unknown to himself he really is. "

3.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have focused on the play and analysed it by focussing on John Webster's Skill in Plot-construction. The next section gives us a critical understanding of the sources, setting and major themes of the play, which allows us to understand the play and the purpose to which **John Webster** has used them. This has been followed by a detailed and comprehensive summary of the

play and John Webster's art of characterization. The Unit has attempted to give a concise and succinct understanding of the play to help us grapple with various issues raised in the play.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. How successfully does Webster match language and character in *The Duchess of Malfi*?
2. How does Webster satirize the Catholic Church and its corrupt practices in the play?
3. Discuss *The Duchess of Malfi* as a tragedy of transgression.
4. What clues are given to us about the society's attitudes to women in the play?



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UNIT 4 THE DUCHESS OF MALFI: CHARACTER ANALYSIS & CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Main Characters in the Play
 - 4.2.1 The Duchess of Malfi
 - 4.2.2 Antonio Bologna
 - 4.2.3 Duke Ferdinand
 - 4.2.4 Cardinal
 - 4.2.5 Bosola
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit is aimed at providing a deeper understanding of the play by analysing the major characters and their function in the play that allows us to critically examine issues pertaining to gender, nobility, abuse of power and prevailing corruption. Finally, we will end with a few questions, which will help us to encapsulate what we have studied so far.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we'll look at how characters have certain functions and roles to play. The characters epitomize the socio-political milieu and their interactions allow us to gain insights into the age and times in which they are created. Let's take a deeper look at character analysis in the sections that follow.

4.2 MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

Let us have a closer look at major characters of the play.

4.2.1 The Duchess of Malfi

The Duchess, strong-willed, brave, passionate, proud, and a loving wife and mother is the most psychologically complex female Character portrayed with great insight and poetic power. A noble and courageous Duchess is the source of all action in the play. Because of her beauty, boldness, sincerity, love, devotion, patience and tolerance, she is placed as one of the best and immortal characters in the world literature. She has a charming and fascinating personality. It is she who is the source of all action in the play and appears before us in various roles-as a noble and courageous Duchess, as a passionate beloved and devoted wife, and as a true and compassionate mother. Her beauty, boldness, sincerity, love, devotion,

patience and tolerance are some of her natural or acquired virtues which place her among the best and immortal characters in the world literature. Webster's fame and recognition as a dramatist can appropriately be said to have depended on *The Duchess of Malfi* and its heroine, the Duchess.

In Antonio's opinion the Duchess is "the right noble Duchess" so very different in temper from her brothers:

*You never fixed your eyes on three medals
Cast in one figure, of so different temper*

Antonio has high words of praise for the Duchess, her sense of dignity and honour, and her pious life. He pays the following glowing tribute to her:

*For her discourse, it is so full of rapture,
You only will begin then to be sorry
When she doth end her speech, and wish, in wonder
She held it less vain-glory to talk much
Than your penance to hear her:*

She, who has son from her deceased husband, has unfortunately become a widow in the prime of life, when she is still in the full bloom of youth. Her two brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, are against her marrying any man below her dignity or rank only to have all her property and wealth after her death. In spite of giving words to her brothers, she falls in love with her own steward, Antonio. Even when she encounters her executioners, sent by her brothers, she thinks of safety of her husband and her children than her own life and sends Antonio along with her eldest child to Milan for the same. Even on the verge of her death, she prays to God in thankfulness. She instructs her maid Cariolato look after her daughter and son.

She says:

*I pray thee look thou giv'st my little boy
Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl
Say her prayers, ere she sleep.*

One of the dialogues between Bosola and Duchess at the time of when he reaches her to put her to death, he asks her, 'Does not death fright you?' Her reply is full of optimism and elevated thinking. She says:

*Who would be afraid on't?
Knowing to meet such excellent company
In th' other world.*

Duchess is a thoroughly virtuous woman. Legous says: 'The victim, the Duchess of Malfi, is all goodness and innocence, and is driven to madness and death by her brothers because she has secretly married her steward, the virtuous Antonio.'

In her innocence, purity and pathetic death, she is often compared to Shakespeare's Desdemona, but she is a lady of great tact, courage resourcefulness and heroic endurance. Her nature is like sweet herbs, it gives out most sweet fragrance when it is crushed. Adversity brings out to the greatest advantage, her passionate tenderness and heroic fortitude.

