



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 three '**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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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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“All human beings... are commingled out of good and evil.”

Jekyll and Hyde are not two people – there is only one Jekyll.

Hyde does not exist as we might expect. He is Jekyll's utterance: a representation. Ironically, the tale is narrated through the cleverly named Mr Utterson, and most events are filtered through his character, aside from epistolary sections of 'evidence' such as letters or Jekyll's final confession.

It is important to note: there is only ever Jekyll. Hyde never narrates and we only get his opinion via reported speech or from Jekyll's perspective. It is the duality IN man, the “commingled”, that Stevenson looks to explore, not duality as in two separate people. Even when Jekyll is in Hyde's form, he is still Jekyll calling himself 'I'; the contemporary theories expounded by Cesare Lombroso would certainly apply here, with Hyde being presented as a dissipated atavist. In this way Stevenson reflects and taps into Victorian fears warning of degeneration, immorality and deviant sexuality.

Stevenson continues the duality motif into the London setting; in this urban Gothic setting such evil could be lurking around every cobbled street, behind any “clean” or “brightly lighted” house. Stevenson therefore presents the setting of London as a dark place both literally and metaphorically. Certainly, the introduction of the buildings in Chapter One and not knowing where “one ends and another begins” is representative of the ‘duality in man’ and foreshadows the inhabitants' traits. Indeed, the fact Hyde's building has “no window” highlights his inaccessibility and mystery, remaining in darkness at this point of the novel, symbolically enshrouded in the “pall” of fog. Furthermore, the door having no knocker nor way of apparently being opened or called on from the outside reflects Hyde's characterisation as Jekyll's id – hidden away and repressed because of the conservative morals of Victorian society.

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The “cheval-glass” – reflections and veneers to hide behind.

Jekyll’s good reputation must be maintained with a veneer of respectability; to lose one’s reputation in Victorian society was to lose everything. Turning here to Shakespeare’s ‘Othello’, the character Cassio who, on losing his job due to villain Iago’s behind the scene manipulation, exclaims,

“Reputation, reputation, reputation! Oh, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.”

Similarly, Jekyll’s privileged position in society allows him no room for misdemeanour, nor an outlet for his desired freedoms. However, in reality, members of the upper class often used their position in society as a protective veneer, a reflective “cheval-glass” (like the one Jekyll owns) to deflect any insight into their misdeeds, drug use and debauchery.

Such behaviour is alluded to with Jekyll’s friends also. Enfield is described to be walking back from “some place at the end of the world, about three o’clock of a black winter morning”, and later we learn that the well-known “beautiful” and “innocent” Danvers Carew is walking in the “small hours” through the streets of London. Where had both men been? Where were they going at such a time? At the very least, we know both witnessed despicable acts, further emphasising the dark underbelly of not only the people of Victorian London, but also the space itself. Arguably, more genteel Victorians saw themselves as civilised and acting within prescribed moral boundaries; to transgress these, as Jekyll has, gives rise to the terror Hyde initiates in those who see him. Why can’t other characters quite put their finger on what it is that’s wrong with him? He is “not easy to describe” and is “deformed somewhere”, and yet Enfield “can name nothing out of the way”. Perhaps evil is indescribable?

Moreover, this creates terror because Hyde reflects the evil inherent in all of us, which also makes it so hard for Enfield, or anyone else, to define. Indeed, the mere sight of this evil is enough to kill Jekyll’s foil, Dr Lanyon, who functions as a symbol of rational Victorian science and as a warning against Jekyll’s tempting brand of “balderdash”.

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The Incident at the Window - the symbolism in “thrust down”.

Jekyll sits at this “half-way open” window when Enfield and Utterson go to visit him – previously, the window at Hyde’s house was described as closed, allowing no contact and for secrecy to continue behind the facade. Here, as Jekyll is dealing with the conflict of releasing Hyde, the window is described to be “half-way open”. Indeed, Jekyll is described to be “taking the air with an infinite sadness of mein”, evoking the sense that he is becoming suffocated, in part, through his duplicitous existence. This is compounded by Stevenson’s use of simile to present Jekyll as a “disconsolate prisoner”, miserably trapped in his own body and possibly (as we later learn) unable to control the changing from one outward appearance to another.

During the conversation with his friends the window is “thrust down” rapidly and forcefully in a panic by Jekyll. This window serves as a symbol for the barrier now present between Jekyll, his friends and Victorian society; Jekyll has physically cut himself off. He is able to see and take part in society but, where he thought Hyde would lift barriers for him, actually he is isolated further due to his immoral acts that are unaccepted by society – instead of making him guilt free, he has become conflicted and full of regret.

Stevenson arguably criticises the Victorian era’s repression of naturally occurring immorality and illustrates, as Jekyll later considers, that by doing this it causes a much bigger “devil” to come “out roaring”.

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