

## **“A WITHERED LAUREL WITH TRAGIC FATE: THE DUCHESS OF MALFI.”**

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(Character analysis of The Duchess in “The Duchess of Malfi” by John Webster)

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### **ABSTRACT**

The journal aim to provide the readers a collective knowledge about the heroine of John Webster’s play — “The Duchess Of Malfi”. This research contain in depth details about the Duchess’ consciousness, examining her psychological vision, moral resilience and political dilemmas. This analysis also portray her as a tragic heroine by bringing out her choices and the way she fought against patriarchal oppressions and redefines female agency in the play. The paper bring out her identity shaped by public duties and personal desires wrapped in family drama. Ultimately, the paper argues that her choices are the catalyst of action in the play and her do’s and don’t form this a great senecan tragedy.

**KEYWORDS:** Malfi, Senecan tragedy, Duchess, John Webster, Withered laurel, female agency, patriarchal oppressions.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A big shot for his tragedies based on themes of power, corruption, and revenge. John Webster was an English dramatist, cleric and public speaker. He was known for his dark and complex writings and born in London to Jacobean era. “ the Duchess of Malfi” is a Jacobean revenge play performed privately in 1602 and was written by Webster in 1612. The source of this play was the second volume of William Painter’s Palace Of Pleasure (1567).

Painter rendered the story from french of Belleforest’s Histories Tragiques (1565) which is at present, a greatly expanded version of the original Tale found in Mathero Bandello’s Novelle (1554). The place is led in Italy. The setting of the play is provided by contemporary Italian Court life, it is the Italionate Hell. The plane revolves around the murderer of a woman and

the conspiracy behind her. She hides her marriage from her brother, but somehow the truth was revealed and it results in a tragic ending, the play as a Senecan revenge tragedy with themes of murder and revenge for pride and honour.

## **SUMMARY**

“The Duchess of Malfi” is a world of crime, intrigue, cruelty, and mortality. Wickedness and vices are rampant and virtue is at a discount in the Italy of Webster. The world of the Duchess of Malfi is an Italian hell. In the age of Webster, it was the usual practice, depict Italy and Italian Court life by the dramatist. The play is regarded as the finest tragedy in the English language outside Shakespeare.

In Webster’s play two brothers, Ferdinand and Cardinal plan to murder their own sister — the Duchess. She is noble, young and psychologically complex female character. She has charming personality and became a widow in the prime of her life when she is still in the full bloom of youth. Duchess courageously decided to marry her steward, Antonio and this is what became her destruction. Later, the storyline of the play depicts how she was tortured and finally murdered brutally. Also, her husband and children were killed too.

## **Character Sketch of the Duchess**

The Duchess stands as one of the most powerful and complex female protagonist in Jacobean drama. She was full of courage, emotional depth, moral resilience, who challenges, rigid aristocratic, and patriarchal terms of 17 century, making her both a tragic heroine and a feminist. She believes in her right to love, rule, and live according to her own choices. Her character can be examined by following pointers :-

### **1. A Woman of Stillness and Moral Independence.**

In the very beginning, the Duchess was told by her brother Ferdinand not to remarry, but she believes in independent choices, and though a widow, she refuses to become merely the property of her brothers. She was in love with her steward Antonio and secretly, marry him and quietly resists the patriarchal domination. Her famous lines of selfhood:

“I am Duchess of Malfi still”

This dialogue symbolises her inner sovereignty, even when she was tortured brutally, she never fails to retain her spiritual and moral authority. She rejects the hypocrisy of patriarchal society by showing how females are controlled and males enjoy freedom by saying:

“ why should only I

Of all the other princess of the world Be cased like a holy relic? I have youth, And a little beauty.”

This speech reveals her appreciation for equality, moral Independence and desire for natural human affection.

## 2. A courageous lover.

The Duchess proposes to Antonio and quickly marry him. Later, she became the mother of his children by this, she takes control of the court, ship and frames marriage as distribution of responsibility and equal partnership. She gives her hand to Antonio and sanctifies their union:

“ Your sacrifice is your obedience”

Unlike other conventional heroines of the age, she was a bold lover and courageous wife. After getting threatened by her own brother, she still secretly marries a man, she loved and became mother of his kids.