In the words of Frederick Allen, “The horrible tortures, however, inflicted by her brothers serve to save her mind already half-crazed with grief. Each new horror seems but to strengthen the resistance of her anguished soul. Even when life has truly become for her the most horrible curse that one can give, her Spirit remains unconquered and unbroken. “I am Duchess of Malfi still”, she says. In the presence of death itself, her strength of spirit might seem superhuman and unnatural but it is humanised by the exquisite tenderness with which it is combined. Her tone to her executioners is that of fearless command. She has not a tremble for their instruments of torture. In the very moment of her horrible death, she stays the hands of her executioners that she may bow her knees before the gates of heaven, and her last cry is a prayer of thanksgiving for the mercy of God.”

At the moment of death, her last words clearly bring out her faith in religion and the grace of God. She is deeply religious and this gives her strength to bear the horrible textures that are inflicted upon her and the cruel death that is her lot.

The question is often asked as to why the Duchess was murdered. Was she really lustful, immoral and irreligious as her brothers think her to be? She was living in a corrupt court, and is there anything surprising or unnatural if its general corruption has also infected her? No concrete answer can be given to these questions but as there is enough evidence in to play to show that she is chaste, virtuous, pure and religious. Perhaps the real answer lies in the fact that Ferdinand felt incestuous love for her, and it was sexual jealousy and not any fault of the Duchess herself, which prompted the murder. Also, both the cardinal and he himself felt that she had disgraced the family by marrying below her ‘degree’ or rank and status.

4.2.2 ANTONIO BOLOGNA

Antonio Bologna, young and smart, wise and intelligent, and honest and virtuous, better known as Antonio who plays a very important role in the play and in the life of the Duchess. It is by virtue of his virtues that he is favoured by Delio, admired by Bosola, and liked and loved by the Duchess, who elevates him to the position of her husband. He is a very keen observer of characters and courts. His observations about the French court and courtiers are worth-praising; and, in this case, he undoubtedly seems to be the mouthpiece of the dramatist.

Antonio is very honest and virtuous. It is not only the Duchess and Delio who are greatly impressed by his honesty but the Cardinal and Bosola also have a very high opinion of his virtues. The Cardinal’s words—“His nature is too honest for such business”—are sufficient evidence to his integrity. Bosola, although in order to please the Duchess, speaks very high of his good qualities in the following manner.

Sure he was too honest.....

He was an excellent

Courtier, and most faithful; a soldier, that though it

As beastly to know his own value too little,

As devilish to acknowledge it too much;

Both his virtue and form deserv'd a far better fortune:
His discourse rather delighted to judge itself, than show itself.
His breast was fill'd with all perfection,

His opinion about Cardinal is, "a Melancholy, Churchman. The spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of toads: When he is jealous of any man he lays worse plots for him than ever was imposed on Hercules, for he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists and a thousand such political monsters." He says The Cardinal and Ferdinand are twins, not by birth, but in their characters. How so much diplomatically Bosola might have said all these things about Antonio, but it cannot be said that his words have no grain of truth in them. "The virtuous Antonio", called so by Legouis, himself acknowledges that he has always been a sincere servant of virtue:

Were there nor heaven, nor hell,
I should be honest: I have long serv'd virtue,
And nev'r ta'en wages of her.

Antonio is a keen observer: His analysis of the personalities of various characters is accurate and worth praising. His views on the French court and courtiers sufficiently exhibit his exactness and judiciousness as an observer of things. The Cardinal and Ferdinand tire immoral and unkind. Antonio sketches their characters in a very few words. Of the Cardinal he appropriately says:

.....he is a melancholy churchman. The spring in his face is nothing but the engendering of toads: where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them, than ever was impos'd on Hercules : for he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists: and a thousand such political monsters.....

And what he says of Duke Ferdinand is equally impressive and correct. He observes that Ferdinand is

.....a most perverse and turbulent nature;
What appears in him mirth, is merely outside,
If he laugh heartily, it is to laugh
All honesty out of fashion.

His views on the character and personality of Bosola and his eulogizing the Duchess aptly show that he observes the things and persons very keenly and minutely. Besides, he wisely generalizes the tendency of the flatterers in the following lines:

Right the fashion of the world:
From decay'd fortunes every flatterer shrinks,
Men cease to build where the foundation sinks.

