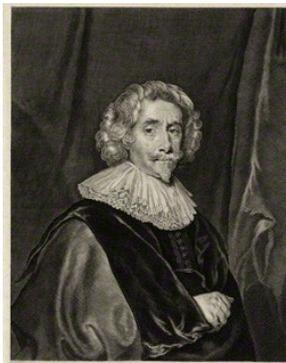


# THE DUCHESS OF MALFI

by John Webster



## THE AUTHOR

John Webster (c.1580-c.1634) was born in London to a carriage-maker and the daughter of a blacksmith. The dates of his birth and death are uncertain, and little is known of his life outside of his writings. Early in his career he collaborated with a group of dramatists to produce history plays and comedies. His reputation is based on his two great tragedies, *The White Devil* (1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614). Later in his career he returned to collaborative writing, but never again achieved the success of the two tragedies for which he is best remembered today.

*The Duchess of Malfi* is based on actual historical events that occurred a century before the play was written. Giovanna d'Aragona, the widowed Duchess of Amalfi, secretly married her steward Antonio Beccadelli. As in the play, the Duchess, her handmaiden, and two of her three children are kidnaped and murdered at the instigation of her brothers, one of whom was Cardinal Luigi d'Aragona, and Antonio is later killed by Daniele Bozzolo; unlike Webster's retelling, the brothers are never brought to justice and die in their beds. The earliest written version of the tale was penned by a friend of Antonio about a year after he died. The bleakness of the drama shows the pessimism that is characteristic of Webster's works; he clearly had little confidence in the nobility of human nature. As T.S. Eliot said of him, "Webster was much possessed by death and saw the skull beneath the skin." Contemporary mystery writers have drawn on Webster's tragedy. P.D. James used Eliot's comment and a quotation from *The Duchess of Malfi* as titles for two of her novels (*The Skull Beneath the Skin*, in which a washed-up actress is engaged in performing as the title character in the play, and *Cover Her Face*), while Agatha Christie incorporated a viewing of the play into the plot of *Sleeping Murder*, the last Jane Marple mystery. Webster also appears as a minor character in the movie *Shakespeare in Love*; he is the boy who discovers Viola's ruse and later tells Shakespeare that when he writes plays, they will be full of blood.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Ferdinand - The Duke of Calabria, he is the twin brother of the title character and the main villain of the play. He is determined that his sister not remarry because he covets her estate and ultimately destroys her and her family. Near the end of the play he goes mad with guilt.

- The Cardinal of Aragon - Brother to Ferdinand and the Duchess, he is evil and scheming and collaborates with Ferdinand in the destruction of the Duchess and all those around her.
- Antonio Bologna - The Duchess' honorable steward, he later secretly becomes her husband and the father of her three children. He is an honorable man who, at the end of the play, is accidentally killed by Bosola.
- Delio - Antonio's faithful friend, he serves as a messenger to Rome to discover the Duke's plans.
- Daniel de Bosola - The Duchess' gentleman of the horse who was put in place by Ferdinand to spy on his sister, he is a melancholy soul who speaks ill of everyone and everything. He becomes Ferdinand's agent in the destruction of the Duchess and her family, but later regrets it and tries to avenge her. He is directly or indirectly involved in every death that occurs in the play.
- Castruccio - Duke Ferdinand's courtier and Julia's husband, he is blind to her infidelities.
- Count Malateste - A cowardly soldier with whom Ferdinand, unaware of the secret marriage already contracted, arranges a marriage to the Duchess.
- Duchess of Malfi - The central character in the play, she is a young widow, the sister of Ferdinand and the Cardinal, who soon secretly marries Antonio. Her gentleness and virtue contrast sharply with the villainy of her brothers, who murder her and her entire family.
- Cariola - The Duchess' faithful handmaiden, she is murdered along with her mistress.
- Julia - Castruccio's wife and the Cardinal's mistress, she tries to seduce Bosola and is murdered by the Cardinal with a poisoned Bible.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Miserable age, where only the reward of doing well is the doing of it!” (Bosola, Ii, 32-33)

“Though lust do mask in ne'er so strange disguise,  
She's oft found witty, but is never wise.” (Bosola, Iliii, 77-78)

