

Deceptive appearances in british literature

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



In literature, there are several themes that can be observed once and again, throughout the ages and in several different works. These themes endure the test of time, and apply to most people equally, regardless of where and when they live. Among them, there is the theme of deceiving appearances. The theme of deceiving appearances is a lasting and universal theme that appears in many works of literature throughout several centuries, and is evident in Hamlet, The Silver Chair and Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, three British works that span 400 years of history.

The first of these works, Hamlet, was written by William Shakespeare during the Renaissance. William Shakespeare is regarded as the most influential and prominent writer in all of English literature. His works include several plays and 154 sonnets which greatly affected subsequent literature and became timeless. Shakespeare was highly regarded by the monarchy of his time, becoming a favorite of both Queen Elizabeth I and King James I; and was England's most popular playwright as well. He enjoyed public success, was part owner of the Globe Theater and acquired considerable wealth. Shakespeare was born in 1564, and died in 1616 at the age of fifty two (Hamlet Context).

Shakespeare's tragic play Hamlet was first published in print form in 1603, but was probably first performed a year before. It is possibly inspired by the History of Denmark and by the work of a French author named Francois de Belleforest (Hamlet Context). Hamlet tells the story of a grief-stricken and philosophical prince. In the play, Hamlet's father, the king of Denmark, is dead and has been replaced by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, who becomes both the new king and new husband of Hamlet's mother. Upon discovering that

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his father was actually murdered by Claudius, Hamlet battles uncertainty in a plot for revenge. Hamlet ends tragically with the death of most of its main characters (Hamlet).

The play explores several themes and questions common to the Renaissance, including moral and existential issues (Hamlet Context). One of those themes, perhaps one of the most prominent, is the deceiving nature of appearances (Hamlet Themes). Hamlet is full of uncertainty. It discusses difficult issues and leaves many unanswered questions, reiterating the idea that what one sees or perceives is not always the truth (Hamlet Themes). As Hamlet notes, “one may smile, and smile, and be a villain” (Hamlet, 1. 5. 109), meaning that one may not always be what one seems.

One example of the theme of deceiving appearances in Hamlet can be seen in Claudius’s behavior throughout the plot. The king of Denmark hides his murder from the whole kingdom, diverting their attention and distracting them with parties and celebration. When he is alone, however, he admits to the crime, saying: “my offence is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, A brother’s murder!” (Hamlet, 3. 3. 37-39). Therefore, Claudius acknowledges his guilt, but keeps appearances up when in front of others. He also hides his intentions towards Hamlet, pretending to be concerned with his health while in truth intending to have him killed. Claudius is not who he seems to be at first, and uses appearances to deceive those around him (Hamlet).

Another example of the theme can be seen in Hamlet’s fake madness. As part of his plot to expose his uncle’s crime and take revenge, Hamlet

pretends to have lost his mind. The people around him begin to show concern for his health, when in fact the madness is an act. This particular piece of the plot, however, goes beyond deceiving other characters through misleading appearances. At some point, the reader himself might be unable to tell whether Hamlet has indeed gone mad or is merely continuing the pretense. The prince alternates between sane and seemingly insane moments in apparent control, but seems to lose himself at times. Therefore, Hamlet's appearance keeps those around him from seeing the truth, and keeps the readers from discerning whether he is truly mad or not (Hamlet).

Both these examples from Hamlet build towards the idea that certainty is impossible to attain, and play an important role in both the plot and in Hamlet's character, while portraying the universal theme of deceiving appearances.

The usage of this theme in Hamlet is not accidental. Shakespeare was hugely influenced by the new ideas of the Renaissance, and one of those ideas, introduced mainly by the French humanist Michel de Montagne, was that the world is a world of appearances and humans are unable to discern the truth behind those appearances. Therefore, the Renaissance context had an impact in Shakespeare's work and is one of the reasons why he included themes such as the deceiving nature of appearances and the impossibility of certainty into his work (Hamlet Context).

In fact, the influence was so relevant that these themes can be found in other works by Shakespeare. One example is found in Macbeth, another tragic play he wrote in 1606 (Macbeth Context). In this play, three witches

deceive the main character, Macbeth, and lead him down a brutal and tragic path with the pretense of helping him gain power. The main character himself uses the deceit of appearances to steal the throne of Scotland, but his true nature is finally revealed and he is killed (Macbeth). Therefore, the theme of deceiving appearances is not restricted to Hamlet, but is present in other works by Shakespeare as well, which further attests to the influence of the Renaissance on Shakespeare and his writing.