Antonio is devoted lover of the Duchess and has very high regards for her. It is his sincerity, honesty and devotion that leave a lasting impression of his good image on the heart and mind of the Duchess. The limits of respect and dignity for Duchess is never be crossed by Antonio even after his marriage with her. He rules her during the nights, but in day time he obeys her like the most

dutiful retainer of hers. When the Duchess says to him, “you are a lord of misrule,” he very lovingly replies, “Indeed, my ‘rule is only in the night.” Then she with one kiss stops his mouth. On this he says, “Nay, that’s but one: Venus had soft doves to draw her chariot. I must have another” (she kisses him again) this dialogue between the Duchess and Antonio shows the passion and piety of love between them. The cares and fears of life are never allowed to enter their loving minds. Antonio’s devotion to Duchess does not allow him to disobey her.

Without any doubt it is clear that Antonio is a very irreproachable man, but the overall impression of his personality is that of a weak-willed, timid and unheroic man who has been raised from baseness to honour. He lacks the capacity for quick decision and vigorous action. He does not act, even when action is not only a necessity but a duty. He always exhibits an inferiority complex. If he had been a man of strong will-power and heroic temperament, the Duchess and her children would not have met the fate they have really done. When the Duchess advises him to leave her for Milan along with her eldest child, he immediately agrees saying, “You counsel safely. Best of life, farewell.” However, to defend his weaknesses and unheroic qualities Frederick Allen’s following views can be presented: “The character of Antonio was largely determined by the exigencies of the story. If the play was not to be repulsive, the steward must not be unattractive. If, on the other hand, it was to follow the original story of intrigue and counter-intrigue, then, of necessity, he must not be bold or venturesome and must naturally assume throughout his relations with the Duchess a subordinate position. The conditions of the original story demanded passivity rather than activity from Antonio, and these conditions the dramatist, in his delineation of the character, was careful to observe, even at the “risk of depicting the steward as somewhat unheroic.”

4.2.3 DUKE FERDINAND

Duke Ferdinand, one of the two brothers of the Duchess of Malfi, has been portrayed by the dramatist as a “rash, impulsive, indiscreet”, man lacking in judgment, “and more or less dependent in his action on the advice of his brother.” In the beginning of the play Webster, through a dialogue between Antonio and Delio, appropriately projects his persona. Of him Antonio says:

..... a most perverse and turbulent nature;
What appears in him mirth, is merely outside,
If he laugh heartily, it is to laugh
All honesty out of fashion.

He is not effortless and employs underhand practices in securing his ends. He weaves round his victims the web of deceitfulness, double-dealing and intrigue, and entraps them. Antonio Continues:

He speaks with others’ tongues, and hears men’s suits
With others’ ears: will seem to sleep o’th’ bench
Only to entrap offenders in their answers;
Dooms men to death by information,
Rewards, by hearsay.

Hearing all this about the intriguing nature and Machiavellian mind of Ferdinand, Delio presents his own estimate of this cruel and dishonest manipulator:

Then the law to him
Is like a foul black cobweb to a Spider,
He makes it his dwelling, and a prison
To entangle those shall feed him.

While delineating his character, the dramatist seems more and more interested in highlighting his cruelty, manipulative talent, and revengeful nature. He always forbids his sister, the Duchess, to remarry, and particularly to marry anyone who is not equal to her status. But, in reality, the position or rank of her husband has nothing to do with him. What he is actually interested in is the singleness (i.e. the state of her remaining a widow) of his sister. After the news of her murder, he sadly admits:

Only I must confess. I had a hope,
Had she continu'd widow, to have gain'd
An infinite mass of treasure by her death:
And that was the main cause; her marriage,
That drew a stream of gall quite through my heart;

By nature, Ferdinand is cruel and tormenting. He applies all the oppressive measures to torture the Duchess to death. His instructions to Bosola to tease and kill his sister seem not to have been given by a man who loves her wealth and property but by one who loves the Duchess herself. He cannot tolerate her falling in love with someone else. He like a dejected malicious lover seeks to take revenge on her. He had incestuous love for the Duchess and sexual jealousy prompted him to torture and murder her. To drive her to madness he orders the mad people to be placed around her. He himself visits her in the darkness of the night and offers her a dead man's hand to frighten her. And ultimately, he gets her murdered.

Notwithstanding his cruelty and oppressiveness, Ferdinand is kind and remorseful. When he sees the face of his dead sister he is filled with pity and remorse for her. He cannot even afford to see her, and regretfully says:

Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle, she died young.
And he even wishes to die with her:
She and I were twins:
And should I die this instant, I had liv'd
Her time to a minute.

