



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!

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The Importance of Phone Calls in Act Three

In the final moments of *An Inspector Calls*, “the telephone rings sharply” – just like the “sharp ring of a doorbell” in Act One that introduces Inspector Goole, so too does this ring cut sharply into the protective, privileged domestic setting of the Birling household. The Birlings have seemingly ignored the lessons of the Inspector and therefore the audience are relieved to hear that, once again, “a police inspector is on his way here...to ask some questions”.

However, whilst this phone call has a significant impact on the plot of the play, there are two other phone calls in Act Three that, although apparently less significant than the final call, have an effect on the audience. The final phone call to the Birling household comes from the outside world – it is a call designed to break down their privileged status. Yet both the call by Mr Birling to Colonel Roberts, and by Gerald to the Infirmary, are calls made from inside the protective domestic sphere and are designed to help protect Gerald and the Birlings from the outside world.

So, let's explore Birling's call to Colonel Roberts.

Birling: *(At telephone)* Colonel Roberts, please. Mr Arthur Birling here . . . oh, Roberts – Birling here. Sorry to ring you up so late, but can you tell me if an Inspector Goole has joined your staff lately . . . Goole. G-O-O-L-E . . . a new man . . . tall, clean-shaven. *(Here he can describe the appearance of the actor playing the Inspector.)* I see . . . yes . . . well, that settles it. . . . No, just a little argument we were having here. . . . Good night. *(He puts down the telephone and looks at the others.)* There's no Inspector Goole on the police. That man definitely wasn't a police inspector at all. As Gerald says – we've been had.

This phone call enhances the idea that institutions mentioned earlier in the play, be it Lord Mayor, Magistrates or Aldermen, are simply designed to maintain the capitalist, patriarchal control of power held by elites. The title of “Colonel” Roberts should garner great respect and dignity, but instead Birling is happy to “ring you up so late” simply to settle “a little argument we were having here”, and Roberts seems happy to oblige. The police force, supposedly meant to serve and protect the general population, have been reduced to the level of Edna at the beginning of the play, someone who can be rung for day or night to serve the whims of the upper class.

Furthermore, whilst the use of the full name “Mr Arthur Birling” would have been a common formal greeting, it still signifies that Birling views himself of great importance, introducing himself with pride and power. When Birling drops the titles and simply states, “oh' Roberts – Birling here”, it explicitly confirms the intimate link between the upper class and the societal institutions that are meant to be blind to money or status. Birling treats Colonel Roberts as a friend, and the casual nature of the conversation implies the frequency with which these two men converse – we know, after all, that Roberts is “an old friend of mine” and that they “play golf together sometimes”. Matters of life and death amongst the working class have been reduced to chatter between golfing buddies.



One of the major themes within the play is the differences between the generations. Whilst at the beginning of the play Priestley depicts all Birlings, both young and old, as selfish and ignorant of their responsibility to society, by the end of the play Sheila and Eric seem to be changing their ways. However, the audience must not forget that, although a little older, Gerald is still part of the “younger” generation, and his phone call at the end of the play not only reinforces much of what we have seen from Mr Birling’s call, but also confirms that any suggestion he has learnt his lesson is sadly untrue.

Gerald: *Anyway we'll see. (He goes to telephone and looks up number. The others watch tensely.)* Brumley eight nine eight six . . . Is that the Infirmary? This is Mr Gerald Croft – of Crofts Limited. . . Yes. . . We're rather worried about one of our employees. Have you had a girl brought in this afternoon who committed suicide by drinking disinfectant – or any like suicide? Yes, I'll wait.

As he waits, the others show their nervous tension. Birling wipes his brow, Sheila shivers, Eric clasps and unclasps his hand, etc.

Yes? . . . You're certain of that. . . I see. Well, thank you very much. . . Good night. (He puts down telephone and looks at them.) No girl has died in there today. Nobody's been brought in after drinking disinfectant. They haven't had a suicide for months.

Much like Birling, Gerald uses his full name and title, then instantly calls upon the capitalist credentials of “Crofts Limited” to get what he needs – the affirmative “Yes” implies the voice on the other end has asked “do you need anything” or “can I help you”, a sign of subservience to the upper class once more. Whilst Birling’s question was a straightforward one, Gerald’s claim that “We're rather worried about one of our employees” is a complete lie – he can quickly slip into a façade of concern when it suits him, and the manner in which he feigns concern about “one of our employees” is galling to the audience. He understands what it is to be concerned about others, but, as we have seen throughout the play, only when it suits his needs.

Furthermore, much like Birling’s call, he sees no issue with utilising the assistance of important societal services for his own personal gain. The infirmary deals with life and death, suffering and heartbreak – the fact he has to “wait” implies they are busy dealing with those who have actually died, those who have been “brought in”, and although his, “Well, thank you very much” maintains his exterior depiction of manners, it seems out of place having enquired about “any...suicide”.

Fundamentally, both of these phone calls serve to remind the audience that although the Inspector may have had a brief impact on the characters within the confines of their home, once he leaves they can instantly reach out to the societal institutions around them and their power and previous behaviours are restored – two phone calls and, as Birling states, “all over now”. However, Priestley isn’t done just yet, and there is one remaining phone call to be made to ensure the audience, not the Birlings, end the evening satisfied.

