

Webster's Duchess of Malfi A Horror Play



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Webster's 'The Duchess of Malfi' is many a times described as 'a horror play'. Actually there is no established type like 'Horror Play' in English Literature. But a horror play is deemed when it presents horrible or diabolical aspects of life. It also may presents effects resulting from devices of horror. The Duchess of Malfi undoubtedly presents horrible devices and cruel methods in the theme or in action. Webster intentionally introduces novel and unheard devices in this drama. It may be noted that the gentle and graceful duchess is contrasted with the horrible treatment given to her. Actually the problem of the second marriage of the duchess need not provoke any element of horror. The Macabre devices like hand of a dead man would definitely reveal the element of horror in the play. A detailed analysis of the play helps us to justify 'The Duchess of Malfi' as a horror play.

The Elizabethan drama, under the influence of Renaissance, followed the spirit of Seneca and not of Sophocles. In England Thomas Kyd's 'The Spanish Tragedy' started the revenge motive and bloodshed on the stage. Many dramatists followed this tradition. 'Spanish Tragedy' presents the passion of revenge with profuse bloodshed and macabre villainy. Besides the Elizabethan audience applauded, when there was more bloodshed on the stage. The Jacobean cynicism helped the element of horror. Webster's play 'The Duchess of Malfi' is a mixture of all these factors. The personality of John Webster also is a factor in the creation of horrors. Another factor was the influence of Machiavelli. His book 'The Prince' taught innovative methods for murder, and sophisticated villainy. Webster puts all these things in his dramas to increase the effect of horror.

In 'The Duchess of Malfi', Webster exhibits his special skill in creating the horror atmosphere. Charles Lamb stated, "To move a horror skillfully, to touch a soul to the quick, this is only Webster can do."

The play starts with a sharp satiric observation on the current court manners. The Royal court is filled with sycophant flatterers and selfish villains. The ambition of every young man was to seek service in the court. Antonio describes all these conditions. He points out

that the cruel brothers Cardinal and Ferdinand personify the theatrical aspects of horror in the play. In the first act, the interaction and encounter between Bosola and the brothers starts the element of horror. Bosola committed a murder on the secret orders from these brothers. He underwent the punishment at Gallies. He just returned and he seeks reward. But the brothers are such villains that they ignore Bosola. But they decide to employ him for spying on the Duchess. The meeting between this trio suggests the gloomy picture to come.

Bosola's description of Ferdinand and Cardinal is an indication of the cruel actions in the course of drama. The speeches of the brothers also indicate their cruel and horrible nature. The dramatist presents the Duchess, her marriage and her secret happiness as fore-ground because the reactions from these brothers are going to be horrible.

As the drama progresses the contrast between the gentle Duchess and the cruel brothers gets highlighted. Along with Ferdinand and Cardinal, Bosola is also a villain supporting the cruel plans of these brothers. Bosola completes the job of a spy and finds out several things regarding the Duchess. He uses many tricks for knowing the facts about her. This provides another contrast between the innocence of the Duchess and the cunning nature of Bosola. In the first two acts the necessary atmosphere for the future horror is prepared. In act III, horror in a theoretical fashion comes out, when Ferdinand enters the Duchess' room. In that meeting his speech is horrible and language is nearly obscene.

The fourth act culminates in action of horrors. Bosola tells the Duchess that Ferdinand wants a compromise with her but only in darkness. Ferdinand leaves the hand of a dead man in her hands. She reacts with chock and says,

**"What witchcraft doth he practice?
That he doth left a dead man's hand here."**

(The Duchess of Malfi)

Such types of horrors are unbelievable. Then in a dumb show, the artificial corpses of Antonio and her son are showed to the Duchess. This was done to shatter the psychological condition of the Duchess. It is another horror, used by Kings to destroy their enemies. The

audience might have derived some satisfaction out of it not exhausted. The mad men are sent into her prison to destroy her mental balance. Any encounter with mad man shatters mental balance. Cariola ironically says that they bring death to her.

This was followed by the doom-maker. He tells the Duchess that she was only a mixture of insects and maggots. He also informs the duchess that he wants to make a tomb because she wants to die. It is a macabre punishment. Lastly the Duchess is strangulated with a big rope. This is presented on the stage. The innocent children are also strangulated. Cariola, who is pregnant is also caught and murdered. Thus this act bears a long list of horrors one upon the others. Even in the fifth act the horrors continue. Ferdinand's

disease in which he digs up the graves and bring dead bodies into the town. There is horrified death of Julia also. The encounter of Bosola with the brothers is also very horrible.

Thus the whole platform and development of the drama are based on the element of horror. The action and the language used in the drama add a lot effect to make the drama appear cruel. The dramatist's idea of the world is cynical and bleak. He displays the mystery of this world where there is a little difference between a sinner and the sinned. The element of horror is the dramatist's subjective experience and the spectators share it. Thus there are unheard horrors presented with utmost skill and great effect. So it is justified to describe it as a 'horror play'.

R E F E R E N C E

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