



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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The Significance of Minor Characters in Chapter 4 – The Carew Murder Case

We are used to exploring the theme of hypocrisy through Sir Danvers Carew. He is introduced as an “aged beautiful gentleman with white hair” and seems innocent and moral. However, this is a world in which gentlemen lead double lives: outwardly respectable, but secretly indulging in sordid and prohibited vices, and there are many clues that Carew is engaged in illicit activity. It is a world of hypocrites, and the angelic imagery linked to Carew is therefore a surface whiteness; a carapace concealing depravity and wickedness. It is the biblical whiteness of the sepulchre, traditionally a burial place or tomb, but also associated with hypocrisy. The Gospel of Matthew (23:27) links whiteness with outward virtue, and inward wickedness:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of ... all uncleanness.”

We can see the theme of hypocrisy developed through three minor characters in this chapter. Hyde’s landlady is “ivory-faced and silvery haired”. The colour symbolism seems to indicate morality, but is merely a facade of decency. Like the “beautiful” Sir Danvers Carew, possibly involved in immoral, if not illegal activity, the landlady’s face is “smoothed by hypocrisy”, the metaphor suggesting a superficial appearance that disguises “evil”. Interestingly, again like Carew, “her manners were excellent” and yet they mask a vicious, cruel nature.

Another minor character is the man who owns the house where the maid recognises “a certain Mr. Hyde, who had once visited her master”. If Hyde visits “her master”, then this man is involved in corrupt, nefarious activity. He might mask this with wealth and privilege, but he too is implicated in the theme of hypocrisy, as is Inspector Newcomen. Newcomen is motivated by “ambition” which in this novella is dangerous, and linked to transgression, alerting the reader to potential corruption. Newcomen has little professional gravitas; he is “delighted” and “gratified” by the prospect of catching Hyde, not because he respects the law and wishes to protect vulnerable citizens from a murderer, but because he craves recognition and promotion. His name suggests a “new-comer”, someone not grounded in traditional values, but one who deliberately exploits circumstances for his own benefit. If a hypocrite is someone who claims to have moral standards but behaves insincerely, then Newcomen is a hypocrite as he is self-serving rather than committed to serving the interests of others in his role as a policeman. These three characters are also ‘whited sepulchres’: concealing, dissembling and feigning goodness.

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