“‘Stay,’ quoth Reputation,  
‘Do not forsake me; for it is my nature,  
If once I part from any man I meet,  
I am never found again.’ And so for you:  
You have shook hands with Reputation,  
And made him invisible.” (Ferdinand, IIIii, 129-133)

“A politician is the devil's quilted anvil;  
He fashions all sins on him, and the blows

Are never heard: he may work in a lady's chamber,  
As here for proof. What rests but I reveal  
All to my lord? Oh, this base quality  
Of intelligencer! Why, every quality I' th' world  
Prefers but gain or commendation:  
Now for this act I am certain to be raised,  
And men that paint weeds to the life are praised." (Bosola, IIIii, 322-330)

"Send Antonio to me; I want his head in a business." (Ferdinand, IIIv, 27)

"Best of my life, farewell. Since we must part,  
Heaven hath a hand in 't, but no otherwise  
Than as some curious artist takes in sunder  
A clock or watch, when it is out of frame,  
To bring 't in better order." (Antonio, IIIv, 58-63)

"I account this world a tedious theatre,  
For I do play a part in 't 'gainst my will." (Duchess, IVi, 80-81)

"Didst thou ever see a lark in a cage? Such is the soul in the body: this world is like her little  
turf of grass, and the heaven o'er our heads, like her looking-glass, only gives us a miserable  
knowledge of the small compass of our prison." (Bosola, IVii, 129-133)

"I am Duchess of Malfi still." (Duchess, IVii, 142)

"Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young." (Ferdinand, IVii, 263)

"I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits,  
Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done 't." (Ferdinand, IVii, 277-278)

"I served your tyranny, and rather strove  
To satisfy yourself than all the world,  
And though I loathed the evil, yet I loved  
You that did counsel it; and rather sought  
To appear a true servant than an honest man." (Bosola, IVii, 327-331)

"The only way to make thee keep my counsel  
Is not to tell thee." (Cardinal, Vii, 243-244)

"We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and bandied  
Which way please them." (Bosola, Viv, 54-55)

"In all our quest of greatness,  
Like wanton boys, who pastime is their care,  
We follow after bubbles blown in th' air.  
Pleasure of life, what is 't? Only the good

Hours of an ague; merely a preparative  
To rest, to endure vexation.” (Antonio, Viv, 64-69)

“How tedious is a guilty conscience!” (Cardinal, Vv, 4)

“Integrity of life is fame’s best friend,  
Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end.” (Delio, Vv, 123-124)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - The play begins with Delio welcoming Antonio back from his time in France. They are soon joined by Bosola and the Cardinal; the former is complaining of the latter’s lack of gratitude for his service. After they leave, Delio tells Antonio that the “service” had been a murder committed by Bosola at the Cardinal’s instigation. Ferdinand and his courtiers then enter, and the Duke rewards Antonio for his victory in a recent tournament. After some banter, the Cardinal returns with his sister, the Duchess of Malfi. Delio and Antonio move aside and discuss the characters of the Duke and Cardinal, both of whom are greedy and vicious, unlike their sister, who is sweet and virtuous. After Delio and Antonio leave, Ferdinand recommends Bosola for a position in his sister’s household. He intends him to serve as an informer in the Duchess’ house, though he believes that Antonio, her steward, would have been more suitable. The Cardinal disagrees, arguing that Antonio is far too honest to do such a thing. After the Cardinal leaves, Ferdinand gives Bosola a bag of gold to spy on the Duchess. He is particularly concerned that she not remarry. Bosola refuses the bribe, but Ferdinand will not take it back because he has already found Bosola a position caring for the Duchess’ horses. Bosola reluctantly accepts the money, the position, and the charge to serve as Ferdinand’s spy.

**Act I, scene 2** - As the scene begins, Ferdinand and the Cardinal are warning the Duchess to be careful about contracting a second marriage. She insists that she never intends to remarry, but they continue to exhort her not even to consider a secret marriage. After they leave, the Duchess tells Cariola, her lady in waiting, that she counts on her discretion to keep secret what she intends to do. She then summons Antonio, who thinks he is being called to account for his stewardship. Instead she proposes marriage to him, and the two pledge their faithfulness to one another and are united on the spot by common law.

