

Appearances

FALSE APPEARANCES

There are many occasions in *The White Devil* when the theme of appearance vs. reality is present, particularly in reference to the characters and their personalities. Is what they see really true? Are they acting deceitfully?

Disguise

First mentioned by Lodovico – “Your wolf no longer seems to be a wolf, / Than when she’s hungry.” (I i 8-9) It is mentioned within the first ten line, emphasising that it will be a vital theme throughout the play.

It is ‘maintained by an imagery comprised of polar opposites.’ (Ribner) to confuse? Or to show that within the play there are many possibilities and contradictions. Even the characters are unsure.

- “sweet-meats which rot the eater”
- “poison’d perfumes”
- “shipwrecks in calmest weather”

Webster also uses double entendres, particularly within Flamineo’s speech, to show nothing is as it appears. This could partly be so that there are two possible meanings to everything, adding to the difficulty in knowing who is a ‘good’ and who is a ‘bad’ character.

Gasparo asks “They’re wondrous brave today. Why do they wear / These several habits?” “That Lord i’t’h black cloak with the silver cross / A Knight of Rhodes; the next Knight of St Michael...” – Lodovico mocks the titles of the Knights; their clothes and the position they represent do not necessarily describe the person.

Setting

‘a turbulent shifting moral universe where nothing that is good is not also bad and the only constants are the inevitability of corruption and death (though this is not a conclusive event, as phantoms rise to re-enact their deaths and accuse their killers)’ (The Guardian) – even death is not as it appears.

The Conjurer

His character is used to put the theme into words; “Great men do great good, or else great harm.” (II ii 57)

Art of the nigromancer – “seeming to conjure when indeed they cheat” (II ii 10) outlining the deceitful nature of those who use disguise

Blake – *The Little Black Boy*

‘When I from black and he from white cloud free, / And round the tent of God like lambs we joy,’ – the colour of his skin, his appearance, is unimportant to God

Blake, *The Chimney Sweeper*

‘And because I am happy and dance and sing, / They think they have done me no injury.’ – His outward appearance does not truly represent the way he feels