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## OTHER THEMES

*Sin*

We have examined specifically carnal sins, but sin as a doctrine features throughout, partly as an example of the weakness of the human condition, and partly as a moralistic warning of pitfalls to avoid. Witness the brothers' **imagery** in their early admonition of their sister not to fall into the habit of lusty widows, 'Their livers are more spotted / Than Laban's sheep'. In the same breath they talk of witchcraft and devilry, and hypocritically of how such 'Will come to light'. 'Lustful pleasures', they say 'forerun man's mischief' (I.1.291, 309, 318, 319).

Who more appropriate than the Cardinal, senior member of the family, to spell out the dogma 'Sorrow is held the eldest child of sin' (V.5.54)?

*Identity*

This at first seems peculiarly relevant to the Duchess who, along with her brother the Cardinal, is given no other name by the playwright. We may ask why this is so? Somehow it distances her from us. Not only her nobility but her lack of a forename puts her beyond our reach. We have sympathy for an Antonio who becomes her lover/husband but never seems to be able to cross that paradox/divide into a familiarity and familialness which goes with a patrician no-naming.

Strangely, even her brothers, intimates from childhood, refer to her directly as you and, in her absence, as the Duchess, or with increasing contempt as sister, strumpet, curs'd creature and so on. No wonder she enters an identity crisis of her own when, faced with the disguised old man of death (Bosola), she challenges him to name her, 'Dost know me?' then 'Who am I?' through 'Am not I thy Duchess?' to a final and resigned affirmation 'I am Duchess of Malfi still' (IV.2.115, 117, 127, 134). So that for all her expressions of intent to Antonio at a levelling, she retreats finally into an identity of position rather than personality. Once the Duchess has lost her status, she does not know who she is, so that she can question with apparent innocence 'Are you not my brother?' But still turn that



## QUESTION

The most important and the least important people in the play are known alone by their titles. What is a playwright's purpose in employing such a device?

innocuousness on its head with the biting dismissive answer she provides for herself, 'No you are a villain'.

Anonymity is akin to a denial of identity for the Duchess, and she fights it as much as Ferdinand welcomes it for the concealing darkness that accompanies it. Bosola demands it as disguise, courtiers appear in masques and even weapons are rarely naked.

*Death and desire/the futility of greatness / the decadence of high life / universal mortality*

Instances will be found throughout the play to illustrate these interrelated ideas.

In Renaissance drama we are never very far from death. People die, often young, often murdered. Almost everyone in this play, good, and bad, dies. The 'activity' is a **metaphor** for the end of the human cycle which started in homely intimacy and runs its course into decline. Nearby lurks desire. We see how characters are aware of this paradox of states, and its outworking in sex. Desire is shown as risky; hence the secrecy. Orgasm is likened to a mini-death. Sidney a contemporary of Webster's writes 'I desire nothing but the death of desire'.

The futility of greatness is well observed, and particularly in the character assassination by Bosola of his masters. Without too fully engaging in the detail of this, he refers to them as rich but providing food for none but crows (I.1.51). The audience may conjecture the **irony** that the fruit that comes from their crooked and fetid growth is not unlike in quality the fruit that Bosola is soon to present to the Duchess which leads to her illness and inexorably to her undoing.

Bosola and Antonio's discussion focuses on mortality, and how it applies even to those who aspire to be great. Hawks have reward, says Bosola, but all that soldiers receive is injury, procession from one hospital to another and in the end being laid out head to foot, in coffins.

One of the features of a **tragedy** is that all the major characters, high and low, die. Most poignantly is this expressed by the Cardinal in



## QUESTION

Does Webster have intentions of promoting morality or does he write to titillate?

## BACKGROUND

## JOHN WEBSTER

## HIS LIFE

We know even less about the life of Webster than we do about Shakespeare. It appears that he was born c. 1578–9, the oldest son of a coachmaker whose business was in Cow Lane, situated in London's Smithfield and within the parish of St Sepulchre. His father was a member of the Merchant Taylor's Company, which Webster himself claims to be a freeman of in 1623. Young John probably attended the Company school before being admitted to the New Inn of the Middle Temple in 1598. His legal training is frequently betrayed by familiarity with court procedure, references to which occur throughout the play.

## CONTEXT

*The White Devil* is the work of an apprentice. *The Duchess of Malfi* is the work of a master-craftsman.

As we know little about Webster's life, so we know little about his death. The year was probably 1634. But this very sparseness of information about one of the foremost Jacobean playwrights can be a benefit. It prevents our being distracted by his circumstances from the drama. Or rather, it stops us from confusing images which come to us by courtesy of his genius with impressions garnered from his biography. We are freed from the person to appreciate the work, and in an uncluttered way.

Of course this introduces a paradox. Most modern critics are very concerned about contextuality. Because we know so little about the man, we are driven to concentrate on textuality, on his writing. In an almost uncanny way this should lead us on to meeting and knowing the writer and his thinking more intimately and more exactly.

## HIS DRAMATIC WORK

As well as having an evident taste for and experience of the theatre, Webster's plays betray the broad range of his reading and are strewn with references to his training and profession as a lawyer.

## Background

In the early 1600s he appears to have collaborated with other playwrights in a number of theatrical ventures, the texts of which are now lost.

The first play he wrote alone was not initially well received. *The White Devil* (1612) experiments with some of the ideas and themes later reworked in the more immediately popular play under consideration in these Notes. Both are set at court, both invoke ghosts, both focus on a heroine and both are tragedies.

*The Duchess of Malfi* (1614) also, like Webster's preceding play, features a **malcontent**. Both men become aware of the birth of pity within themselves, but Bosola's remorse and his response to it affect the final outcome of the play in a manner not available to Flameneo. In the fourth act, too, the Duchess becomes so intensely the focus that the dramatic nature of her unfolding torture surpasses anything realised in Webster's former work. It became common in this era of drama (and often persists to our own day) to define a person by their position or role in society; so that the Duchess's assertion of her identity takes on a political as well as a personal significance. The fact that her last words to her maid are maternal instructions gives substance to the view of Webster's politically liberal, even matriarchal sensibility.

Although Webster was only 33 when the play was first performed, it was nearly another ten years before it was published. There were certain intrinsic dangers in the printing of such a play; not only the neurotic censorship rife at the time but also the danger of text piracy.

The last play Webster is known to have written by himself is *The Devil's Law Case* (1616). The audience is encouraged to think this is going to be another **tragedy**, but it ends in **comedy**, both in the classical and colloquial sense. Webster continued to maintain his interest in the sort of fraught political events well known to his spectators and, like the other plays, there is a constant tension of gender, with women cast in the tragic role.

Not much is known of the rest of Webster's theatrically productive life, or indeed any other part of it. This forces a benefit on the



## QUESTION

*The Devil's Law Case* is the comedy *The Duchess of Malfi* could have been if Bosola and the Duchess had ended up in each others' arms. Wouldn't such a satire have reflected Webster's sense of humour better? Or would it have been a farce?