He scolds Bosola, the spy and murder, for obeying him and putting her to death. He would have more pleased him if he had hidden her somewhere instead of killing her. His following words exhibit his affection for the Duchess and his pathetic bent of mind:

Let me see her face. again;
Why didst not thou pity her? What an excellent

Honest man might'st thou have been
If thou hadst borne her to some sanctuary!
Or, bold in a good cause, oppos'd thyself
With thy advanced sword above thy head,
Between her innocence and my revenge!
I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits,
Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done't.

The sudden change in the thinking and attitude of Ferdinand is like that marked in the other Elizabethan villains. However, change in him is somewhat different from that in others. They generally change their attitude and behaviour due to their helplessness and adverse circumstances, but Ferdinand is changed out of pity and remorse. He even goes mad and dies in madness. But for his too much dependence on his elder brother, the Cardinal, he would have been a less unkind man with only a few weaknesses like rashness and outrageousness.

4.2.4 CARDINAL

Cardinal, the elder brother of the Duchess, is the real villain in *The Duchess of Malfi*. He is evil and wicked to the core of his heart. He knows no mercy or pity. Almost all the murders in the play have been planned by him and executed at his instance. He is actually a Machiavelli in a cardinal's robe. Frederick Allen estimates his character thus: "He has all the besetting sins of the Machiavellian villain. He is cold, calculating, and treacherous, inordinately ambitious and factions (III, iii 35), pitiless in his hate, secretive in his lust and in his villainy and as incredulous of loyalty in others as he is faithless himself (V, ii, 250). He would seem to regard gratitude as a weakness, and is careful to disappoint his tool of all reward, and, if possible, to be rid of him when once he has gained knowledge of dangerous secrets in his criminal service."

The Cardinal is out and out wicked and devilish. His thoughts and acts are inspired by the devil himself. He does not hesitate to do even the vilest of the things. Of him Bosola says: "Some fellows, they say, are possessed with the devil, but this great fellow was able to possess the greatest devil, and make him worse." Describing the mind and personality of this "melancholy churchman" Antonio substantiates Bosola's above view of him. He says: "he is a melancholy churchman. The spring in his face is nothing but the engend'ring of toads: where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them, than ever was imposed on Hercules: for he strews in his way flatterers, panders, intelligencers, atheists: and a thousand such political monsters."

He is keen, shrewd and calculating. He is the chief force behind all the murders in the play. He observes things and characters keenly, behaves with them shrewdly and makes exact calculations about their ends and means. Ferdinand and Bosola are merely his instruments; he uses them in the ways he likes. At the time of appointing a spy to keep a watch on the Duchess, Ferdinand suggests the name of Antonio, but his (Cardinal's) shrewd eye sees his honesty as his great disqualification to be a spy. He says to Ferdinand, "You are deceiv'd in him/His nature is. too honest for such business." His face never reveals what is in his heart. He has a remarkable control over his thoughts and feelings which he can

hide to the extent he wants. It is he who shrewdly gets the Duchess tortured and murdered, gets Antonio banished from Ancona, and then, in the end, asks Bosola to put him to his sword. When he thinks that Julia may disclose his secret of his ordering the murder of the Duchess, he puts her also to death by making her kiss the Bible with a poisoned covering. And his scheming nature is best exemplified in his instructing all the officers not to come out of their chambers when in the night they hear any shouts or cries from Ferdinand. Actually, at this time he has to remove the dead body of Julia to her own dwelling. But unfortunately, he himself falls a victim to his own scheme and is given fatal wounds by his brother Ferdinand.

The Cardinal knows no remorse but all revenge. He has no pity for the Duchess, her children, her husband, or for Bosola or Julia. In order to satisfy his revenge, he can do anything. He gets his sister killed in cold blood; banishes her husband, Antonio from Ancona, orders Bosola to kill him and also plans to put an end to Bosola's life. He, in order to shut Julia's lips puts her to death.

This worldly prelate can be said to have almost all the vices in him. In the words of Frederick Allen, "Popular report endows him with high spirits, personal courage and gallantry and a reckless passion for gambling. His more intimate acquaintances know him for a dark intriguer who maintains a veritable army of spies and treacherous tools." However, like all the other villains, particularly of the Elizabethan drama, he, in the end, realizes:

Oh Justice:
I suffer now for what hath former bin
Sorrow is held the eldest child of sin.

