

Shailesh Ranjan
Assistant Professor
Dept- of English
Maharaja College, Ara.

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The Duchess of Malfi and Revenge Tragedy

A Revenge play can be defined as a drama in which the tragedy is brought about by the pursuit and accomplishment of revenge. It is blood asking for blood. Generally 'A Revenge Play' can be described as a drama in which the protagonist seeks revenge for the bloody actions of the protagonist who had killed some near or dear one of the protagonist. In due course of taking revenge, the main character might face insanity, murder, sufferings, and philosophical debates between his faith and his duty of revenge. Such type of drama was very popular during the Elizabethan and Jacobean period. It was the period, between 1580 to 1630 when drama was at its peak form in literature, and revenge play was the main attraction of the audience. Elizabethan dramatists had borrowed this genre from Seneca, the ancient Roman dramatist, to satisfy the appetite of their contemporary audience for violence and horror. Thomas Kyd was the first dramatist who established this genre on the English stage with his famous work 'The Spanish Tragedy'. The success of this work compelled many writers to write revenge plays. Marlow's 'The Jew of Malta', Shakespeare's Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Titus Andronicus,

John Marston's 'The Revenge of Busy D'Ambois', and John Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi' and 'The White Devil' are some popular plays of this genre of Elizabethan and Jacobean period. Some of the main characteristics of Revenge plays are as follows :-

- (a) Some murder is committed and the ghost of the murdered person appears to some close relative or friend of his, and enjoins him to take revenge.
- (b) Revenge is conceived as a sacred duty and not as a kind of wild justice. The avenger is moved by a sense of sacred duty and not as a kind of any passion, say greed, or hatred for some personal injury.
- (c) There is a piling up of crude, physical horror upon horror's head, and thus there is much that is sensational and melodramatic. These terrors are intensified by the repeated appearance of ghost.
- (d) In the end, there are a number of deaths and the stage is left littered with dead bodies.
- (e) There is abundant use of the imagery of violence and terror.
- (f) Prominent role is assigned to some rascally servant known as the malcontent, a machiavellian-villain much given to reflection and satiric comments.

- (g) The protagonist often kills innocent persons.
- (h) The reader feels sympathy for the avenger.
- (i) Usually the plays are written in five acts.

'The Duchess of Malfi' is considered as the masterpiece of John Webster, a post-Shakespearean dramatist of Jacobean period. Webster is known for his revenge plays. 'The Duchess of Malfi' is considered to be a revenge tragedy. It has several features of a revenge tragedy. The play begins as a love story with a Duchess who secretly marries with Antonio, her steward. Her brothers, Ferdinand and Cardinal, advise her not to remarry. She insists that she has no plan to remarry. But Ferdinand and Cardinal had no believe on their widow sister so they sent Bosola to spy her. After their return to Rome, Duchess plans to propose Antonio with the help of her maid, Cariola and assures Antonio that they will find a way to appease her brothers. Later Duchess secretly gives birth to three children in two years. Bosola informs Ferdinand and Cardinal that Duchess is married. The Duchess and her two children is imprisoned where they are strangled. Bosola, later plans to kill the two brothers but kills Antonio instead. Bosola confronts the Cardinal, and in the ensuing fight Ferdinand also wakes up from his madness and joins the fight. Bosola first stabs Cardinal and later Bosola and Ferdinand kill each other. Thus, all the major characters die at last. Antonio's elder son by the Duchess appears in the final scene, and

takes his place as the heir to the Malfi state.

John Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi' has several features of a revenge tragedy. There is free exploitation of crude, physical horrors, like the dance of mad men, the presentation of dead man's hand before the Duchess, the presentation of wax statue of Antonio and children as if they were dead, the appearance of the tomb-maker and the executioner with all the apparatus of death. The play is full of murders - Duchess and her children are killed by strangling, Antonio is murdered, Julia dies by poisoning, Bosola, Ferdinand and Cardinal kill each other. There is also a Machiavellian malcontent, Bosola, a rascal who also indulges in satiric reflections on life.

But 'The Duchess of Malfi' differs in a number of ways from the traditional revenge play. Bosola himself was a culprit but he takes revenge of the murder of the Duchess. He was not a well-wisher or relative of the Duchess and Antonio. Then why he takes revenge. The motive of the revenge is weak. Duchess had not done any heinous crime for which she is tortured. If there is a revenge motif, it comes out in the last part when Bosola avenges himself on the Cardinal and Ferdinand, for their ingratitude to him, and also because he has been touched by the murder of the Duchess and decides to avenge it. So, Revenge in the play is not taken as a sacred duty as in the Senecan tragedy but as satisfaction of personal passion. The play also diverts from traditional Senecan tragedy in which the

hero dies in the last at fifth act. But here, Duchess and her lover, Antonio, dies in the fourth act. Webster has used physical horrors to show the suffering and inner torture of the Duchess but the firmness and nobility of her soul is also revealed.

Thus, we can say that 'The Duchess of Malfi' is a revenge play not in traditional sense fully but to some extent. It is placed among the greatest revenge tragedies like Hamlet, The Spanish Tragedy etc.

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