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**Course: English Literature Survey: The Neoclassical Period**

**Compare and Contrast John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Aphra Behn's *The Rover* as a Jacobean Revenge and Restoration Play Respectively**

**Introduction**

In the world, kingdoms defeat kingdoms to become the ruling power, fashions defeat fashions to become the trending and all these happen in time, we also experience same in literature. In literature, periods or ages come out so that old ones will go in. Neoclassical period was one of the ages in literary history.

Neoclassical literature was written between 1660 and 1798. This time period is broken down into three parts: the Restoration period, the Augustan period, and the Age of Johnson.

Writers of the Neoclassical period tried to imitate the style of the Romans and Greeks. Thus the combination of the terms 'neo,' which means 'new,' and 'classical,' as in the day of the Roman and Greek classics. This was also the era of The Enlightenment, which emphasized logic and reason. It was preceded by The Renaissance and followed by the Romantic era. In fact, the Neoclassical period ended in 1798.

**Neoclassical Period**

Neoclassical started with the death of Queen Elizabeth and beginning of James Elizabeth nephew's reign. His alignment with the Catholic Church in England caused tumult which would only stop when his grandson Charles II will be brought back to the throne in England. His was a time of comfortableness in England. People would meet at coffee houses to chat about politics,

among other topics, and sometimes drink a new, warm beverage made of chocolate! It was also the beginning of the British tradition of drinking afternoon tea. And it was the starting point of the middle class, and because of that, more people were literate.

People were very interested in appearances, but not necessarily in being genuine. Men and women commonly wore wigs, and being clever and witty was in vogue. Having good manners and doing the right thing, particularly in public, was essential. It was a time, too, of British political upheaval as eight monarchs took the throne.

## **Characteristics of Neoclassical Literature**

Neoclassical literature is characterized by order, accuracy, and structure. In direct opposition to Renaissance attitudes, where man was seen as basically good, the Neoclassical writers portrayed man as inherently flawed. They emphasized restraint, self-control, and common sense. This was a time when conservatism flourished in both politics and literature.

## **Revenge tragedy**

A revenge tragedy, also called tragedy of blood can be any tragedy where revenge is, more or less, a minor part of the overall narrative rather than just a narrative's major driving force. It is drama in which the dominant motive is revenge for a real or imagined injury; it was a favourite form of English tragedy in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. As long as revenge is an underlying theme or motivation throughout the piece, it can be labeled as revenge tragedy. The revenge drama was derived originally from the Roman tragedies of Seneca but was established on the English stage by Thomas Kyd with *The Spanish Tragedy*.

For example, John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, while often classified as a tragedy (its original frontispiece marketed it as *The Tragedy of the Dutchesse of Malfy*), can also be classified or read as a revenge tragedy since both major and minor characters are motivated by revenge.

## **Features of Revenge Tragedies**

The play does, however, correspond in many ways to the established structure of the revenge tragedy and contains many of its recognizable features.

- Dumb show
- Machiavellian villainy
- Madness and feigned madness
- Murders and corpses
- Ghosts

- Physical torment/ torture
- Soliloquies
- Sudden reversal of events
- Revenge seekers death
- Masks
- Restoration of order

With these already listed features, *The Duchess of Malfi* will be discussed, comparing and contrasting between the play and the Jacobean revenge tragedy.

### ***The Duchess of Malfi***

The play by John Webster tells of a certain duchess, who inherits her political position from her dead husband, the former Duke of Malfi. The Duchess's two brothers, the Cardinal and Ferdinand, who are both corrupt never wants her get remarried. To make sure that their sister does not derail, the brothers make the Duchess into employing Bosola, who is working as Ferdinand's spy.

The Duchess marries Antonio and both of them, though, they secretly had their marriage relation got babies. Bosola reports back to the brothers that she is married to Antonio. They decide to punish her by torturing her and later strangle her together with her two children and Cariola her maid. Antonio is also mistakenly killed by Bosola and then Bosola claims revenge upon the brothers, and so kills both Ferdinand and the Cardinal. He dies from a fatal wound he got. The only surviving son of the Duchess and Antonio who is taken in by Antonio's old friend Delio, is finally brought back at the end with the hope of the dukedom being restored.

### **Similarities**

There are features of the Jacobean revenge tragedy which can be seen in the play. Here they are going to be brought out.

### **Dumb show**

This is a performance within Jacobean revenge tragedy by madmen. They are often called in to perform before the dignitaries. In our play, these madmen are employed right before the Duchess was strangled. It comes as an order from Ferdinand the Duchess's brother. This is seen in Act V, scene II.

## Machiavellian villainy

A Machiavellian villain is a character portrayed in literature that is in a sense a "puppet master". He uses other "tool villains" in order to get what he desires. A Machiavellian villain always operates in secrecy, concealing his true intentions from everyone. In the play being looked at, Ferdinand and his brother Cardinal together with Bosola are grossly Machiavellian characters (villains). One of the incidents in the play that stamps out Bosola in particular is when he uses Julia Castruccio's wife to get words from Cardinal's. The woman ends up with her life being taken from her and it is seen in Act V, scene II.