Throughout his life he has played the game of deaths and murders, but the moment he sees his own death before his eyes, he fears and falters like the most cowardly person. In this connection, Frederick Allen observes, "The prelate's cynical audacity deserts him when Bosola proclaims his revengeful purpose. Unlike most of Webster's other characters, he falters in spirit at the threat of death and appeals to his assailant for mercy. But, when he has already received a fatal wound, something of his old mocking spirit returns : he can taunt Bosola and pray to be himself, 'laid aside and never thought of ' Indeed nothing in his life becomes him so much as the leaving it, then and then only does he reveal a trace of unselfishness : "Look to my brother."

4.2.5 BOSOLA

Bosola, "the most consummate character in *The Duchess of Malfi*," is next only to the Duchess in significance. He is the most complex and complicated character in the play. On the one hand, he is a well-read scholar, philosopher and worldly-wise man, and on the other, he is keen, shrewd, witty, manipulating, and cunning, fit to be appointed a spy to keep a watch on the activities of the Duchess. His speeches are always characterized by his wit and philosophy. He can safely be called a 'spoiled genius'.

He is actually the "court gall" whose "railing is not for simple love of piety: Indeed, he rails at those things which he wants, would be as lecherous, covetous, or proud, Bloody, or envious, as any man, If he had means to be

so.” This assessment of Bosola’s personality is by Antonio is an ample evidence of his shrewdness and satirical talent. It is his unfavouring circumstances that have brought him failures and frustrations. And out of frustration he has become such an unfeeling and unkind manipulator. Having passed his seven-year term in the galleys, when he comes back to the Cardinal, at whose instance he murdered someone, the latter responds coldly. Then Bosola says: “I have done you better service than to be slighted thus. Miserable age, where only the reward of doing well, is the doing of it!” Hearing this when the Cardinal says to him, “You enforce your merit too much,” he reminds him (the Cardinal):

“Ifell into the galleys in your service, where, for two years together, I wore two towels instead of a shirt, with a knot on the shoulder, after the fashion of a Roman mantle. Slighted thus? I will thrive some way: blackbirds fatten best in hard weather: why not I, in these dog days?” ‘

To a certain extent it is the Cardinal’s neglect of Bosola which has poisoned all his goodness. In this connection, Antonio says:

’Tis great pity
He should be thus neglected, I have heard
He’s very valiant. This foul melancholy
Will poison all this goodness, for, I’ll tell you,
If too immoderate sleep be truly said
To be an inward rust unto the soul;
It then doth follow want of action
Breeds all black malcontents, and their close rearing,
Like moths in cloth, do hurt for want of wearing,

Bosola is an ambitious man who can go to any extent to achieve his goal. He accepts the offer given by the Cardinal to be aspy in the palace of the Duchess. Of his ambition and desire for power Frederick Allen writes: “He is certainly not without ambition, and in his bitterness his only motives for action are considerations of personal aggrandisement and desire for power. In the world of practical life, he wilfully disregards conscientious scruples, but he is not altogether without them.”

As a spy Bosola is intelligent, shrewd and dauntless. He very cunningly confirms the pregnancy of the Duchess, the birth of the child. and conveys the news to the Arragonian brothers in Italy. The climax ‘of his shrewdness can be seen when he praises Antonio while all other officers of the Duchess ridicule and abuse him: and thus he gains confidence of the Duchess, who discloses all her secrets to him. He misguides her and gets her arrested at the shrine of Loretta. Towards the end of the play he intelligently deposes Julia to know the secret of the sadness of the Cardinal.

His assessments of the personalities of different characters are exact and dauntless. He is intelligent and fearless enough to present the characters with all their virtues and vices. He comments on the nature and character of the Cardinal and Ferdinand in the following way: “He and his brothers 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." His dauntless tone becomes satirical when he directly says to Ferdinand:

Your brother and yourself are worthy men;
 You have a pair of hearts are hollow graves,
 Rotten, and rotting others: and your vengeance.
 Like two chain'd bullets, still goes arm in arm;
 You may be brothers; for treason, like the plague,
 Doth take much in a blood.

Bosola is an unkind avenger. He, at the instance of the Cardinal and Ferdinand, tortures the innocent Duchess in all the possible ways. When gold is offered to him, he immediately asks "Whose throat must I cut?" But unfortunately, he works for the thankless Arragonian brothers, who offer him nothing but abuses and misbehaviour. After the strangling of the Duchess he is again refused his reward. His vengeance takes a turn and he plans to take revenge on the Cardinal and Ferdinand. He asks Ferdinand:

Let me know Wherefore I should be thus neglected? Sir,
 I served your tyranny: and rather strove
 To satisfy yourself, than all the world;
 And though I loath'd the evil, yet I lov'd
 You that did counsel it: and rather sought
 To appear a true servant than an honest man.

