

What's so special about Shakespeare's language?

English

A series of workshops and resources written and performed by Michael Rosen for Shakespeare Week.

Workshop Four

So we've heard a bit about the island in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* in the first three workshops, and we've met Caliban who lives on the island. In this speech, Caliban is talking to a Duke called Prospero who was banished from Milan and came to live on the island. Caliban is now angry about it.

This is what he says:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' the island.

(*The Tempest*, Act I Scene 2)



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English

Workshop Four (continued)

So this is an angry speech but it doesn't start angrily. There are several changes of mood in this piece:

- First Caliban talks about who he thinks the island belongs to and how it was stolen from him.
- Secondly he tells the story of how well Caliban and Prospero used to get on.
- Then Caliban suddenly starts to curse Prospero.
- Finally Caliban shows Prospero what he thinks is unfair about how it is now 'you sty me' (like pigs are kept in a sty).

Caliban moves between four moods in the piece and this is called 'movement' in language.

In this piece you can also see the rhythm that Shakespeare used a lot for his plays. The posh word for this is 'Iambic pentameter' and it goes like this:

Today today today today today

teTUM teTUM teTUM teTUM teTUM

But sometimes Shakespeare would break the rhythm with a TUM-TUM phrase, often to make us sit up and notice. Here's an example:

'In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me'

The TUM-TUM bit is 'hard rock'.



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English

Workshop Four (continued)

Writing suggestion

This can be a real situation about you or it could be an imaginary person in an imaginary place. You're going to write what's called a 'dramatic monologue'. It's going to be a complaint – you're angry! But you're not going to put all your anger in right from the start.

Here's the structure you can follow:

- ♦ Start off calm.
- ♦ Show how nice it used to be – you helped this other person. You were kind.
- ♦ Then you're furious with yourself that you were kind and nice.
- ♦ So you curse the other person!
- ♦ And then you finish with the hard truth – this is why it is unfair.

As you write, you may notice that you may need several types of language... straight and plain... lyrical and beautiful... angry and cursing... and then back to some straight plain talking about the situation.

Many different emotions

We know that Caliban is angry in this speech. Shakespeare's plays are full of many different emotions. Can you think of the names of some emotions and describe them a little? Write them down here – they might come in handy when you're writing.

Emotion	Notes
Frustration	Annoyed that you can't do what you want to do
Envy	You wish you could be like someone else or have what they have
Happiness	Joy, delight, feels good

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English

Workshop Four (continued)

So, let's have a look at Shakespeare expressing emotion. Here's a character called Macbeth thinking about what's going to happen next in his life. See if you can think of an emotion word to express what he feels like. Don't worry if you find it hard to understand every little bit. Just think about the mood.

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(*Macbeth*, Act V Scene 5)

Have a look at these words and phrases that I think express the mood (you can do this with any piece of writing):

- Last
- Out, out
- Shadow
- Heard no more
- Signifying nothing

These words make me think that Macbeth is feeling negative and thinks that life is pointless – it 'signifies nothing'. That's the 'what' of what he is saying; but 'how' is he telling us this?

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English

Workshop Four (continued)

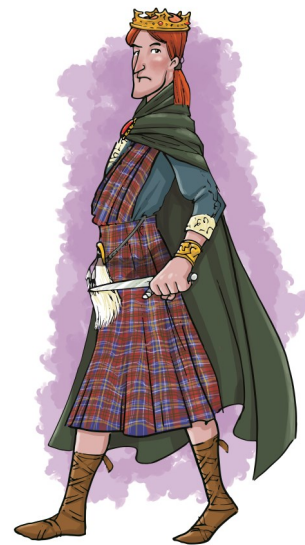
Did you notice in the middle of the speech, Macbeth blew out a candle. It was an action. But the action showed us how he felt. He said, 'out, out brief candle'. He snuffed out the life of the candle and pointed out how 'brief' it was, how short-lived it was. We can say the candle represented Macbeth's view of life itself. That's what we call a **symbol**. Shakespeare loved symbols – they are a great way to express feelings without saying exactly what that feeling is.

Write down some symbols that you know and use here:

Now look at the beginning of the speech – can you see the repetition? What could be simpler? Just repeating one word over and over again.

Sometimes we do that when we express emotions that really matter to us – we might say 'Oh no, oh no, oh no' or 'Great, great, great!'

When Macbeth says 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' he sounds as though he is so overwhelmed that all he can do is repeat the word.



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English

Workshop Four (continued)

But now let's look at Shakespeare expressing some other emotions. What about love? Here's Juliet who is in love with Romeo.

She says:

"Come, gentle night, come, loving, black-brow'd night,
Give me my Romeo, and when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
that all the world will be in love with night,
and pay no worship to the garish sun."

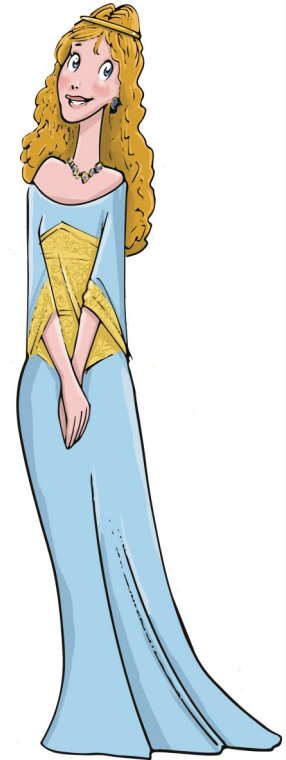
(Romeo and Juliet, Act III Scene 2)

You've heard of fantasy writing. Well, this is Juliet doing a bit of fantasy writing. She talks to the night as if it is a person. You probably know that's called '**personification**'. And Juliet makes 'night' into a gentle, loving person, with black eyebrows. She asks night to give her Romeo but then there's a very surprising change, she suddenly talks of Romeo dying. 'When he shall die'. What would you call this? Looking into the future? An omen? Does it give us a sense of doom even at the moment that Juliet is in love?

Then the fantasy goes on... she imagines something that could be horrible but in her mind is beautiful, cutting him into stars in the night sky, where it'll make the sky so beautiful that the whole world will love the night and not take any notice of the 'garish sun', the 'flashy sun'.

It's not only fantasy, it's what we might call 'fantastical'. It's beyond imagining. I think we're back with '**hyperbole**' here, aren't we? Shakespeare wants to show us that Juliet is so full of emotion that she comes up with something huge and even slightly crazy.

Another thing to spot about the language, is **contrast**. Shakespeare often gets us to think about things by contrasting them, showing how different one thing is from another. Here it is in the one I've mentioned; the contrast between the night sky with stars in it and the daytime with the sun in the sky.



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Workshop Four (continued)

Writing suggestion

Why don't you think of a time when you or someone else you know or someone you can imagine is full of an emotion? And think of a character - it could be you or someone else that is going to express their thoughts and feelings. This is going to be a **monologue**. One person speaking their mind. It's also called a **soliloquy**.

Here's a list of writing devices that Shakespeare used to write about emotion that will help you to write your own soliloquy or monologue:

- ♦ being fantastical - crazy almost;
- ♦ using personification;
- ♦ repeating words;
- ♦ contrasting things;
- ♦ making the language musical;
- ♦ using metaphors and similes;
- ♦ cursing yourself or others;
- ♦ giving us plenty of pictures or images so that we can see what it is you're talking about;
- ♦ using a symbol like blowing out the candle;
- ♦ or any of the other uses of language I've talked about.