**Act II, scene 1** - The scene opens with Bosola mocking Castruccio and an old woman. After they leave, Bosola remarks about changes in the Duchess’ appearance that make him suspect that she is pregnant. Antonio and Delio then enter; Antonio has just told Delio that he and the Duchess are married, but swears him to secrecy. The Duchess then enters and comments about how fat she is getting. Bosola gives her a gift of apricots (thought at the time to induce labor), which she hungrily devours, and goes into labor prematurely. Antonio is afraid doctors will be summoned, so he quickly calls for the midwife whose attendance had been prearranged.

**Act II, scene 2** - Bosola is now convinced that the Duchess is with child. Antonio then rushes in with a group of men, insisting that the Duchess has been robbed by a Swiss mercenary and that the entire house is to be locked down until the thief is caught. The Duchess, made ill from the shock, will see no one. After everyone disperses, Cariola announces to Antonio that he has a son. He

quickly sends Delio to Rome, whence Ferdinand and the Cardinal have gone, and sets off to cast the baby's horoscope.

**Act II, scene 3** - Bosola, having heard screaming coming from the Duchess' room, decides to explore the palace. He encounters Antonio, who, suspicious of his intentions, accuses him of poisoning the Duchess with his apricots and stealing her jewels. Antonio's nose starts bleeding, and the blood covers his initials on his handkerchief. He exits, but drops a paper containing the baby's horoscope. Bosola finds the paper, now knows the truth about the Duchess' sudden disappearance, and suspects that she is Antonio's mistress. Knowing that he will be charged with poisoning her but that the charge cannot stick, he prepares to send word of what he has learned to Ferdinand and the Cardinal in Rome.

**Act II, scene 4** - In Rome, the Cardinal asks his mistress Julia how she managed to come to the Eternal City without her husband Castruccio. Her pretext was that she came to visit an old hermit monk. As they speak, a servant announces the arrival of Delio, and the Cardinal quickly leaves the room. Delio gives Julia a bag of gold and asks her to meet him as soon as possible. Meanwhile, he hears that Castruccio has arrived with a letter for Ferdinand that has greatly distressed him, leading Delio to fear that Antonio has been betrayed.

**Act II, scene 5** - Ferdinand and the Cardinal discuss the letter. The former is furious and is determined to destroy the Duchess, her palace, her lands, and all that she possesses for shaming the family by bearing a child out of wedlock. They do not yet know who the father is, but Ferdinand rages on for the rest of the scene about what he will do to his sister and her lover when he finds out.

**Act III, scene 1** - Several years pass between Acts II and III. Delio returns after a long stay in Rome, and Antonio tells him that the Duchess has borne two more children while he has been away. The common people, unaware of the secret marriage, think the Duchess is promiscuous and believe that Antonio is advancing his status by remaining in her employ. Ferdinand, the Duchess, and Bosola then enter, and Ferdinand announces that he has arranged for the Duchess to marry Count Malateste. She objects because of his low status and tells Ferdinand that she is the object of scandalous rumors, which he assures her he will never believe. After she leaves, Bosola tells Ferdinand that she has given birth to three children, but that the father is unknown. Bosola thinks she has been bewitched and is convinced that the identity of the man responsible can be found by means of astrology. Ferdinand thinks this is nonsense and intends to force a confession from his sister that very night, for which purpose he has obtained a key to her bedchamber.

**Act III, scene 2** - Antonio is in the bedchamber of the Duchess and insists on sleeping with her. Energetic banter between them and Cariola ensues, and finally Antonio and the maid leave the room to give her a chance to prepare for bed. Ferdinand then enters by another door with a dagger. She informs him that she is married, and he responds by telling her that she may never see her lover again, and swears that if he finds out his identity, he will surely kill him. He then tells the Duchess that he will never look on her face again and leaves the dagger, intending that she should use it on herself. After he leaves, Antonio returns with a pistol and accuses Cariola of betraying them, but she insists on her innocence.