This shows that Bosola, in order to satisfy his desire for power and pelf, deliberately but reluctantly moves on the path of dishonesty and manipulation. But when the reality dawns on him he changes his intention with the determination "I would not change my peace of conscience for all the wealth of Europe." He is ready even to provide a new life to the Duchess. Seeing her stirring again he says, "Upon thy pale lips I will melt my heart to store them with fresh colour." He makes up his mind to seek out good Antonio and to put him into "safety from the reach of these most cruel biters". Then he declares, "It may be, I'll join with thee in a most just revenge." Thus, Bosola, who was once the instrument of the Cardinal, becomes later on his own instrument to take revenge on the Cardinal himself. He reaches him to put him to his sword; he offers him large sums of money, but he clearly says, "Thy prayers and proffers are both unseasonable", and stabs him without wasting any time.

Bosola is a man of philosophical mind. His statements and conversation exhibit his philosophy and scholarship. But for his association with the cruel and Machiavellian Cardinal, Bosola would have been a pure scholar and profound philosopher. Most of the philosophical assertions in the play have come out from the mouth of this philosopher turned villain. Some of his reflections on life are as under:

- (1) our bodies are weaker than those paper prisons boys use to keep flies in : more contemptible, since ours is to preserve earth-worms :

didst thou ever see a lark in a cage ? such is the soul in the body this world is like her little turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads, like her looking-glass, only gives us a miserable knowledge of the small compass of our prison.

- (2) We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded.

Which way please them.

- (3) We are only like dead walls, or vaulted graves,

That, ruin'd, yields no echo.....

Oh this gloomy world,

In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness

Doth, womanish, and fearful, mankind live?

To summarize all his acts and deeds in the play of *Bosola*, David Cecil writes: "There is a strain of good in him; and in the end this strain of good leads him not to damnation but to repentance. From the first his amorality is shown to be the result largely of harsh circumstances, and as such more excusable. He is a middle-aged soldier of fortune, so vexed by poverty, ingratitude, and bad luck that he is ready to yield to any temptation that comes his way. Why be scrupulous in a wholly unscrupulous world? Ferdinand and the Cardinal take advantage of his desperate mood and make him their creature in their plots against their sister, the Duchess. Under their pressure he proceeds like Flamineo, from crime to crime. For he spies on the Duchess, who trusts him; then betrays her secret, then when the brothers begin to wreak vengeance on her, he becomes first her torturer, after-wards her murderer. But he has never liked his task from the beginning. As it gets more odious, he recoils more and more receives the brothers' orders with a kind of bitter detachment, praises her courage to them, talks to her, even while he is engineering her torments, with a strange melancholic irony. Finally, in the magnificent scene when he stands with the Duke Ferdinand by her dead body, he finds himself unable any longer to shut his ears to the clamour of conscience".

4.3 LET US SUM UP

By this time we have finished reading the play *The Duchess of Malfi*; we have gone through each unit and are now in a position to see how **John Webster** has used his characters to narrate the story of *The Duchess of Malfi* and how he deviates from the Shakespearean tragedy popular at the time. The critical analysis will enable us to understand the various perspectives through which the play can be read and will help us expand our understanding of the play. However, we should keep in mind the fact that though we, as 21st Century readers, analyse the play from our vantage point, and through various 20th and 21st Century critical tools, what we observe is blatant disregard for a woman's assertion of her rights to live as she desires and it clearly explicates the fact that suppression of female sexuality was the norm then and even today in many parts of the world. Then again, we keep reading about honour killings and of deaths related to inter caste marriages in India. It compels us to reflect on whether we have progressed as a society in real sense of the term or not.

4.4 QUESTIONS

1. What claims does the Duchess have to the status of a tragic protagonist? Discuss Webster's portrayal of her from this perspective.
2. Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy abounds in incestuous relationships. How would you interpret Ferdinand's incestuous attraction towards his sister?
3. Discuss the dual roles of Bosola as an accomplice of Duke Ferdinand and the avenger of the Duchess. How does Webster reconcile the two aspects in the presentation of his character?
4. Which characters in *The Duchess of Malfi* demonstrate Machiavellian motives?
5. Compare and contrast different characters in the play? Do you agree with the Puritans that they are immoral?

