

## THE WHITE DEVIL - CHARACTERS

All the characters, situations and issues are shown from multiple perspective so that every character is ambiguous, contradictory and elusive. This is achieved by the use of framing devices, repetition, echoes and stage management.

Webster, unlike other play-writes, offers us a limited access to the minds of his characters and they all constantly change depending on their circumstances.

### FLAMINEO

- The main character in terms of the length and intellectual energy of his part.
- His death marks the climax.
- However, he is not the most important character in plot terms, his story is relatively unimportant.
- He functions as the main conduit of information for the audience (due to his numerous asides and soliloquies).
- His introduction (his run-on lines, rhetorical questions and pauses all show his self-control and persuasive powers).
- He is a crafty manipulator and we learn to distrust him and disapprove of his character whilst also being entertained by his outrageous insolence. He is attractive and repellent at the same time
- His personality type would perhaps now be described as 'psychopathic' given his glibness and superficial charm, lack of emotional empathy, manipulative behaviour and parasitic lifestyle.
- However a contemporary understanding would have been in terms of the 4 humours; sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic.
- He is subject to mood-swings because of an excess of the choleric or 'angry' humour.
- He is tugged between constructive impulses and bitter or violent reactions.
- In his better moments a philosophic desire to prevent blood shed characterises him but in his other moments he pursues a deliberate tendency to provoke others into acts of revenge which eventually close in upon himself.
- He is a typical malcontent; unhappy and dissatisfied with the world and he offers a cynical commentary on events and characters in the play.
- His own analysis of the problem with his life is want of money and lack of financial support.
- In order to advance himself in the world he therefore has become Brachiano's secretary.
- He is willing to prostitute his sister and murder his brother-in-law in order to serve Brachiano and advance in his own interests.
- However we know that in reality he dislikes and despises Brachiano and he makes this clear on the occasion where he confronts him in the house of convertites.
- Given his many gifts (wit, intelligence and power to amuse) the course of action he has chosen is tragic, giving a sense of what might have become if only he had chosen to follow a different course in life.
- He harps on about himself, his own ill-treatment and lack of appreciation.
- His egocentricity further shows as he never seems to think or care about anyone else and only towards the end of the play, when everything is unravelling, do we see any glimpse of feeling for others.
- A disturbing element in his speech of admiration for Vittoria when he is dying is that it is full of misogyny – that is, his constant complaints against and belittling of women.

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- Flamineo is a skilful manipulator – he often says something different in asides than what he says outloud. He epitomises the difference between seeming and being.

## VITTORIA

- Her beauty is dwelt on
- She only has 6 appearances and, given the different nature of each appearance, it is difficult to form a judgement about her character since we mainly see her in conjunction with other characters.
- Vittoria's role is very little for a title character. Her impact in each of her appearances differ. She starts off resilient and tempts Brachiano with a dream. She then, during the trial scene, personates masculine virtue then later regains her female voice.
- Webster shows that in this society women can only define themselves through men; it is their only route to some limited power.
- Whether through marriage or more illicit means, women's sexuality is their only means of social mobility
- Her trial scene reveals the vulnerable position of a woman in that society; she is seen simply as a commodity that belongs to a man. She is presented as the helpless, if not innocent, victim.
- Both her and Brachiano were guilty of the same thing yet Brachiano is treated courteously and Vittoria must accept her unjust punishment.
- She reaches tragic status at moments before her death, achieving the self-knowledge essential for a tragic heroine; she fully understands how this society works.
- She dies a noble death with untainted honesty
- She could be seen as a paradox... is she vicious or virtuous? Magnificent or vulgar? Perhaps she really is a "devil in crystal"; pretending to be pure and therefore not what she seems.
- We see her coolness when confronted by Monticelso's accusations in court and her proud defence in the face of the abuse of his position.
- The audience may wonder whether she is in fact a good-time girl or rather an ambitious schemer, a "white devil" who is willing to stop at nothing to gain her ends? Monticelso even calls her a "Devil" directly.
- There is always a nagging doubt at the back of the audience's mind that she was in some way responsible for the deaths of her husband and Isabella.
- In the house of convertities we are sure of her innocence but, in defending herself, she lets slip that she knows about Brachiano's guilt in his wife's death so we are bound to question her moral position.
- We are never sure of her feelings for Brachiano, or indeed for Flamineo. Flamineo is not quite sure either.
- The audience must ask themselves to what extent her actions are justified – was she simply acting in self-defence since he had threatened to kill her.
- Vittoria emerges, at least in some readings, as braver and more resourceful when cornered. However it is also possible to play her as tainted, corrupt and hypocritical – the 'white devil'

## BRACHIANO

- He is one of the most powerful and important men in Renaissance Italy.
- He is a mixture of weakness, brutality and bullying.
- At first he seems weak, a would-be-lover, dependant on his secretary, Flamineo. However later he is revealed as vicious, sadistic and unscrupulous.
- He also appears to be a comic figure.

