

The Duchess of Malfi by John Webster

Outline of a talk by Tom Rank at an A Level Revision Day

The general advice document offers guidance on how to approach Paper 4; please read it in conjunction with the specific comments on this text.

Though in our miseries Fortune have a part,
Yet in our noble sufferings she hath none.
Contempt of pain, that we may call our own.

Antonio

We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and banded
Which way please them.

Bosola

What are we to make of these extracts, both from near the end of the play? Do they tell us about Webster? About the characters? About the play? About ourselves? Will we change our minds by the very end of the play?

The dominant assessment objective is AO4, different interpretations, so you need to be able to discuss issues in the play. Make the text itself your first study, including selecting key short quotations to memorise. You *must* support your views by close reference to the text.

Debates

These are some of the debates you might have about this play. The examination question is very unlikely to resemble any of these exactly so you must also be ready to discuss ideas you have never met before, at least not in the form that you find on the paper.

1. Act 1 is chaotic and pointless. **Or** Act 1 is a cleverly contrived introduction to the play.
2. In Act 2 Scene 1 the Duchess is enhanced as a human being. **Or** In Act 2 Scene 1 the Duchess is diminished by her disregard of her public duty.
3. Who is the more important character in the play – Bosola or the Duchess?
4. The Duchess is responsible for her own downfall. **Or** The downfall of the Duchess is entirely the responsibility of the evil brothers aided by the murderous Bosola.
5. The play is weak in structure, strong in characterisation. **Or** The play's strength is in its structure but few critics take the trouble to understand its cleverness. Its weakness lies in the one-dimensional characters who inhabit the play.
6. Webster's purpose in writing the play was to titillate the audience's fascination with sexual and violent perversions. **Or** Webster's purpose in writing the play was to disgust his audience at the wickedness they see in the play and to promote morality.
7. Julia is so unnecessary to the play that many productions rightly cut her part. **Or** Julia is crucial to our understanding of the Cardinal and all he represents in Webster's aim to show the perceived wickedness of the Catholic Church.
8. Whereas the Duchess is the moral centre of the play, Bosola is its dramatic centre.

9. Webster creates more comedy than horror in the play. **Or** The play is nothing more than a wax-work chamber of horrors.
10. Webster has produced a play of gratuitous cruelty and violence. **Or** Webster clearly shows in his play the triumph of good over evil.
11. Webster is able to produce the most thought-provoking language and imagery but he has been unable to produce a coherent play.
12. The main purpose of the play is to show the conflict between the old aristocracy (represented by men like Ferdinand) and aspiring middle-class bureaucrats (like Antonio). **Or** The main purpose of the play is to show that an intelligent, independent woman like the Duchess cannot survive in a world dominated by powerful male rulers and their agents.
13. Is *The Duchess of Malfi* any more than a revenge tragedy?
14. Life, as it appears to Webster, is a moral chaos. **Or** Webster bases his faith upon human integrity and in the nobility to which human life can aspire in spite of the disorder which surrounds it.

(These debates are based mainly on material prepared by Roy Hopwood for AQA Newsletter – March 2003.)

Script extract

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the character of Bosola plays an uncertain role. Whilst he is in charge of the Duchess' horses, his main task is that of a spy and intelligencer for the Aragonian brothers. This would seem to agree that he is an "entirely convincing character". However, Bosola also acts as a choric figure at regular intervals during the play and he often makes judgements on the other characters and the series of events. Therefore he could merely be seen as "a tool in the plot". Yet Bosola's character is much more intricate than these opinions portray it to be.

This is the opening paragraph – note that the key words of the question (shown in quotation marks) are addressed from the start, with some detail already and a good balance of views. Note also the dramatic awareness: "choric" etc – and of structure. Continuing at this level the answer would gain a secure A grade.

Asking questions

- Act 1 is chaotic and pointless.
- *Or* Act 1 is a cleverly contrived introduction to the play.
Which seems more convincing?
How can I deal with the other opinion, even if I think it's wrong?

What parts of the play can I find to support either of these opinions? Can I comment on language form and structure too?

- Life, as it appears to Webster, is a moral chaos.
- *Or* Webster bases his faith upon human integrity and in the nobility to which human life can aspire in spite of the disorder which surrounds it.

More evenly balanced opinions here? So, can I say both are right, up to a point? Yes – there's no need to take sides just because the question is like that! You still have to find examples that support both sides. See the quotations used at start of this section for ideas.

The Duchess of Malfi - the ending

- A redemptive ending?
- Human aspirations are nothing?
- Accept the pain and frustration of life and to die with courage and dignity?
- Brutal theatricality?
- Demonstrates the conflict is a social one, over possession of the Duchess?

Whatever opinions the question might come up with, it probably won't be all of these. Yet the ending is complex (see next extract too) so you might want to take something from all of them. What you think about the ending is likely to colour your views of the whole play – considering the last Act is part of an examination of the structure of the play.

The Duchess of Malfi – one character's comment

BOSOLA: In a mist; I know not how:
Such a mistake as I have often seen
In a play. O, I am gone!
We are only like dead walls or vaulted graves,
That, ruin'd, yield no echo. Fare you well.
It may be pain, but no harm, to me to die
In so good a quarrel. O, this gloomy world!
In what a shadow, or deep pit of darkness,
Doth womanish and fearful mankind live!
Let worthy minds ne'er stagger in distrust
To suffer death or shame for what is just:
Mine is another voyage.

What a strange mix is here! How would you comment on the views Bosola appears to be expressing in these lines? What do these comments reveal about him, about other characters (can you see how they apply to the brothers, to Antonio, the Duchess...?) - and about what Webster's view might be?

The Duchess of Malfi – another view of the ending

DELIO: ... Let us make noble use
Of this great ruin; and join all our force
To establish this young hopeful gentleman
In 's mother's right. These wretched eminent things
Leave no more fame behind 'em, than should one
Fall in a frost, and leave his print in snow;
As soon as the sun shines, it ever melts,
Both form and matter. I have ever thought
Nature doth nothing so great for great men
As when she 's pleas'd to make them lords of truth:
Integrity of life is fame's best friend,
Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end.

Are we convinced by these words? That may depend, of course, on the staging – think about that important aspect. It will also depend on everything else that we've already seen in the play.

The Duchess

- “The Duchess of Malfi...steps out of the path of duty and marries for lust.”
- “...she is inescapably a victim of others' evil and of social attitudes.”
- “Once she has married Antonio, the Duchess initiates no action.”

Can we accept all of these? Probably not – though some may, you feel, apply at certain points – your view may change as you watch the play unfold or as you think again. Be prepared to explain how the views of someone in the audience might change during the course of the play in response to actions on stage.

Organising your knowledge

Think of ways of organising your work on the play - eg:

- Characterisation
- Structure
- Language
- Pairs and opposites (twins, public/private, folly and wisdom, men and women ...)