

THE WHITE DEVIL – LANGUAGE AND STRUCTURE

STYLE AND TONE

- There is a mixture of verse and prose.
- The verse is principally iambic pentameter and the tone is frequently ironic and satirical.
- Changes in tone are rapid and frequent.
- We see a whole set of short sayings, one- and sometimes two-liners, which encapsulate pithy moral maxims known as sententiae. These are usually signalled in the text by quotation marks. Their use was common in Senecan tragedy, which was so influential on Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Some critics argue that their use represents a weakness in Webster's writing. In his address 'To The Reader', Webster defends his play for its lack of a "sententious Chorus"
- As Webster constructs his dialogue from books and not necessarily from first hand observation of human behaviour, his interest is therefore less in how the action of the play is developed by the inner life of the characters but rather more on how the events and outcomes might combine to establish a tragic figure.

IMAGERY AND ALLUSION

- In his address "To The Reader" Webster accepts that he was "a long time in finishing this tragedy" and this may in part explain the play's dense texture – images are repeated throughout the play, iconographic use of black and white, metaphors and similes relating to animals, vegetation, disease, parasitism and painting which produce ironic counterpoints.
- Black and white are so central to the play, as the title suggests. The symbol of the white devil has many possible interpretations varying from the specific (perhaps referring to a single character) to the general (a sense of evil in the play)
- The devil was traditionally regarded as black and so the title suggests a creature black on the inside but white on the outside.
- Webster plays with the idea of the contrast between black and white, appearance and reality, good and evil.
- Apart from Zanche, there are two more 'black' characters – Francisco during act 5 when he is in disguise and the non-speaking part of 'Jacques the Moor' who does not speak but enters with Giovanni, creating a strong visual effect.
- Two characters who wear white are Monticelso after his election and Vittoria for her wedding.
- There are over a hundred example of animal imagery and this represents a systematic process of human degradation.
- He also goes on to cover vegetation and the overall effect is of decay and the sense that nature itself is somehow corrupt.

LATIN

- The amount of Latin in the play is notable
- Most of it is related to the ceremonies of the Catholic Church
- There are also a number of sententiae in Latin
- Vittoria's objection to Monticelso's Latin jargon raises further questions about the use of Latin in the rest of the play and the extent to which it is designed to induce fear and mystify.

Dramatic techniques

SPECTACLE

- Spectacular visual effects are alternated with smaller private scenes in order to create visual patterns.
- The use of colour and lavish costume is also notable.

DUMB SHOW

- The play includes two dumb shows and they occur one after the other in act 2 scene 2.
- They are a dramatic device of silent pantomimed actions derived from medieval theatre.
- They enable the audience to witness the deaths of both Isabella and Camillo in rapid succession. They are framed by the voyeurism of Brachiano and the Conjuror.
- The audience is therefore able to witness Brachiano's response to the two events – the effect is to distance us from the murders, causing us to focus instead on the reactions of the man who ordered both murders.

SOLLOQUY AND ASIDES

- Soliloquy's allow the audience private access to a character's thoughts and thus enable the character to build up a relationship with the audience.
- We learn motives as each of the villain reflect and give informed decisions about the course of action they will pursue – they choose evil knowingly.
- Interestingly neither Vittoria nor Monticelso are given soliloquies.