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- At their first meeting Vittoria is very much in control and it is she who suggests the murder of her husband and Brachiano's wife.
- When Vittoria's mother accuses them of adultery he is quick to blame Cornelia for making a fuss.
- When he is confronted by his brother-in-law (Francisco) over the affair, he is unrepentant and threatens to go to war rather than give Vittoria up.
- He is an affectionate father, proud of her precious son, but also a cruel husband, treating Isabella with callous contempt. He rejects her attempts at reconciliation and divorces her but then goes through the charade of letting her divorce him in public to avoid war between Florence and Padua.
- 10 lines after Isabella's exit, he is already planning her murder. The method, poisoning the portrait she kisses each night, underlines his calculating viciousness
- His appearance at Vittoria's arraignment is a sign of ignorance and then he leaves to allow Vittoria to defend for herself.
- In the house of convertites he is quick to believe that Vittoria is unfaithful to him, but faced with her anger he backs down.
- When Flamineo dies, he offers a damning assessment of Brachiano to the disguised Francisco. As Flamineo perceives, he is selfish and immoral, putting his desires before everything.
- Yet on the other hand he does it all for the love of Vittoria and when he realises that he is dying his first thoughts are of her.

## FRANCISCO

- 🐾 He is the Duke of Florence and the brother of Isabella
- 🐾 He is a member of the powerful and wealthy Medici family
- 🐾 He is the perfect embodiment of the Renaissance prince.
- 🐾 He's a rare Machiavellian; a clever, sophisticated, ruthless and subtle character.
- 🐾 He expresses concern for Isabella and takes her part, angrily accusing Brachiano.
- 🐾 When Isabella shows her public tirade against her husband, he instantly turns against her and blames her for failing to achieve a reconciliation.
- 🐾 He plots with Monticelso to keep Vittoria's husband out of the way in order for Brachiano's affair with Vittoria to become a public scandal.
- 🐾 On learning of his sister's death, he appears genuinely moved
- 🐾 When Monticelso suggests revenge upon Brachiano, Francisco rejects the idea. This suggests a difference between himself and Brachiano.
- 🐾 Francisco has already decided to take his revenge in his own way. His revenge is inspired by Isabella's ghost. The love-letter he sends to Vittoria has the desired effect of making Brachiano jealous and determined to marry her.
- 🐾 He then disguises himself as the Moor, Mulinassar and is accepted by Brachiano's court, suggesting fine acting abilities.
- 🐾 Meanwhile he hired Lodovico, Gasparo and others to implement Brachiano and Vittoria's death.
- 🐾 Francisco's absence at the end of the play when the villains caught and punished is disquieting. His survival suggests that his power puts him beyond the reach of the law and that his influence will live on, perhaps in his nephew, Giovanni.

## MONTICELSO

- 🚩 He is Camillo's uncle and Brachiano's enemy

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- ✚ He is determined to punish him and Vittoria for their affair
- ✚ He presides over Vittoria's arraignment, accusing her of immorality and sentences her to detention in the house of convertites.
- ✚ Throughout her trial he plays a leading role, abusing his clerical position, as Vittoria points out, by acting as both her accuser and her judge.
- ✚ His angry tone casts him in an unfavourable light.
- ✚ He seems obsessed by her and her sexual attractions
- ✚ He may also be another candidate for the role of 'white devil' since, as Pope, he would be clothed in all white.
- ✚ His elevation to Pope, without a proper election, suggests the corruption of the whole institution of the Catholic church.
- ✚ The fact that his first act of being Pope is to carry out a private act of vengeance by excommunicating Brachiano and Vittoria reveals the depth of the corruption.
- ✚ The possession of his 'black book' and his urging of Francisco to take revenge reveals a depraved mind.