Bosola then knocks on the door and Antonio slips out of the room. Bosola tells the Duchess that Ferdinand in great anger has taken horse to Rome. She tells him that her brother is angry

because Antonio has mishandled the household accounts. He leaves and Antonio reenters. The Duchess tells him about her lie and begs him to flee to Ancona, where she will send him her treasure and hopefully join him later. Bosola returns with officers, prepared to arrest Antonio, but the Duchess, after accusing him openly of cheating her out of a million ducats, tells him that he must leave immediately and that all his property is forfeit to her; she does not want him arrested in order to avoid further scandal. After he leaves, Bosola praises him to the Duchess to see how she responds. His praise makes her trust him, and she confesses that Antonio is her husband and the father of her children. He calls her noble for marrying a virtuous man without thought of his social status. She begs him to keep her secret, and he agrees to do so. She then entrusts him with her treasures and asks him to take them to Antonio in Ancona, where she intends to follow in a few days. He advises her to announce that she is going on a pilgrimage to Loretto, fifteen miles from Ancona, so no one will try to stop her from making her escape. After she and Cariola go to prepare for their trip, Bosola confesses to the audience that he intends to tell Ferdinand everything and expects great personal advancement as a result.

**Act III, scene 3** - Ferdinand and the Cardinal are speaking with a group of soldiers. Delio and the others are discussing Count Malateste, who has earned a reputation as a coward. Bosola enters and draws Ferdinand and the Cardinal aside; they are clearly incensed by whatever he tells them. The two brothers, now knowing of the Duchess' plans, determine to pursue her, and Ferdinand summons 150 cavalymen for the purpose.

**Act III, scene 4** - At Loretto, two pilgrims discuss the fact that the Cardinal is planning to renounce his vows and become a soldier, and that his sister the Duchess has arrived on pilgrimage. The Cardinal's renunciation is then pantomimed, along with the banishment of Antonio, the Duchess, and their children; the Cardinal even seizes his sister's wedding ring. The pilgrims also mention that the Pope has divested the Duchess of her title and lands because of her supposedly loose morals.

**Act III, scene 5** - Antonio, the Duchess, and their children, now without home or fortune, bemoan their fate. Bosola then arrives with a letter from Ferdinand, which proclaims in ambiguous language that all is well and they are to return to Malfi. The Duchess doesn't trust her brother, however, and is convinced that he wants Antonio dead. They refuse Ferdinand's summons, and after Bosola leaves, they decide to split up, with Antonio taking the oldest boy with him to Milan. As soon as they leave, Bosola arrives to take the Duchess back to her palace and the tender mercies of her brothers.

**Act IV, scene 1** - Bosola informs Ferdinand that the Duchess is behaving nobly in her imprisonment. Ferdinand has made a vow never to look on his sister again, so he visits her in the dark. He gives her a dead man's hand with Antonio's ring on it, then shows her wax figures made to look like the bodies of Antonio and her children. Convinced that her husband and children are dead, she confesses that she no longer wishes to live. She then contemplates suicide and directs fierce curses against her brothers. Ferdinand revels in his sister's grief and intends to make her life even more miserable by sending ruffians and bawds to wait on her and putting madmen around her palace so she cannot sleep. Bosola tells him that he goes too far and that he will no longer visit the Duchess in his own guise, but Ferdinand tells him that he has one more task to perform before going to Milan to kill Antonio.

**Act IV, scene 2** - The Duchess and her handmaiden are now surrounded by noise on all sides from the madmen installed in her residence by her brother. The Duchess is thankful for the racket because it distracts her from her grief. She wishes she could have a short conversation with those beyond the grave so she can know for certain what awaits her after death. A servant then ushers eight madmen into the room, supposedly to entertain the Duchess and make her laugh. They sing and dance, then Bosola enters in the guise of an old man, telling her he has come to prepare her grave. He is followed by an executioner and his attendants carrying a coffin. The executioner strangles her, and Bosola orders him to go do the same to the children. But Cariola, the Duchess' handmaiden, enters first and is strangled as well. Ferdinand then enters and looks upon his handiwork, after which he rebukes Bosola for not resisting his orders and spirited her away to some safe hiding place. He finally confesses his motive: that he expected to inherit a fortune if his sister remained childless. Bosola then demands payment for his service, but Ferdinand threatens him with death for the murder he has committed, then sends him into exile instead. Ferdinand leaves and Bosola considers what he would do had he the chance to do it over again. As he convinces himself that he would never betray the Duchess again, she revives, calls for Antonio, is told he is alive, then dies.

