



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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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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Act Four Scene Two – The State of the Nation

Whilst the death of the Macduff's dominates the action of the scene, a deeper look into Act Four Scene Two highlights the degeneration and degradation of Macbeth's Scotland under his rule. This is a wholly different Scotland when compared to Duncan's, a country fragmented and torn apart, and a shadow of its former self. It is a nation straining to understand itself under the rule of a paranoid and brutal king, and one who's national identity has been drastically altered.

In Act Four Scene Two, Lady Macduff highlights the national paranoia when responding to Ross' plea for her to have patience when asked about the whereabouts of her husband:

“When our actions do not
Our fears do make us traitors”.

Whilst being deeply concerned that she has no understanding of her husband's location, she is more concerned that his absence will be viewed as traitorous by the nation and, by extension, Macbeth himself. Ross further purports this national paranoia when remarking that “cruel are the times when we are traitors”. Even those who are good can be, at any time, considered traitorous by the ruling powers. Those living in Macbeth's Scotland question their core values and as Ross states, “do not know ourselves”. This is a country that has had its principles and heart ripped out and replaced with a culture of fear, terror, and dread.

This awareness of the state of the nation is not only shared by Ross and Lady Macduff, but also by her son. Later in the scene, her son asks, “what is a traitor?” to which she responds “Why, one that swears and lies”. This is an obvious remark and one clearly directed towards Macbeth and his behaviour as king. The exchange continues with Lady Macduff stating that “every one” must be hanged by “the honest men”, a clear foreshadowing of Macduff's fight with Macbeth later in the play. Macduff's son's awareness of Scotland's degeneration becomes apparent here with his poignant statement:

“Then the liars and swearers are fools, for
There are liars and swearers enough to
beat the honest men and hang up them.”

According to the son, Scotland is replete with “liars and swearers”, outnumbering the “honest men”. This operates on two levels. Firstly, it highlights Macbeth's Scotland as a place where no one can be trusted, paranoia is rife in society and carries the vice of swearing, a world where the very words it uses cause pain to its people. Secondly, it represents a place that has turned the very fabric of society into liars, infected with its own delusions and willing to lie to save themselves. It is a place where honesty is punishable by death. A place that has become a totalitarian abyss, no different from Kim Jong-Un's North Korea or Stalin's Russia, where the widespread suspicion of its people tainted its national consciousness. In Macbeth's Scotland honest people die, mistrust is rife and the country itself is fundamentally broken. It is a message to us, the audience, of the dangers of dictatorships and if we do not listen, history will inevitably repeat itself.

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Act Four Scene Two – The Savagery of Macbeth

Shakespeare wastes no time in building upon the tension of Macbeth's assertion that "The Castle of Macduff I will surprise" in the previous scene. The audience is immediately transported to Fife, Macduff's castle, and bear witness to horrors previously not seen in the play. Lady Macduff, furious at her husband's "flight" from Scotland, refuses to believe Ross's attempts at justifying Macduff's actions. Despite Ross's best attempts at highlighting the positive aspects of Macduff's characteristics, "Noble", "wise" and "Judicious", Lady Macduff turns her frustration and bewilderment towards her young son.

Shakespeare plays this interchange out through 26 lines of dialogue and whilst seemingly unimportant, it offers the audience a glimpse into the close relationship held between Lady Macduff and her son. Shakespeare's use of stichomythia allows this relationship to be established and for the humour of their disagreement to come through for the audience:

Son: "Nay, how will you do for a husband?"

