



Significance of the Insignificant

In recent years, some English Literature GCSE and A-Level exam questions have asked students to focus on areas of a set text that perhaps diverge from the "main" thematic or character-based concerns of the text.

It is important teachers note that exam boards make explicit the fact that questions and extracts can come from ANYWHERE IN A TEXT - therefore, skipping over the seemingly insignificant is not necessarily a sensible idea.

Learning time is limited, and it is logical to spend quality time on "key" sections of a text. To that end, we have provided brief analysis of '**insignificant scenes of significance**' for a number of GCSE texts, so that these scenes can be explored comprehensively but efficiently by pupils.

These scenes are also incredibly useful for demonstrating whole text knowledge - whilst key scenes may be rich in material, these brief scenes are excellent for highlighting the development of theme or character, and may even awaken an examiner to a new and original point that hasn't been made by pupils again and again!

Are you interested in writing a piece for our Significance of the Insignificant series?

If you would like to know more about publishing an article for this series with us, on any number of GCSE texts, then get in touch at contact@thequotationbank.co.uk to find out more.

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Mr Birling: The Significance of Style and Sentence Structure

At the beginning of Act One Mr Birling, specifically during the dinner party, dominates the conversation. He has long, dogmatic speeches in which he arrogantly delivers narrow-minded and ill-informed views concerning class and politics. At this point, Priestley uses Birling to convey the power of the upper class in Edwardian England in 1912, and to suggest the hubris of that class. They believe they are unassailable and, immersed in colonial and class attitudes of Empire, assume that they cannot be challenged. By giving Mr Birling such extensive and uninterrupted speeches at the beginning of the play, Priestley is able to establish the dominance of the upper class, and draw attention to its selfish, capitalist agenda.

Interestingly, Mr Birling only speaks at such length and with such fluency in this first scene. Once the Inspector arrives, and through the rest of the play, his lines are constantly interrupted or cut off, often by the Inspector or by Sheila, who begins to act as a proxy for the Inspector and his views. He is never really allowed the linguistic space he had in the dinner party scene. His final words in the play are consistently truncated and interrupted. The hyphens, questions and pauses along with the unfinished sentences communicate his diminished power and failing authority.

The way in which Priestley constructs Birling's voice is significant as it represents broader themes. Through the shift in style and sentence structure, from lengthy, supercilious speeches to tentative, halting, interrupted constructions, Priestley is able to communicate how Mr Birling's power is threatened, and then diminished as a consequence of the forces working against him. This is the case both in the microcosm, as exemplified by the Inspector, whose compassionate socialism is a direct challenge to Mr Birling's brutal capitalism; and in the macrocosm as Britain, exhausted by two world wars, looks to a new political agenda to shape society in the form of the Labour Party and, as a consequence, Britain's class system will dilute and evolve.

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