Another work that shows the theme of deceiving appearances is *The Silver Chair*, by C. S. Lewis. C. S. Lewis was a Christian writer born in 1898, and is known mainly for his theological works and fiction. He was part of a literary gathering called the Inklings, which became famous and in which future well-known authors gathered to read their unpublished works. Lewis died in 1963 (Modlin).

The Silver Chair is part of his well known *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. It is the sixth book, and was published in 1953. It tells the story of two children that go on a search for the lost prince and heir to Narnia's throne, Prince Rilian. The prince has been kidnapped by the Lady of the Green Kirtle, a woman who can turn into a snake and who had previously murdered Rilian's mother. The Lady puts the prince under a spell, and takes him to her realm, the Underworld, with the intention of using him to take over Narnia when the time is right. The two children are given the mission of rescuing him. They finally find him and free him, bringing about the death of the witch and the destruction of the Underworld (*The Silver*).

There are two main examples of the theme of deceiving appearances within *The Silver Chair*. The main one is in the character of the Lady of the Green Kirtle herself. The Lady of the Green Kirtle appears beautiful and pleasant, hiding her true nature and intentions. She manages to deceive the prince, thus being able to capture him, and pretends to help the children in their search while misleading them and putting them in great danger. Her deceiving appearance is described in these lines:

“(...) and at noon Drinian looked up and saw the most beautiful lady he had ever seen; and she stood at the north side of the fountain and said no word but beckoned to the Prince with her hand as if she bade him come to her. And she was tall and great, shining, and wrapped in a thin garment as green as poison” (*The Silver*, 50).

The Lady of the Green Kirtle is in fact a monster and a murderer, but hides it well, using all kinds of lies and deception to get what she wants, which clearly portrays the theme within this work.

The second example of this theme that can be found in *The Silver Chair* is in the giant's fake hospitality. At some point during their search, the children are walking on a road and meet the Lady, who gives them directions to the Giant's royal palace. There, they are received by the royal family and offered all kinds of comforts that eventually make them settle and keep them from continuing their search. The children learn later that the hospitality was a facade, and that the Giants intend to cook and eat them in an upcoming feast. This shows once more that appearances can be deceiving (*The Silver*).

The main influence that led C. S. Lewis to include the theme of deceiving appearances in his work was Christianity. Lewis wove Christianity into all his works, whether they were fiction or not (Modlin). In *The Chronicles of Narnia* in particular, he included both biblical principles and stories with mythology and fictional tales. Since the deceiving nature of appearances is a recurring theme in the bible, it became a main theme in several of his works as well.

One of those works which portrays the theme like *The Silver Chair* is *The Last Battle*. *The Last Battle* is the seventh and final book of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and was published in 1956. In it, a clever monkey disguises a donkey and deceives everyone into thinking the donkey is Aslan, the lion their king. With this lie, he gains all kinds of privileges and luxuries. The monkey is in fact accustomed to lies and deceit, since from the very beginning, even before his biggest lie, he used deception to exploit the donkey and avoid work (*The Last*). This shows that the theme of deceiving appearances was present in other works by Lewis as well, due to the influence Christianity had on his life.

Yet another work that portrays the theme is *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, a modern children's/teen's book written by J. K. Rowling. Rowling was born in 1965. Besides the *Harry Potter* series, she has written several fictional books, and has received many awards. She is also the founder of Lumos, a charitable organization to end institutionalization of children across Europe and find them safer homes (About).

Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows is the seventh and last book of the *Harry Potter* series. It was published in 2007. It tells the story of Harry's last

school year, in which he is forced to forgo attendance to Hogwarts (the school of wizardry) and go on a quest to defeat Lord Voldemort, the villain of the series. The quest culminates with the Battle of Hogwarts, in which many people, including some of his close friends, die, but in which Voldemort is also defeated. The book concludes with a peek at Harry, his friends and their families seven years later, when their children are preparing to depart for their school year at Hogwarts (The Deathly).

The theme of deceiving appearances is explored in several of the Harry Potter books, but it appears heavily in The Deathly Hallows.