Lady Macduff: "Why, I can buy me twenty at any market"

Yet their interchange is swiftly interrupted with a messenger proclaiming that they "be not found here" and soon after, the appearance of a murderer who immediately states, "Where is your husband?" rapidly followed by, "He's a traitor". This is the moment that Shakespeare chooses to highlight Macbeth's brutality and violence. Upon the son's exclamation that the murderer is a "shag-eared villain", the murderer plunges his blade into the boy after remarking, "what, you egg?" This is significant as the lexical choice of "egg" highlights his youthfulness and subsequent innocence. This is further highlighted when the murderer exclaims, "young fry of treachery". A fry is a young fish, small in stature and clearly no threat to the menacing and intimidating presence of the murderer. What Shakespeare presents here is the symbol of a defenceless child, a "fry" incapable of retaliation and completely at the mercy of the predator in front of him. Lady Macduff's assertion that the "owl" will attack her "nest" comes true, and she experiences the tragic pain of watching her son murdered in front of her.

The apex of Macbeth's savagery does not stop here; Shakespeare accentuates cruelty with the murder of Lady Macduff which, like many Shakespearean deaths, happens off-stage. The significance of this happening off-stage encourages the audience to imagine the horrors that she would have experienced in her final moments. By not showing her death, Shakespeare alludes to something darker and more extreme and therefore, firmly establishing Macbeth as a cruel, vicious, and inhumane figure in the play – a homicidal maniac whose murderous actions stretch beyond men and presents a world where no one is safe, not even women and children. There is no going back for Macbeth after this point. He has established himself as someone capable of the most cruel and violent of actions and ultimately, far removed from the figure that was once described in Act One Scene Two as "noble", and, later in Act One Scene Five, as "too full o' the milk of human kindness".

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Macbeth Act Five Scene Two – Kingly Comparisons

Act 5 sees Shakespeare accelerate Macbeth's demise, replete with short, fast-paced scenes that ramp up the tension, culminating in the final stand-off between Macduff and Macbeth. In Act Five Scene Two, Shakespeare slows the pace, offering the audience an opportunity to see the kingly comparisons between Macbeth and Malcolm. Shakespeare wastes no time in highlighting Macbeth's unjust and unnatural position as king. Lennox remarks that "many unrough youths" are amongst the advancing army, young men who are rebelling against Macbeth's position as king despite their youthfulness and lack of life experience. They are aware that if they do not act, the world they will grow up in will be a world of hatred, dishonesty, and terror.

Macbeth clearly does not fit the position of King. Shakespeare highlights this incongruity using the semantic field of clothing, seen twice within 6 lines. Firstly, Caithness states that "He cannot buckle his distempered cause Within the belt of his rule". The lexical choice of "buckle" highlights Macbeth's rule as being like that of tightening a "belt" – a "belt" Macbeth is unable to fasten and proving a relevant metaphor for the audience to understand his lack of leadership. Secondly, Angus states that:

"Now does he feel his title

Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe

Upon a dwarfish thief."

The image above defines Macbeth as king. He simply does not fit "his title" or the "robe". He is a dishonest "thief" who has stolen kingship and because of this, Scotland is suffering. Macbeth is far from the "giant" a king is supposed to be and the visualisation of the audience is that of a small man, out of place and unworthy of the title.

However, despite the abundance of lines spent highlighting how unfit Macbeth is as king, Shakespeare makes sure the audience is aware of the solution to Scotland's problems and its rightful king, Malcolm. Caithness highlights that Malcolm is the "medicine of the sickly weal", the only cure for a country that is afflicted with Macbeth's poisonous rule. The lords' responsibility from this point forward is to protect Malcolm so that this "medicine" can be administered to the country. Malcolm is referenced as a "sovereign flower" that has to be cared for, protected, and planted as king in order to "drown the weeds" Macbeth has sown during his reign. Shakespeare's use of natural imagery here presents a clear distinction between the two kings. Macbeth, just like the "weed" he is referenced as, is not wanted in this metaphorical garden, and has become uncontrollable, a living parasite corrupting every aspect of Scotland, and must be uprooted. Malcolm, however, is the "flower", an elegant and delicate specimen that needs to be carefully guarded and cultivated for Scotland to flourish and bloom with life. By utilising these natural-world metaphors, Shakespeare allows the audience to clearly see what is at stake in the following scenes; a kingdom that continues to be overrun by "weeds", or one that grows, blossoms and is rife with life.

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