

Antithesis 1

USE WITH PAGE 13

Every Shakespeare play makes frequent use of antithesis: the opposition of words or phrases against each other:

To be, or not to be ...

'To be' is the thesis, 'not to be' is the antithesis.

Shakespeare knew that the essence of drama is conflict. His plays depict conflict at every level. In the history plays there are bloody struggles for the throne. In the comedies, the course of true love never runs smooth, beset by all kinds of mishaps, mistakes and quarrels. In the tragedies, good and evil oppose each other.

Shakespeare's language expresses conflict in the use of antithesis. Just as character is set against character (Hamlet versus Claudius, Iago versus Othello), so Shakespeare sets the word against the word:

For night owls shriek where mounting larks should sing

'night owls' against 'mounting larks', 'shriek' against 'sing'

To sue to live, I find I seek to die

And nothing is, but what is not

Fair is foul, and foul is fair

Cannot be ill, cannot be good

My only love sprung from my only hate!

My grave is like to be my wedding bed

- 1 a Speak aloud the examples above. To discover the see-sawing, conflicting movement of the language, weigh out each antithesis as if your hands were a pair of scales.

b Work with a partner, link hands and gently push and pull as you speak the lines to each other. Experiment with different movements to discover how the antitheses give the language a physical, to and fro, opposing movement.
- 2 Find examples of antithesis in the play you are currently studying. Speak aloud each example you find and choose movements that emphasize each antithesis.

In *Coriolanus*, the patrician (upper class) Coriolanus makes much use of antithesis as he contemptuously scorns the ordinary people of Rome, the plebeians:

What would you have, you curs,
That like not peace nor war? The one affrights you,
The other makes you proud. He that trusts to you,
Where he should find you lions, finds you hares,
Where foxes, geese. You are no surer, no,
Than is the coal of fire upon the ice,
Or hailstone in the sun. Your virtue is
To make him worthy whose offence subdues him,
And curse that justice did it. Who deserves greatness
Deserves your hate. (1.1.166-175)

peace	affrights	lions	foxes
war	proud	hares	geese
fire	hailstone	worthy	greatness
ice	sun	subdues	hate

In Sonnet 66 Shakespeare lists the injustices that make him long for 'restful death'. Each of the first twelve lines contains at least one antithesis.

- As to behold**
for example to see
- desert**
a deserving person,
justice
- gilded honour**
noble dignity
- strumpeted**
made a prostitute
- limping sway**
weak government
- doctor-like**
like a pompous and
ignorant teacher
- simplicity**
stupidity

Tired with all these, for restful death I cry:
As to behold desert a beggar born,
And needy nothing trimmed in jollity,
And purest faith unhappily forsworn,
And gilded honour shamefully misplaced,
And maiden virtue rudely strumpeted,
And right perfection wrongfully disgraced,
And strength by limping sway disabled,
And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly (doctor-like) controlling skill,
And simple truth miscalled simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill:
Tired with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that to die, I leave my love alone.

- 1 See Activities 1a and 1b on page 12.
- 2 In a group, prepare a choral-speaking version of *Coriolanus's* speech or Sonnet 66. Add actions to highlight as many of the antitheses as you can.