One example of this is Mr. Lovegood's betrayal. Mr. Lovegood is the father of one of Harry's close friends, Luna Lovegood. Harry and his two friends, Ron and Hermione, go to him for help, believing he might have information they need. Mr. Lovegood tells them all they need to know, but behaves strangely and nervously throughout the whole meeting. Harry finally finds out that Luna has been taken by the death eaters - Voldemort's followers - and that Mr. Lovegood has betrayed him to them in order to get his daughter back (The Deathly). This situation is seen in the following passage:

"Xenophilius licked his lips " They took my Luna," he whispered, " Because of what I've been writing. They took my Luna and I don't know where she is, what they've done to her. But they might give her back to me if I - If I-" " Hand over Harry?" Hermione finished for him. " No deal." said Ron flatly. " Get out of the way, we're leaving." Xenophilius looked ghastly, a century old, his lips drawn back into a dreadful leer. " They will be here any moment. I must save Luna. I cannot lose Luna. You must not leave" (The Deathly, 85).

Though this passage shows that Mr. Lovegood was motivated by love to his daughter, it also makes clear that he is not as trustworthy and loyal as he had seemed before. After helping Harry at other times through his newspaper, Mr. Lovegood chooses to deceive and betray him out of fear, thus showing that appearances can deceive even when it comes to people that generally do good (The Deathly).

However, the main example of the theme in this work is Severus Snape's story. Snape is Harry's teacher at Hogwarts throughout the first six books, and a highly unpleasant one at that. Snape is cruel and biased, and treats Harry badly because of his troubled relationship with Harry's father in the past. Nevertheless, he appears to be loyal to Dumbledore, the school's headmaster and one of the main figures in the fight against Voldemort. At some point in the series, Snape is revealed to be a spy for Dumbledore, acting as a double agent within the death eaters and manipulating information to help those against Voldemort. However, at the end of the sixth book of the series, Snape kills Dumbledore and runs away with the death eaters (The Deathly). This seems to finally define Snape's character for many readers, showing him to be a treacherous and awful man (Sottosani). In The Deathly Hallows, Snape returns to Hogwarts as headmaster and Voldemort's ally, taking control of the school with the other death eaters. It isn't until almost the end of the book that the truth about Snape is revealed. Snape was indeed a death eater when he was young. He had had a close friendship with Harry's mother since he was a kid, but was bullied by Harry's father and many others. He eventually found his place among those who sided with Dark magic. When Harry's parents were killed by Voldemort,

Snape abandoned the death eaters. Guilt riddled, he pleaded with Dumbledore for forgiveness, desperate to help as he could out of love for Harry's mother. He had a difficult relationship with Harry for several years, but worked alongside Dumbledore all the time. His final act of apparent betrayal - Dumbledore's assassination - was actually part of a devised plan made by Dumbledore himself to use something that was inevitable for the greater good. Dumbledore was already dying for other reasons, and was about to be killed in an attack he could not prevent. The headmaster personally asked Snape to do the job in order to, among other reasons, protect the boy who was being forced by Voldemort to do it and to maintain Snape's appearances and status with the death eaters so he could be of more help in the future. Although Snape was certainly unpleasant and didn't care about Harry except for his being related to someone he had cared about, his deceiving appearance hid his courage and the fact that he was a better person than he seemed to be (The Deathly).

These examples within Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows portray the theme of deceiving appearances in two different ways; showing that people can be worse or better than they appear to be.

There are no obvious influences leading Rowling to include this theme in her writing. However, she holds Christian beliefs, which might have influenced her work as they did Lewis's. She has also had experiences with people that were not as they first seemed to be, such as her first husband, whom she divorced after being thrown out of her house and forced to raise a child on her own. However, these are merely possible reasons, and there is no

conclusive information as to why she might have used this theme (Biography).

Whether there was any influence or not, this theme does play a huge role in her other works. Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, the fourth book of the Harry Potter series, is a good example of this. This book was published in 2000. In it, one of Voldemort's followers infiltrates the school posing as a teacher. He intends to take Harry to Voldemort, who in turn wants to kill the boy. In order to do this, he not only pretends to be someone else, but poses as Harry's friend and helps him win a tournament, leading him to a trap in the process (The Goblet). Therefore, the theme appears in several of Rowling's books, not just The Deathly Hallows.

In conclusion, the theme of deceiving appearances is a very recurrent and common one in literature. It can be seen in works as different and separated by time as Hamlet, The Silver Chair and Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows are. It permeates British literature across time, and remains universal.