**Act V, scene 1** - Antonio asks Delio whether any hope exists for him to be reconciled to Ferdinand and the Cardinal. He has been granted safe conduct to go to Milan to meet with them, but Delio doubts their sincerity and smells a trap. He has heard that the Marquis of Pescara has seized a fortress belonging to Antonio. Delio approaches the Marquis and asks for the fortress, but is refused. Then Julia, the Cardinal's mistress, makes the same request, which the Marquis promptly grants. Clearly the brothers are enriching themselves at Antonio's expense. Pescara then tells Delio he refused to give him the fortress because he knows it was taken unjustly; only the lowest of the low deserve to receive such ill-gotten gains. He tells them that Ferdinand has arrived in Milan but is sick of the apoplexy. Rather than visit him, Antonio decides to visit the Cardinal and seek reconciliation.

**Act V, scene 2** - Pescara visits Ferdinand and is told by the doctor that he suffers from lycanthropy - he thinks he is a werewolf and has been prowling about at night digging up corpses in the churchyard. When Ferdinand enters he is clearly mad and tries to strangle his shadow for following him about. The Cardinal explains his madness by saying that his family has been haunted by the ghost of an old woman who was murdered for her wealth, and that Ferdinand saw the ghost and has since become increasingly worse. At the same time, the Cardinal hides from Bosola, who is also present, his knowledge of the Duchess' death. He then commissions Bosola to find Antonio and kill him, supposedly to free the Duchess to marry a worthy nobleman. Bosola agrees, but mistrusts the Cardinal and determines to follow his own path.

Before he can leave, Bosola is interrupted by Julia, who professes her love for him and tries to seduce him. He decides to play along with her as a way of finding out more about the Cardinal. Before the Cardinal enters, she hides him in a closet. The Cardinal, fearing that the Duke will in his madness confess his guilt, tells his servants not to allow anyone to see Ferdinand unless he is present. He tells the audience that he is tired of Julia and longs for a way to rid himself of his mistress. Julia, seeking to comfort him, induces him to tell her what troubles him. With some reluctance he finally confesses his role in the deaths of the Duchess and two of her children. In shock, she determines to tell the world, and he kills her by getting her to kiss a Bible dusted with poison just as Bosola emerges from the closet. Bosola asks the Cardinal for the reward due him, and the Cardinal promises him wealth and lands if he will keep quiet about what he now knows and kill Antonio. He

then gives Bosola the key to his quarters, but after he leaves, Bosola tells the audience that he intends to do anything he can to save Antonio's life and get revenge on his enemies.

**Act V, scene 3** - Antonio and Delio stand in the graveyard outside the Cardinal's palace. As they talk they hear an echo that sounds very much like the voice of the Duchess. Delio warns him not to visit the Cardinal that night, and the echo seconds the advice. Antonio remains firm, however, and Delio goes to fetch his eldest son to encourage him to act prudently.

**Act V, scene 4** - The Cardinal sends his companions to bed, telling them that they need not watch Ferdinand, who is doing much better. He makes them swear, even should they hear Ferdinand cry out in his madness, telling them that he may choose to imitate his brother's cries for reasons of his own. After they leave, the Cardinal tells the audience that he intends to carry the body of Julia back to her quarters, and when Bosola confirms the death of Antonio, to kill him as well. Bosola overhears him and hides. Ferdinand then enters, rambling in his madness. Antonio, who has entered the palace, wants to kill him before he can go to prayer, but before he can do so, Bosola stabs him in the darkness, thinking that he is killing Ferdinand. Before Antonio dies, Bosola tells him that his wife and younger children have been murdered, and he dies sending his love to Delio and his oldest boy. Bosola orders a servant to carry Antonio's body to Julia's room while he prepares to take vengeance on the Cardinal.

**Act V, scene 5** - The Cardinal is struggling with his conscience when Bosola enters with the body of Antonio. Bosola announces that he intends to kill the Cardinal, who promptly calls for help and offers anything in his power to dissuade Bosola from his deadly mission. His friends, however, having been told to ignore any noises they might hear in the night, do nothing. As Bosola runs the Cardinal through with his sword, Ferdinand bursts into the room, joins the fray, and gives Bosola a mortal wound. Before he dies, however, he kills Ferdinand. The noblemen rush into the room to find carnage everywhere. Too late, Delio enters with Antonio's only surviving son, who is now the heir to the family estate, fortune, and title.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Analyze the motive behind Ferdinand's murder of his sister in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Is his professed motive sufficient to explain his cruelty? Why or why not? Be sure to consider his position as well as what he hoped to gain from the death of the Duchess.
2. The death scene at the end of Act IV in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* bears certain similarities to the death of Desdemona at the end of William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Compare and contrast the two death scenes, being sure to consider not only the way in which death occurs, but also the words and attitudes of the dying women and their murderers.
3. Discuss the character of Bosola in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. He is in many ways the most complex character in the story, and is given the most poetic speeches. How would you evaluate his strengths and weaknesses? Is he fundamentally a good or an evil man? Does he change over the course of the play? If so, how?

