

Understanding *The Duchess of Malfi* through key words

Example

A key word: church

The subject/ theme relevant to the key word: religion

A passage containing the key word:

ANTONIO. Some such flashes superficially hang on him for form;
but observe his inward character: he is a melancholy churchman.
The spring in his face is nothing but the engend'ring of toads;
where he is jealous of any man, he lays worse plots for them than
ever was impos'd on Hercules, for he strews in his way flatterers,
panders, intelligencers, atheists, and a thousand such political
monsters. He should have been Pope; but instead of coming to it
by the primitive decency of the **church**, he did bestow bribes
so largely and so impudently as if he would have carried it away
without heaven's knowledge. Some good he hath done——

Location of the passage in the play: Act I, Scene III

Characters in the scene: ANTONIO, DELIO

The context of the passage: Antonio and Delio enter the court and meet Ferdinand and the Cardinal. Ferdinand and Castruccio show contempt for Antonio because he is of a socially inferior birth. Antonio recognizes that the Cardinal, like other nobilities at court, is hypocritical and selfish.

Your interpretation of the passage: In this passage, Antonio warns against the danger of judging someone's virtue by their outward appearance and performative conduct in public. Antonio believes that the Cardinal will plot against anyone and ally himself with people of crooked intention for the pursuit of his self interest. Antonio suggests that the Cardinal also obtained his distinguished position in the church through bribery. This passage comments directly on the corruption of the church and the disintegration of moral values at court.

Group 1:

A key word: "crooked"

The subject/ theme relevant to the key word: Corruption

A passage containing the key word:

Bosola: He and his brother are like plum-trees that grow **crooked** over standing-pools; they are rich and o'erladen with fruit, but none but crows, pies, and caterpillars feed on them. Could I be one of their flattering panders, I would hang on their ears like a horseleech, till I were full, and then drop off. I pray, leave me. Who would rely upon these miserable dependencies, in expectation to be advanc'd to-morrow? What creature ever fed worse than hoping Tantalus? Nor ever died any man more fearfully than he that hoped for a pardon. There are rewards for hawks and dogs when they have done us service; but for a soldier that hazards his limbs in a battle, nothing but a kind of geometry is his last supportation.g

Location of the passage in the play: Act 1, Scene 1

Characters in the scene: BOSOLA, ANTONIO, DELIO

The context of the passage:

Bosola gets into a discussion with the Cardinal, where he tries to reason with him. Which only ends up with the Cardinal dismissing him and leaving the conversation. Antonio and Delio approach him afterwards to inquire. Bosola explains his unfair treatment working underneath the brothers. He brings up various comparisons, one highlighting how animals get more benefits than a soldier who sacrificed his limbs.

Your interpretation of the passage:

Jasmeet- In this passage, Bosola is displaying his frustration working under the brothers. His comparison of the brothers as plum trees that crows, magpies, and caterpillars feed on paints them in a negative light. Forewarning what energy the brothers attract. Bosola admits he too is there to leech off them and leave once he has achieved his goals; directly highlighting the corruption within the court. That status is needed to progress within society which means resorting to such measures. Despite all he has done, he is still treated with disregard. Comparing himself to a soldier who sacrifices his limbs for little to no reward, alluding to the

injustice faced. This implies the corruption and injustice faced within the courts which are corrupted with the power of status.

Ethan - Each of the characters at the start of the play has their own ulterior motive for why they act the way they do, especially in regards to how they behave amongst each other. The relationships between the characters' interactions is the most interesting thing to look at. Each conversation is always a fine dance between stating the "said" and the "unsaid", and the unsaid is often that each person, or at least in this scene, has motives to move higher in society for their own upwards mobility. Bosola describes the brothers in such way as "leeches", and readers get a sense that the brothers' true motives are to grab at any opportunity to claim power. In Ferdinand's case specifically, it is claiming of the throne, hence the reason why examining his relationship (and the brothers in general) with the Duchess is compelling to watch as they wrestle with her strong will and ability to refuse the wishes they have for her not to get married, just so that they can get the power that they desire. Bosola is no stranger to this as well, as he acts as someone that just obeys the wishes of his higher ups, but also for his upward mobility. Each character has their own intentions, but it's funny how these unsaid motives come up in the character conversations. Bosola though, unlike the brothers, is a little more moral, and goes on to complain about the behavior of the brothers, rightfully questioning their actions and protesting against his unfair treatment.

Group 2:

A key word:

The subject/ theme relevant to the key word: and Economic Struggles/Advantages and its role in relationships.