## 3. Stoical and persistent.

As the play darkens, the Duchess was transformed into a figure of extraordinary stoic endurance. Ferdinand make her suffer from psychological cruelty, such as he presents to her a dead man hand and she kisses it, she was shown wax figures of her supposedly murdered family and finally, kept around mad men who scream and torture her. In one of the most haunting scenes, she welcome death with resolve by saying:

“ pull, and pull strongly, for your  
able strength Must pull down heaven Upon me”

Later, she was strangled to death by Bosola, a machiavellian antagonist in the play.

## 4. Spiritual and ethical women.

The Duchess is deeply compassionate and forgiving, even towards her executioners. Her final words are not filled with hatred or revenge, but with mercy and generosity. This establish her moral superiority over her tormentors. She reflects a Christian vision of patience and endurance transforming suffering into spiritual victory. She was a true queen.

“ I forgive them.”

## 5. Proto- feminist tragic heroine.

The Duchess’ tragedy lies not in a moral fail, but in her challenge to corrupt social order. Her assertion of the right to love became an act of rebellion in the society, that treat women as a political property. She boldly claims:

“ if all my Royal kindred

Lay in my way unto this marriage I'd make them my low footsteps."

These line reveals how resolute she is in pursuing a life shaped by personal desire rather than family pressure.

#### 6. Like a lotus in dirt.

The Duchess stands for light and moral clarity in a decaying court. She objects ancient custom, patriarchal operation, political pressure and corrupt world. Instead, she wisely did what seems good for her stuck to it till the very end till death. This shows her philosophical awareness of human corruption, even as she herself strives to rise above it with her statement: "whether we fall by ambition, blood, or lust Like diamonds We are cut with our own dust."

#### 7. Motherhood.

The Duchess was a mother too and she aimed at keeping her children safe till the end. She was full of motherhood and keep her children above herself. While she was in a danger of death she still cares for her kids and orders her maid:

"Go, help your old lady;

And give my little boy, some syrup for his cold"

These lines depicts her love for her children and are one of the most sorrowful dialogues of the Duchess in the entire play.

### Plot Structure

The main plot of the play consist of the story of the Duchess. She married her Steward Antonio, despite the warning of her brothers, and this leads to her death and destruction of her husband and children too. Bosola who killed her and her kids later repents and avenge death. Her role was of a malcontent, tool-villian and an avenger. As said by Clifford Leech — "A collection of brilliant scenes, whose sentences do not ultimately cohere"

The subplot of the play is marked by Julia's story and her murder by Cardinal. His tragic art is a result of a number of influences. Thus, in the play, there is much of melodrama and sensation, and this is the central theme of the play. It serves to intensify the horror. Also, the conflict of the play entirely rest on the stoical protagonist (Duchess) and Machiavellian villians. The leading characters are most complicated as the possesses, both Senecan and Machiavellian qualities. Collins appreciates Webster by saying:

" No dramatist, even not Shakespeare showed more consummate ability in heightening the terrible effects"

Hence, it can be said that John Webster is one of the finest dramatist among all the other

among his own times. His use of imagery and philosophy of tragedy makes his works listed in the world plays.

“ a very great literary and dramatic genius directed towards chaos.”

—T. S. Eliot

## CONCLUSION

Webster presents the Duchess not as a fallen woman, but as a morally victorious figure whose inner nobility and kindness survives even death. Her life on the other hand for the triumph of human dignity over corruption.

Through her rejection of patriarchal control, her capacity for deep love and her unshakening dignity was truly visible in the play. She became a symbol of resistance and feminine. The Duchess of Malfi is thus, a story of resistance over corruption, feminism over patriarchal control and spirituality over madness. Hence, the heroine as said by her husband in the play “withered” but doesn’t fail to leave a legacy behind her.