## LODOVICO

- ✓ He is a parallel character to Flamineo as he is a ruined nobleman, a malcontent and Francisco's murderous henchman – as Flamineo is Brachiano's.
- ✓ Lodovico, in only three years, has depleted his wealth and has committed horrid and bloody murders
- ✓ The play opens and closes with him (apart from Giovanni's final quatrain)
- ✓ His character is revealed from the start as his two friends attempt to reconcile him to his banishment, pointing out that it was well deserved – he has lived riotously and ruined himself.
- ✓ His motivation in avenging Isabella's death is complicated by his personal feelings for her. He confesses "I did love Brachiano's Duchess clearly".
- ✓ When Monticelso tells him revenge is damnable, Lodovico appears willing and only reconsiders when he receives money to continue, which he believes it from Monticelso.
- ✓ He does serve Francisco loyally.

## ISABELLA

- She is Brachiano's wife, Francisco's sister and Giovanni's mother
- She is devoted to her husband, even after she divorces her
- She is also a devoted mother, nursing her son herself at a time when aristocratic women rarely did so.
- She is willing to pretend to divorce her husband in public to prevent a war between the republics of Florence and Pauda
- She believes in the power of her love to reconcile her husband
- When Brachiano rejects her and she enters her public divorce, her performance convinces her brother
- She regrets her female weakness – 'O that I were a man, or that I had power' – but her fierce words make the audience suspect that she harbours these bitter feelings in her heart, despite her claim that it is only an act.

## ZANCHE

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- Vittoria's maid and Flamineo's mistress
- She is a Moor (originally meaning 'a native of ancient Mauretania' but later more loosely used to signify 'a member of Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent')
- The cultural associations surrounding people of colour were generally negative, although Webster plays with contrasting ideas of black and white, suggesting that they are interchangeable.
- Sexual promiscuity is assumed of her
- She is called 'devil' by Marcello and Cornelia calls her a 'haggard' and strikes her. Their treatment of her is clearly inappropriate.
- When Francisco adopts a Moorish disguise she confesses her love for him at once and is willing to steal from Vittoria and run away with him
- When Flamineo suggests a suicide pact with Vittoria she endeavours to persuade him to let them kill him first
- Then when she believes him to be dying she gloats but she is resolute and dies bravely in the end.

## CORNELIA

- ✎ The mother of Flamineo, Vittoria and Marcello.
- ✎ She represents the voice of conventional Christian morality in her disapproval of the affair between Vittoria and Brachiano. However she accepts their marriage and is part of the wedding and it is there that she voices her disapproval of Flamineo's relationship with Zanche.
- ✎ She strikes Zanche, presumably on account of her gender and her social inferiority and also perhaps her colour
- ✎ When Flamineo kills Marcello, Cornelia is distraught but does attempt to shield Flamineo from blame, since he is the only son she has left.
- ✎ It is her descent into madness, as she sings a dirge, which finally causes Flamineo to feel compassion
- ✎ As the voice of feminine decorum, Cornelia tries to resist the drift toward immorality, denouncing not only her own family members, but Brachiano also, by reminding him of his marital status and praying that Vittoria's life be shortened if she brings dishonour to her husband's bed

## CAMILLO

- He is Vittoria's husband and Monticelso's nephew.
- He is a fool and no match for his beautiful and clever wife
- It becomes apparent that the family had lost all their money so Vittoria's motive for marrying Camillo was financial.
- His main function is to obstruct the play's more important characters
- He is fearful of being cuckolded by Brachiano but is gullible and easily manipulated by his uncle, wife and brother-in-law.
- His death at Flamineo's hands (by having his neck broken) is pathetic.

## MARCELLO

- He is the brother to Flamineo and Vittoria and the son of Cornelia.
- He is easily angered and bad-tempered

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- He is a soldier and serves Francisco and he is poorly rewarded for his service although he does not share Flamineos general discontent.
- He is the voice of conventional morality, for example he frowns on Vittoria and Brachiano's relationship.
- He seems to overcome his misgivings though and attends the wedding
- He threatens to cut Zanche's throat which shows an unpleasant side to him.

### GIOVANNI

- 🐾 He is the son of Brachiano and Isabella
- 🐾 His few brief appearances display his youth and immaturity
- 🐾 We first see him when he arrives in Rome with his mother, emphasising their attachment.
- 🐾 With his fathers death, he becomes the new duke, despite his youth.
- 🐾 He speaks the final words of the play and is responsible for the restoration of order.
- 🐾 His reference to Homer shows that Giovanni is well educated with a classical education. He is presented as lively and precocious (wise beyond his years) and innocent in the ways of the world with a very Black or white view. All the major characters treat him with affection and he is used by Webster as a measure of his fathers selfishness and lack of responsibility.