

Shakespeare's technique

We can also deal with language in *Macbeth* by looking at the techniques Shakespeare used. Some of these techniques (and names) might seem difficult at first. If that's the case, just think about what the play would sound like if the technique was not used. For instance, when we meet the witches at the start, imagine that they said:

"Things aren't what they seem, you know"

Well, yes, it is easy to understand but it is not something unusual or interesting, and it doesn't seem to be something a witch might want to say anyway. So instead, they say:

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair"

Suddenly it's not so obvious what Shakespeare is getting at. This is also a lot more complex and interesting - opposing ideas are put together and the actual meaning seems to be a paradox - how can something fair be foul, and something foul be fair? Let's have a look at this next.

Ambiguities

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair"

We know the witches are in the middle of a storm and perhaps they are saying that they like this; they are witches so they enjoy bad things and are on the side of evil. However, they could also be saying that what we think looks attractive (or 'fair') is actually bad (or 'foul'). In other words, our ambitions can be our downfall. Or they could be warning us of things to come in the play - Macbeth is tempted by their predictions and enters a confused, unnatural world, where he cannot trust what he sees and cannot bear what he is.

Perhaps now we can appreciate Shakespeare's skill as a writer - many of his characters say things which are **ambiguous**. This means that you can interpret them in different ways, so the witches might be talking about the weather, or they might mean something completely different. Another example of ambiguity is when Lady Macbeth says the daggers 'must lie there' - she could mean the daggers must be placed there, but also that the daggers will hide the truth and pin the blame on the servants.

Imagery

- **Imagery** is used a lot in *Macbeth*. This is when strong pictures or ideas are created in our minds. For instance, the play has lots of references to darkness, to sleep, to disease and even to blood. Imagery often describes one thing in terms of another, and there are three main ways this happens:
- **Metaphors** is when one thing is called something else. For instance, when Macbeth wants to defend his lands against others, he uses metaphors from medicine - he wants to find the 'disease' in Scotland, to restore it to 'health' and to use a 'drug' against others.
- **Personification** is where something is described as if it is human, so the "Dark night strangles the travelling lamp".
- **Similes** is when a direct comparison is made (with 'as', 'than' or 'like'), so Banquo says that the witches "look not like the inhabitants o'the'earth" or Macbeth says something "moves like a ghost".

Other techniques

- **Opposite words or ideas** are also frequent in *Macbeth* - they highlight conflicts in the story such as appearance and reality, choice and fate or good and evil. At times the opposites are in terms of single words, such as 'heaven' or 'hell'. The technical term for this is antithesis, when words are deliberately chosen to contrast. For instance, we have 'foul' and 'fair' from the witches and even Lady Macbeth says what has 'quenched' the servants has given her 'fire' (she means it's made them tired, but made her alert).
- **Repetition** is also used frequently in *Macbeth* - repeating a word or phrase draws attention to it. For instance, in Act 2, Scene 2 we have:

Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep, Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care

In fact the word 'sleep' is repeated 8 times in just 10 lines. Again, this is no accident - Shakespeare really wants the audience to be aware of what sleep means to his characters - sleep is like death, but it's also an escape from the worries of the world. By concentrating on the word 'sleep' we can see how Macbeth has put Duncan to sleep (he's killed him) and now will no longer sleep (or relax) again.

- Another important technique in *Macbeth* is the use of **soliloquies**. These are speeches but they are meant to be heard only by the audience. They tell us directly about a character's thoughts and feelings and they are very important in *Macbeth*, because we can understand exactly what is going through a character's mind. Perhaps the most famous is in Act 2, Scene 1, which starts: "Is this a dagger I see before me". Without this soliloquy, we would have no idea just how confused Macbeth is.