
Death in Context: Analyzing the Characters of The Duchess of Malfi

In 'The Duchess of Malfi' the characterisation of the protagonists allows the concept of death to be explored deeply. Webster's portrayal of the Duchess marks her embracement of death as she appears to be prepared for her fate, whereas the Cardinal is shown to be terrified when truly exposed to the idea of mortality. This is due to their contrasting beliefs with regards to the afterlife - as the Duchess has faith that she will be united with her loved ones after death, whereas the Cardinal shows no such beliefs. This suggests that although the characters are shown to be aware of death, their unawareness of what may await after impacts the way in which they perceive their end.

Webster captures the characters' awareness of death via their ability to embrace their end - this is particularly apparent with regards to the Duchess' execution scene. Despite the fact that the Duchess is fully conscious of her inevitable end, she remains composed and 'kneels' to her death. She then simply states 'come violent death' - this marks her collected nature, as Webster suggests that she is almost content with her sentence. The Duchess' unfazed attitude is marked by her cry 'I am the Duchess of Malfi still' which again demonstrates that although she is aware of her physical end, she is also aware that her name will remain alive throughout history. This provides a contrast to the presentation of the Cardinal, who is shown to fear death rather than embrace it. This is exemplified via Webster's use of short cries from the Cardinal in his death scene, such as "Help!", "My dukedom for a rescue!", "Help, help, help!", therefore presenting his death as far less graceful. R.S White regards the Duchess' death as somewhat valiant, describing the play as a 'tragedy of a virtuous woman who achieves heroism through her death'. This stresses her bravery, indicating that she is clearly aware of mortality, unlike the Cardinal who remains determined to escape death. One may also argue that Webster's decision to portray the Duchess' death as courageous is evidence of his nature as an author with some feminist leanings. This is due to the fact that Webster almost illustrates the Duchess as superior to her male subjects - many of which are shown to be afraid of death (notably the Cardinal and Ferdinand). This positive presentation is far ahead of Webster's time, as during the 17th century women were largely regarded as inferior and significantly weaker than men, therefore it is somewhat ironic that Webster has chosen to reverse this stereotype and allow his female protagonist to adopt a role with many conventionally masculine traits. It could be debated that this approach from Webster is consequent of the contemporary societal context, as throughout the 1600's death was by no means unusual - especially in the city of London which was often plagued by disease. The high rates of infant mortality and homicide are likely to have influenced the outlook of Webster, as it's evident that death was regarded as normal to an

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extent.

Despite the apparent acceptance of death from the Duchess, her awareness of what lies after death differs to other characters in the play. The Duchess is shown to be a strong believer in the afterlife; for example when speaking to Antonio she explains that they will 'know one another in the other world'. This allows Webster to suggest that the Duchess' faith in a safe afterlife is what grants her the ability to face death peacefully. The portrayal of the valiant Duchess is reflective of the contemporary context, as during the 1600's both England and Spain remained predominantly Christian nations; Catholicism and Protestantism forming a key part of society. This meant that many people of this period believed in an afterlife, which was not only a Christian belief but also provided them with a sense of comfort - due to the fact that the mortality rates were extremely high. A modern audience may regard this belief as somewhat foolish and unreliable, therefore one could argue that the Duchess perhaps convinces herself that she is aware of what awaits after death - merely as a form of self-comfort. Nevertheless contemporary audiences will have shared the same perception as the Duchess herself, meaning spectators would have been more likely to sympathise with her and believe her embracement of death is characteristic of traditional Christian teachings.

When considering the characters' awareness of death, it is clear that this differs as a result of their beliefs of what awaits after death. This is likely to have been largely influenced by the views and societal contexts surrounding Webster - as the normality of death means that the characters are generally aware of their end. Despite the fact that both the Duchess and the Cardinal meet their end in the play, their different feelings towards the afterlife slightly hinders their perception of death - as the Duchess sees it as a triumph to be united with her family, whilst the Cardinal is shown to be reluctant and scared; perhaps Webster has characterized him in this manner to stress the irony of his unreligious ways.

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