4. In both John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, one of the villains goes mad with guilt. Compare and contrast the madness of Ferdinand and Lady Macbeth, being sure to consider its causes, the form it takes, and the consequences of their madness.
5. Compare and contrast the death speeches of Antonio in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Macbeth in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Consider especially what they have to say about the meaninglessness of life. How does the fact that one is a good man and the other a villain affect your analysis of their speeches?
6. Compare and contrast the closing scene of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* with that of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In what ways are the two similar, beyond the obvious fact that bodies lie strewn all over the stage? Do the endings bring effective resolutions to the tragedies? Do the elevations of Malcolm and Antonio's son promise a hopeful future for the kingdoms in question? Why or why not?
7. A tragedy is a story that purges and uplifts the emotions as the audience sees a noble figure come to a bad end because of a flaw in his character. On the basis of this definition, does John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* qualify as a tragedy? If so, who is the tragic hero or heroine? If the Duchess, what is the flaw in her character? Is Antonio enough of a central figure in the play to qualify? What about Bosola, who shows his nobility in the end? Or does the play contain no one who qualifies as a tragic hero? Support your analysis with specifics from the play.
8. T.S. Eliot, when speaking of the work of the author of *The Duchess of Malfi*, said, "Webster was much possessed by death and saw the skull beneath the skin." What do you think Eliot meant? Discuss how this play confirms Eliot's comment. Use specific incidents and quotations to support your analysis.
9. The title character in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* gained her title by marriage to an Italian count, but she and her brothers are Spanish, from the province of Aragon. The incident on which the play was based took place in the early sixteenth century, during the height of the Spanish Inquisition. How do the characters and actions of the two brothers, Ferdinand and the Cardinal, reflect the atrocities associated with that institution? Give attention to their machinations as well as to the trial scene involving the Duchess.
10. In what ways does John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* provide a critique of the class-consciousness of Jacobean England? Be sure to cite both quotations and incidents from the play in your analysis.
11. Compare and contrast the two villainous brothers in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Do the differences between their personalities allow them to serve as foils for one another, or do they complement one another in planning and carrying out their evil designs? Which of the two strikes you as more evil, and why? Be sure to include specific incidents and quotations in your analysis.

12. Many commentators have argued that Ferdinand, the villain in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, harbors incestuous feelings for his twin sister the Duchess. Do you agree? What in the play might lead critics to this conclusion? How might such feelings motivate both his anger and his eventual madness?
13. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, do you believe that Antonio is worthy of the Duchess' love? Analyze his character, considering both virtue and strength. Do these qualities compensate for his inferior social status and upbringing? Why or why not?
14. Two of the leading characters in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess and the Cardinal, are never named. Why do you think the playwright has chosen to do this? Does it give the characters greater universality or make them symbols rather than individuals? Support your conclusion with details from the play.
15. John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* has three significant female characters - the Duchess, Cariola, and Julia. Analyze these characters in terms of what they say about the playwright's view of women, their salient qualities, and their role in society.
16. John Webster, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, made a woman the protagonist in a tragedy - something Shakespeare never did. To what extent does this contribute to the social commentary of the play? Do you think it makes the play more attractive to a modern audience? Why or why not?
17. When the ambassador to England from the court of Venice saw John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, he condemned it as anti-Catholic. Do you agree with his assessment? Is the disreputable Cardinal intended to symbolize the corruption of the Catholic Church as a whole, or is his character to be understood as an individual, albeit a villainous one?
18. How does the dialogue in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* reflect the political environment in Jacobean England? Give special attention to what the play says or implies about France, Spain, and the Pope, all of whom were considered England's enemies at the time.
19. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, why do the Duchess and Antonio keep their marriage a secret, especially in the light of producing multiple offspring? Could the tragedy have been avoided had they married openly? Why or why not? Support your speculations about alternative plot developments with specifics from the play's dialogue.
20. A good tragedy is supposed to provide catharsis for the audience - a purging of emotions that leaves them better off than when they arrived at the theater. Does John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* provide such a catharsis? Why or why not? Be sure to cite specifics from the play as you answer the question.

