

The white devil – THEMES

1. LOVE AND DEATH

- The play suggests that love is an archaic force which destroys the established social order as well as the personal lives of all those caught up in it
- Its inevitable outcome is death – love and death are indissoluble
- All those who love die as a result – the love of Brachiano and Vittoria signifies the death of Isabella and Camillo and this leads to the death of Brachiano and Vittoria themselves.
- Vittoria is killed due to poison to her lips whilst similarly Brachiano is killed in the same manner (poison on his mouth guard)
- The love of Brachiano and Vittoria is adulterous which calls into question ideas concerning the institution of marriage in the period – it was essentially a system designed to ensure patrilineal inheritance (the legitimate continuation of the male bloodline) and establish political alliances in which women, in particular, functioned as pawns.
- Within 30 lines of Brachiano and Vittoria being alone, she is confiding in her dream of the death of Isabella and Camillo.
- Isabella's death is brought about not simply by her husband's love for another woman but by her love for him as she kisses his portrait.
- Flamineo's 'love' for Zanche leads directly to the death of his brother Marcello.
- The maternal love of Cornelia and Isabella is shown as both women unusually for the time suckled their own children, demonstrating the strength of maternal love.
- Isabella is killed by her love for her husband while Cornelia is destroyed by her love for her children – Cornelia ends up losing her mind.
- Death can, paradoxically, lead back to love – Brachiano's death leads to his final cries for Vittoria and his speak of his love for her
- Flamineo has exploited his sister but it is not until both are truly facing death that he says "I love thee now"
- There is no notion of any religious afterlife considered by Flamineo or Vittoria. Flamineo does not speak of heaven or hell but merely "to study a long silence"
- The theme and preoccupation with death was hardly surprising given the proximity of death and fragility of life during Webster's time.

2. IDENTITY AND DISGUISE

- ❏ Identity in the play is never fixed or stable
- ❏ Characters shift their positions and are open to different interpretations. The play is filled with warning about the deceptive nature of appearances.
- ❏ The characters change and play different roles, mainly adopting disguises
- ❏ Francisco is a concerned brother in act 2, a moralist in act 3, a scheming Machiavellian in act 4 and a disguised Moor in act 5
- ❏ Lodovico is a ruined nobleman, turns into a ruthless assassin and adopts the disguise of a monk to carry out his revenge
- ❏ Brachiano is a besotted courtly wooer, genial father, cruel husband, ruthless murderer, jealous lover, vicious tyrant and fearful murder victim.

- ❏ Flamineo is the most mercurial character – he plays the concerned brother-in-law to Camillo and then goes on to play-act his own death.
- ❏ The effect of this increases the audience’s sense of disorientation, making it difficult to fix on any one idea and is perhaps one of the factors responsible for its mixed critical reception over the years.
- ❏ It also poses questions about the meaning of identity and the purposes of theatre and disguise.
- ❏ Webster sees character as fluid and provisional, responding to circumstance and situation, adopting different roles and disguises.
- ❏ Disguise also extends to the level of the text. Many of Flamineo’s lines contain double entendres and what is on the surface of the dialogue is often the extreme opposite of what is meant.

3. POLITICS AND RELIGION

- ❏ The powerful and wealthy are able to do as they please without taking account of the law. This inequality produces a deeply flawed, corrupt society
- ❏ The alliance between Monticelso and Francisco against Brachiano represents the alliance between Church and State with the two parties.
- ❏ Francisco is more concerned that political stability is maintained than the honour of his sister.
- ❏ The play demonstrates how the corrupt political system affects the whole social structure. It also questions the role of religion at a structural level. Religion is responsible for formulating and upholding the basic moral tenets of society
- ❏ The Church and the law leads to the disintegration of all social bounds.
- ❏ The importance of the Church to politics is evident at the election of the new Pope where influence over the election is sought by the powerful families of Italy.
- ❏ A certain perception of a reading of Machiavelli was that politics was based on the calm, rational and amoral scheming of princes and politicians. However, some critics now argue that the Jacobean understanding of Machiavelli misrepresents his original ideas.
- ❏ ‘respectable’ society was embodied by the “great men” of the play. They represented legality and honesty yet both undermine the power and purity of societal forces and show them to be more about maintaining power than encouraging virtue.
- ❏ These “great men”, such as Francisco and Monticelso, are noble by birth but very little separates them from the thugs like Lodovico and Flamineo.
- ❏ Despite being fitted in holy robes, Monticelso is a scheming revenger
- ❏ It is the clash between political necessity and the love between Bracciano and Vittoria that sets the tragic events in motion
- ❏ Neither Bracciano or Vittoria has married their partners at the beginning for love but more for the furtherance of the power and influence of their own families.
- ❏ A moral, Christian framework to the play is seen through the influence the ‘English tradition of morality plays’ had on *The White Devil*.