## Madness and feigned madness

Madness or feigned madness is another indispensable attribute of Jacobean revenge tragedy. In another play of this type, *The Changeling*, Antonio and Francisco are counterfeit madmen but in this particular play, Ferdinand becomes mad. He is reported to have gone mad after seeing a ghost of his sister and thinks of himself as a wolf. The doctor calls it Lycanthropia. (5.1)

## Murders and corpses

Jacobean revenge tragedies are always violent. The play has its own deal of violence and starting from the murder of the Duchess to the death of the avenger Bosola himself. Corpse-littered scenes will be experienced at least twice in the play.

## Physical torment/ torture

In the play the Duchess herself is a victim of the torture starting from the time her brothers confine her to the court till the moment she will be strangled. (4.1)

## Soliloquies

At some point in the play the characters thought aloud, exposing their mind about the happenings in the play or what they think about other characters. An example is:

Bos. O, she's gone again! There the cords of life broke. O, sacred innocence, that sweetly sleeps on turtles' feathers, whilst a guilty conscience is a black register, wherein is writ All our good deeds and bad, a perspective that shews us hell! That we cannot be suffer'd to do good when we have a mind to it! This is manly sorrow; these

tears, I am very certain, never grew in my mother's milk: my estate is sunk Below the degree of fear: where were These penitent fountains, while she was living? O, they were frozen up! Here is a sight as direful to my soul, as is the sword unto a wretch hath slain his father. Come, I'll bear thee hence, and execute thy last will; that's deliver Thy body to the reverend dispose of some good women: that, the cruel tyrant shall not deny me. Then I'll post to Milan, Where somewhat I will speedily enact worth my dejection. (4.2)

This is after the death of the Duchess and her kids together with Cariola.

## Revenge seekers death

The plays often end with the avenger's death. In this play when Bosola is done avenging the Duchess's death in the final scene, he dies of a fatal injury he sustained while trying to kill Cardinal and Ferdinand.

## Masks

In the play there is masking. The Duchess in her confinement is made to see figures that looked like the corpse of her husband and that of her child. She even kisses hand of a dead man shown to her as her husband Antonio's hand. (4.1)

## Restoration of order

In the play we would see order coming back at the end of the play when the revenge has been made. The dukedom goes back to the Duchess's first son kept under Delio's care by Antonio.

## Complex plot

The play's plot (arrangement) is intricate in nature. The play does not tell of events which happened in a simple plot – one event leading to another.

## Ghosts

Apparition of ghost, especially the ghost of the one seeking revenge is an attribute of this particular tragedy being looking at. Here we see that Ferdinand the brother of Duchess who goes mad after seeing his sister's ghost. We also see Antonio being talked to from the grave which is identified as Duchess's own. In (5.3) the echo is heard from the duchess's grave.

## **Dissimilarities**

*The Duchess of Malfi* has been recorded as one of the most perfect examples of Jacobean revenge tragedy. Even though this could be true, there are differences one can sift when it is looked at based on the aforementioned characteristics of Jacobean revenge tragedy.

## **Cannibalism**

Another attribute of Jacobean tragedy is cannibalism. But in this particular play, it is lacking. There is no mention of it.

## **Restoration play**

The term “restoration” in Restoration drama refers to the return of the monarchy to England after period Puritan rule. It can also be applied to the stage itself, for during the Commonwealth interregnum, Puritan authorities repeatedly endeavored, though with limited success, to banish public performances of plays. From September 2, 1642, when Parliament proclaimed that “while these sad causes and set times of humiliation do continue, public stage-plays shall cease, and be forborne,” until August 21, 1660, when King Charles II granted patents to Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant to establish theaters, drama in England was something against the state.

The period’s major contributions were the comedy of manners or wit and the heroic tragedy, both of which emerged rather quickly and endured throughout the era. Alongside these predominant forms, other types of comic and serious plays coexisted on the stage. Among the former were burlesques, farces and political satires together with couple of other forms.

## **Features of restoration plays**

Below are some characteristics with which restoration plays can be identified;

- Satire
- Coincidence

- Social deviant attitude
- Masking
- Machiavellian villain
- Violence
- Restoration of order
- Trickery

## ***The Rover***

Aphra Behn's play, *The Rover*, tells of a young maiden Florinda who her father wants to marry off to Vincentio, a wealthy old man. Florinda's brother Don Pedro on his own would not want her to marry Vincentio rather he prefers Don Antonio, his friend, who is viceroy's son. But Florinda would not want to marry both because she prefers an English colonel, Belvile. She (Florinda) is supported by her sister Helena whose fate has been sealed that she would become a nun. During the carnival, Helena meets the wayward Willmore, the rover and falls in love with him. Willmore later goes on to sleep with Angelica the courtesan after deceiving her that he loves her. He gets in a love triangle.