21. John Webster, the author of *The Duchess of Malfi*, clearly understood the wickedness of human nature and the fact that such evil led inevitably to death. The Bible also is brutally honest about man's sinful nature, but it also portrays the story of man's redemption in Christ. Does Webster's play go beyond portraying sin to giving a hope for redemption as well? Why or why not? If it does, of what does the redemption consist? If not, what does this communicate about the playwright's worldview?
22. Machiavellian pragmatism was associated with evil in the Elizabethan age; those who were willing to do anything to achieve their desired ends and believed that the ends justified the means were portrayed as villains. Does this same tendency exist in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*? Which characters would you describe as Machiavellian, and why? Do these traits brand them as evil?
23. Machiavellian pragmatism was generally associated with evil in seventeenth-century England. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, however, some critics have identified an exception to this trend, insisting that the Duchess "uses Machiavellian tactics but is not villainous." Do you agree? What choices does she make that indicate that she believes that the ends justify the means? Do these choices undermine her goodness? Are her choices biblically justifiable? Why or why not?
24. The torture scenes in Act IV of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* were the seventeenth-century equivalent of today's horror movies. Would they have had the same effect on the audience then as the gruesome scenes in modern cinema have on the viewers? Why or why not? Was Webster's purpose to shock or entertain, or did he have something else in mind? What might it have been?
25. The first time Bosola appears on the stage in John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, he says, "Miserable age, where only the reward of doing well is the doing of it!" Thus his character is introduced as a mercenary who will do anything for money. Is this a faithful representation of his character as the story progresses? What are the factors that cause him to change by the end of the play?
26. In Act III, scene 2 of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand tells a tale about Death, Love, and Reputation to make the point that the Duchess has irretrievably lost her reputation by giving birth to illegitimate children. Compare and contrast this discourse on the subject with Iago's treatment of it in Act II, scene 3 and Act III, scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Othello*. How do the two men approach the subject differently, and for what purposes do they speak of it?
27. In Act III, scene 5 of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Antonio says to the Duchess, "Best of my life, farewell. Since we must part, / Heaven hath a hand in 't, but no otherwise / Than as some curious artist takes in sunder / A clock or watch, when it is out of frame, / To bring 't in better order." Does the playwright share his confidence in Divine Providence? Why or why not? Use quotations from the play to analyze Webster's view of God's superintendence in human affairs.

28. Immediately prior to her death in Act IV, scene 2 of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, title character bravely affirms, "I am Duchess of Malfi still." What is the significance of this affirmation, and how does it contribute to the major themes the playwright is seeking to communicate?
29. In Act IV, scene 2 of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand says, "I bade thee, when I was distracted of my wits, / Go kill my dearest friend, and thou hast done 't." Compare this with the grief shown by the protagonist at the end of William Shakespeare's *Othello*. Do the two men have equal cause for their grief? Is one more or less culpable than the other? Why or why not?
30. In Act IV, scene 2 of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola regrets that he has served Ferdinand in such a way that he "rather sought to appear a true servant than an honest man." Is this a sign of repentance on the part of Bosola or is it an attempted justification of his behavior? Is he taking personal responsibility for his deeds or arguing that he "was only following orders"? Support your arguments with specifics from the scene and those that follow.
31. In Act V, scene 4 of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola bemoans his accidental stabbing of Antonio by saying, "We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck and bandied which way please them." Antonio responds, "Like wanton boys, whose pastime is their care, we follow after bubbles blown in the air." Compare these expressions of the idea that man is the helpless victim of fate with Gloucester's lament in William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, they kill us for their sport." Do these comments reflect the beliefs of the playwrights? Do the respective plays support these fatalistic ideas? Why or why not?
32. The last lines of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, spoken by Delio, are, "Integrity of life is fame's best friend, / Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end." Is this the ultimate message that Webster wishes to communicate - the moral of the story, so to speak? Why or why not? If so, does the play successfully leave the viewer with this conviction? If not, what is the final message of the play?