4. **FEMINISM**

- The 'white devil' of the title is most commonly taken to be Vittoria
- For many years the play was known as 'Vittoria Corombona'
- Vittoria is central to the play – it is her beauty and brilliance that inflame Brachiano's desire and thus activate the plot
- Her life is circumstanced entirely by her relations with men. Her life is defined by her place in a patriarchal social structure in which women are dependent upon and subservient to men.
- She is blamed and called a whore and Brachiano does not hesitate to blame her and even sees himself as an innocent victim.
- Vittoria goes on to specifically draw attention to the fact that in order to defend herself she 'must personate masculine virtue'
- All the women in the play as seen to be similarly positioned
- Vittoria is contrasted with the compliant, submissive Isabella, but her brother confirms that she was also subject to an arranged marriage with Brachiano in order to cement the alliance between Florence and Padua. Beneath the surface Vittoria and Isabella are more similar than different. They are both victims of male lust and desires, are both held to unfair standards of virtue and are unfavourably compared to Brachiano
- In order to preserve the peace Isabella play-acts the divorce and as soon as she does vent her anger she is immediately criticised and blamed.
- Zanche is oppressed by her race and class as well as gender. She is abused and insulted by Cornelia and Marcello. She is Vittoria's dark shadow, frequently referred to as 'devil' – the black devil to Vittoria's white.
- The play's constant misogynistic commentary is evidence.
- Flamineo says "women are like cursed dogs, civility keeps them tied all daytime, but they are let loose at midnight; then they do most good or most mischief". He goes on to imply that all they're interested in and good for is nightly (sexual) activities.
- Women are frequently seen by men as mere commodity. Vittoria is accused of lust and infidelity and men, under the guise of honour, are violent and derogatory towards them
- Vittoria's ever-changing roles could reflect the brutal transitions between accommodation and deceit demanded of all women if they are to survive in a patriarchy.
- Zanche had traded her emotions so long she seems only vaguely aware of them.
- Females were not allowed to act and so all female parts were played by men

5. **MISOGYNY (PREJUDICE AGAINST WOMEN)**

- Misogyny manifests itself in the viewpoints of most of the male characters
- Flamineo constantly utters disparaging remarks about women
- Most characters treat the headstrong Vittoria as a whore but avoid prosecuting Brachiano
- Women are held to different standards than men and are treated as dangerous when they show strength or sexuality.

6. **REVENGE AND TRAGEDY**

- The play uses many revenge tragedy tropes such as a secret murder of a harmless person, a ghostly visitation and a devastating final scene with most of the cast dead
- Francisco seeks revenge for the murder of his sister Isabella
- In the 1580's English Revenge tragedy found its formula (based largely around the work of Tomas Kyd's play "the Spanish Tragedy". The typical formula would be a Italian/Spanish setting, political corruption, violence, revengers, poison, ghosts and the death of the revenger. Shakespeare perfected this character type perfectly in "Hamlet" and it is clearly Echoed in Webster's play.

7. **CLASS**

- ✿ Flamineo's strongest motivation is his desire to ascend the social ladder.
- ✿ According the Flamineo "knaves do grow great by being men's apes". I.e. if he fakes being a great man for long enough, he will be a great man.