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 Two

Here's a poem about winter from Shakespeare's play *Love's Labour's Lost*.

When icicles hang by the wall
And Dick the shepherd blows his nail
And Tom bears logs into the hall
And milk comes frozen home in pail,
When blood is nipp'd and ways be foul,
Then nightly sings the staring owl, Tu-whit;
Tu-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.
When all aloud the wind doth blow
And coughing drowns the parson's saw
And birds sit brooding in the snow
And Marian's nose looks red and raw,
When roasted crabs hiss in the bowl,
Then nightly sings the staring owl, Tu-whit;
Tu-who, a merry note,
While greasy Joan doth keel the pot.

(Love's Labour's Lost, Act V Scene 2)

Say the poem together and see if you can conjure up the images as you say it.

Here's some help with expressions that you might not know:

- 'blows his nail' means blowing breath onto his fingernails to warm them up;
- 'keel the pot' means 'scouring out the saucepan' and;
- 'the parson's saw' means that the priest is giving his sermon (or lesson) in church.

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Workshop Two (continued)

The poem has lots of 'pictures' that happen in winter. Can you sort them into seeing, hearing and doing? Joining these 'pictures' together are words such as 'when', 'and' and 'while'.

Things you can see	Things you can hear	Things that people are doing
Icicles hanging		

Have you noticed how 'ordinary' the language is – ordinary names, everyday things and no long complicated words? It's as if Shakespeare wanted to paint a picture of what winter is like for ordinary people.

You may also have noticed that the poem rhymes but not completely regularly, such as 'note' and 'pot' or 'blow' and 'saw'. So in some poems you can have 'kind-of-rhymes' or 'half-rhymes'.

Writing suggestion



- Write a season poem – winter, summer, spring or autumn.
- Choose some people who are going to be in your poem.
- Think of some ordinary scenes in your season. Remember: seeing, hearing and doing. Make a list of them.
- When you've got your list, see if you can arrange them so that they sound good. Perhaps make them rhyme or half-rhyme if you want to.
- Shakespeare's poem had a chorus – the owl singing… Can you add a chorus to yours? Dog barking? Doors slamming? Anything you want…

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Workshop Two (continued)

So in workshop one we looked at how Shakespeare used language to make a spell and in workshop two, so far, we have looked at how to make a scene. Here's something much shorter to think about…



I've already mentioned Macbeth – he listens to the witches that give him the idea that one day he might become king. He tells his wife and they hatch a plot to kill the present king. It is all very horrible and it gets worse – but it doesn't seem to make Macbeth happy! Here is one short thing he says about himself:

'Full of scorpions is my mind'

A scorpion is an insect that can give you a very, very nasty sting. So Macbeth is saying that it feels as though his mind is full of scorpions – we know it is not really full of them. He's saying that what he is thinking about is troubling him or disturbing him and hurting him.

Scorpions here are a metaphor for that hurting feeling. Instead of saying 'My mind is hurting', Shakespeare's language is much more powerful and gives us a better picture.

Shakespeare loved to use metaphor and his language is jammed full of it! Using scorpions to describe Macbeth's torment was even more powerful than using 'full of pinches is my mind' or 'full of nettles is my mind'.

Using the word 'scorpions' tells us that Macbeth is hurting a lot!

It is an exaggeration or to use the posh word: '**hyperbole'**. Hyperbole is great fun for writing and Shakespeare obviously enjoyed it!

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Workshop Two (continued)

Writing suggestion

Come up with some metaphors or similes with hyperbole.

Here's a formula to follow:

- Choose a feeling, a mood or a situation (being ill, being excited, winning a race, opening presents, being sad, being worried, being very angry…)
- Choose an image to help you express that such as 'My mind is like a fire blazing' (that's a simile); or say that the image **is** something such as 'full of fire blazing is my mind (that's a metaphor)
- Describe what the thing is doing, such as 'My mind is like a fire blazing and now the flames are exploding into fireworks in there' (that's added some hyperbole or exaggeration).



Here's another example:

'I've got a tummy ache' (a feeling you have)

'It feels like there's a hedgehog in my tummy' (add in a simile)

'...and the hedgehog is jumping about in my tummy and the prickles are sticking to my insides' (add in hyperbole)

'...and now the hedgehog is doing somersaults and cartwheels in there…' (even more hyperbole has been added!).

Now you have a try! This poem can be short or long, just as you want…