A passage containing the key word:

"*DUCHESS.*

*The misery of us that are born great!
We are forc'd to woo, because none dare woo us;
And as a tyrant doubles with his words,
And fearfully equivocates, so we
Are forc'd to express our violent passions
In riddles and in dreams, and leave the path
Of simple virtue, which was never made
To seem the thing it is not. Go, go brag
You have left me heartless; mine is in your bosom:
I hope 'twill multiply love there. You do tremble:
Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh,
To fear more than to love me. Sir, be confident:
What is 't distracts you? This is flesh and blood, sir;
'Tis not the figure cut in alabaster
Kneels at my husband's tomb. Awake, awake, man!
I do here put off all vain ceremony,
And only do appear to you a young widow
That claims you for her husband, and, like a widow,
I use but half a blush in 't."*

Location of the passage in the play:

Characters in the scene:

The context of the passage: The Dutchess is speaking about her role as a dutchess and upper status.

Your interpretation of the passage:

C- my interpretation of the passage was that the Duchess is a passionate person and she was explaining her feelings to a man and professing her love knowing she is a higher power that she is not a Stone.

Group 3:

A key word: Love

The subject/ theme relevant to the key word: Marriage, religion, sin, love, status

A passage containing the key word: *Go, go brag*

You have left me heartless; mine is in your bosom:

I hope 'twill multiply love there. You do tremble:

Make not your heart so dead a piece of flesh,

To fear more than to love me.

Location of the passage in the play: Act 1 Scene 3

Characters in the scene: The Duchess and Antonio

The context of the passage:

The Duchess and Antonio discuss their feelings regarding each other and the obstacles around them.

Your interpretation of the passage:

The Duchess and Antonio are talking about how they feel about each other. She thinks that Antonio is too worried about the opinion of her brothers. She is breaking traditions with class hierarchy, so she wants Antonio to be more confident about his feelings towards her because she is already risking a lot by being with him. Also there are many passages foreshadowing the marriage before it happens because of Antonio's praise for The Duchess.

Group 4:

A key word: devil/sin

The subject/ theme relevant to the key word: Unacceptable/different behavior

A passage containing the key word:

BOSOLA. *"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? O, this base quality
Of intelligencer! Why, every quality i' the world
Prefers but gain or commendation."*

Location of the passage in the play: Act III, Scene II.

Characters in the scene: Duchess, Ferdinand, Bosola, Cariola, Antonio, Officers 1, 2, 3 and 4.

The context of the passage: Antonio tries to convince the Duchess of staying with him for the night. They are married. She thinks it isn't a good idea. Antonio talks to Cariola about why she should marry, and being single isn't good. Ferdinand talks to the Duchess about her reputation for remarrying, disrespecting her deceased husband. The Duchess makes up a lie to Bosola about her husband stealing from her, he sends to capture him. Officers arrive with him and she asks to let go, since he is her husband; she sends her husband away to Ancona. Bosola is astonished by why she is married to a man with no money or power, so are the officers. Bosola advises her to leave with Antonio, she does. Bosola is a spy, about to sell the information he's learned.

Your interpretation of the passage: Bosola is thinking about his wrongdoings of selling that information and betraying the Duchess. He uses being a politician as an excuse for doing the devil's work (wrongdoings) and getting away with it.

Group 5:

A key word: Lust

The subject/ theme relevant to the key word: Desire, Greed

A passage containing the key word: " She hath had most cunning bawds to serve her turn, And more secure conveyances for lust Than towns of garrison for service. CARDINAL. Is t possible? Can this be certain? FERDINAND. Apply desperate physic: We must not now use balsamum, but fire, The smarting cupping-glass, for that's the mean To purge infected blood, such blood as hers."

Location of the passage in the play: Act II Scene V

Characters in the scene: Ferdinand and the Cardinal

The context of the passage: Here we find Ferdinand and the Cardinal after reading a letter from Bosola saying that the duchess is pregnant and they are discussing it.

Ferdinand & Cardinal is being driven mad. The Cardinal is telling Ferdinand to lower his voice but Ferdinand doesn't care. He's talking and saying she's looking for more lovers to convey in bed and looking for lust.

Your interpretation of the passage: The Cardinal and Ferdinand are shocked to learn the truth about how the duchess has become pregnant and are now trying to turn the opportunity over to themselves in their favor.

Group 6:

A key word:

The subject/ theme relevant to the key word:

A passage containing the key word:

Location of the passage in the play:

Characters in the scene:

The context of the passage:

Your interpretation of the passage:

Ty: I think that this particular quote highlights the harmatia within Bosola, as I am assuming it leads him to his inevitable doom. Within the borders of this play, which include religion and conformity, it is interesting to see Bosola make a moral shift, even when we know that he has committed crimes even before the play started.

Laura: I feel that this passage is a generally great example of text for the complexity of characters' feelings as they bend their own social ideals around the fear and control of sin, and evil. Doing bad things because someone is committing sin. Committing sin themselves. fearing the judgment of God, Church and themselves is a silent motivator for many of these characters.

Daysi: Although Ferdinand is offering Bosola something in exchange, he feels that what he is doing is sinful even though he has committed a crime before. One of the reasons he is willing to spy is so that he can level up his social status and for his wealth.