Belvile's frequent plans with his lover, Florinda keeps being foiled and on one occasion, he gets caught while waiting for his love after drunken Willmore engages himself in a fight with Don Antonio. In Antonio's place Belvile promises to fight the duel Antonio has the next day for him and coincidentally the duel was with Don Pedro. There Don Pedro offers disguised Belvile Florinda's hand in marriage when Belvile spared his life. But withdraws the offer as soon as he discovers it is Belvile. Later, Florinda running away from womanizing Willmore enters Blunt's lodging and would have been raped by Blunt if not for coincidental visit of Don Pedro and Belvile. Florinda is brought out in mask but suddenly Pedro leaves due to Valeria's information about Florinda's escape. Finally, in Pedro's absence, three marriages took place between: Florinda and Belvile, Valeria and Fredrick and finally, Helena and Willmore.

## **Comparison**

As *The Duchess of Malfi* was compared with Jacobean revenge tragedy, *the Rover*, will be compared also with the restoration play tradition to know where they agree.

Satire

In *The Rover*, one would discover that the whole play is filled with satire. We see the womanizing being satirized in the person of Willmore (1.2, 2.2). It can be seen in other parts of the play.

## Coincidence

Series of coincidental events are seen in the play, from the meeting of Belvile's party with Florinda's party in the second scene of Act one to the last scene of the play to where Don Pedro is taken to Blunt's Lodging where Florinda unknowingly ran to.

## Social deviant attitude

The play seems to go against the social norms of the time particularly that of placing wealth above love in the marriage. Florinda loves Belvile but due to the fact that he is a poor English colonel their marriage is refused initially. Florinda's father wants her to marry an old rich man Vincentio while her brother prefers a rich but younger Don Antonio even in his waywardness.

## Masking

Gipsy character is used by Florinda and her party during the carnival (1.2). In 2.1, Pedro and Antonio fight over Angelica because they are wearing mask and not well aware of each other. These two are just a few of where the use of mask is seen in the play.

## Machiavellian villainy

Willmore is a Machiavellian villain and who would do anything he can to get whatever he wanted even if it meant deception as in 2.2 and even violence as in 3.3. Antonio and Pedro as in 2.1 show their greed and readiness to fight because Angelica. Another character is Helena.

## Violence

Violence plays major role in the play. An example is in 2.1, when Pedro fights with Antonio his would-have-been-brother-in-law. And even draw up a sword-fight that will take place at Molo. In 3.3, Antonio is wounded by Willmore and 4.2, the disguised Belvile fights Pedro.

## Restoration of order



At end of the restoration play, peace is restored. The same can be seen in this our play where in the end we would experience three marriages with Pedro actually giving up on his idea.

## Deception

In the play, Willmore the rover is the master deceiver. The way he plays the ladies with his tongue is exceptional. Lucetta described as a wench deceives the naïve Blunt and with her pimps steals everything he had from him in 3.2.

## Aside

Practically used by almost all the active characters in the play, it is when a character says something not intended to be heard by other characters in the scene. It is usually when the characters are talking to themselves.

## Dissimilarity

### Feminism

The restoration society is believed to be a patriarchal society. But Aphra Behn chooses to give the power of decision making to the women. Not only are they able to make their choices, they are able to control matters concerning them. We see Helena supporting her sister and even voicing out her opinion in 1.1. In 2.1 Angelica chooses her occupation as a courtesan and through that wields much power over men.

Contrary to some other restoration play as we could see in the country wife, women are in great control in the play.

### Restoration plays

In this particular category of neoclassical literature, restoration plays, we learn that restoration plays are not only comic but also tragic. Our play here *The Rover* is a restoration play but only an example of a drama genre in existence then.

## ***The Duchess of Malfi and The Rover***

*The Duchess of Malfi* and *The Rover* have been looked at respectively. Their strength and weakness with regard to the tradition they belong to have also been considered. Now, both plays are now to be looked at to see some of their similarities and dissimilarities remembering that among first things they have in common are that both works are plays and are of neoclassical period.

### **Similarities**

#### Masking

Seen in the plays as discussed are the roles played by mask. The gipsy masks and masquerades used in *The Rover* together with some other occasions and the mask used to play tricks on the confined Duchess in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

#### Machiavellian villainy

Both plays as one would see from the analyses made above contain a great number of characters in this form. *The Rover* has some in the characters of Helena, Antonio, Lucetta and in *The Duchess of Malfi*, one would see characters like Bosola, Ferdinand, Cardinal.

#### Violence

Violence is a part of both plays that cannot be overlooked. One would see them in 2.1 and 4.1 in *The Rover* and *The Duchess of Malfi* respectively.

#### Restoration of order

Both plays have restoration of order at the end of the play even though they vary in their genres. In *The Rover*, three marriages take place at the end of the play while in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Duchess's son is made to take over the dukedom.

### **Dissimilarities**

## Dumb show

There was dumb show in *The Duchess of Malfi* but was not in *The Rover*.

## Madness and feigned madness

In *The Duchess of Malfi*, there is madness. Ferdinand ran mad. But in *The Rover* no trace of madness can be seen.

## Murders and corpses

Even though there are violence experiences in the plays, *The Duchess of Malfi* has corpses and murder situations. *The Rover* has no bloody scene.

## Physical torment/ torture

No torture in *The Rover* but enough torture in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

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