



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 four '**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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Act Two Scene Three (The Porter Scene)

Structurally, this scene of comedic value takes place immediately after the cruel murder of Duncan, perhaps emphasising the brutality of Macbeth's actions – the juxtaposition of the fearful words of Macbeth and the ruthless tone of Lady Macbeth with the Porter's humorous, drunken ramble accentuates the evil of the previous scene.

Yet the Porter's monologue highlights a key message of the play – the idea that evil and devilish behaviour permeates our society. Although the audience may be shocked by the extreme nature of Macbeth's actions, the Porter stresses that sinful behaviour is commonplace. Repetition of diabolic language such as "Beelzebub", "devil-porter", "hell-gate", "hell" and "devil's" alongside the images of "sweat for it", "roast your goose" and "everlasting bonfire", create a vivid depiction of the intensity of hell, reminding the audience of the suffering Macbeth will ultimately endure. However, "if a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key" suggests many men follow the path Macbeth has chosen; perhaps he should not be judged too harshly for his decisions.

The Porter's tale of the effects of alcohol could also serve as a metaphor for Macbeth's 'intoxication' by the witches. Drinking "provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance"; Macbeth is provoked by the "desire" of the crown, but his once noble "performance" deserts him.

The conflict between "makes him and it mars him" mimics the boldness Macbeth feels ("makes him"), combined with the poor decisions he makes ("mars him"); whilst drink "persuades him", so too do the witches convince Macbeth of his greatness, yet their message also frequently "disheartens him". If the Porter is correct in his assertion that man can easily be provoked by the power of intoxication, then Macbeth's behaviour could be, to some extent, explained by the fact he is intoxicated by the witches, yet it is important to remember the by-products of such intoxication for the Porter are "urine" and vomit ("cast him"), hardly the heroic qualities the audience seek in their king.





Act Two Scene Four (Old Man and Ross)

After the murder of Duncan, a series of unnatural events take place – one interpretation is that these acts mimic the unnatural behaviour of Macbeth killing Duncan and suggest the consequences of such behaviour. However, it is important to analyse closely the symbolic value of the acts discussed by the Old Man and Ross.

Ross states that “’tis day, and yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp” – his question of whether “is’t night’s predominance, or the day’s shame” could certainly allude to the tragic outcome of the play, and allows the audience to consider who is at fault for Macbeth’s tragic downfall. “Night’s predominance” has associations with the power and strength of darkness and evil and could symbolise the “predominance” of the witches over Macbeth; “day’s shame” stresses the vulnerability and weakness of good and could represent the shame and guilt of Macbeth for his actions. Therefore, the audience can question whether it is the witches’ “predominance” or Macbeth’s “shame” that causes the unnatural events in the play.

The “mousing owl” that “hawked at and killed” the “falcon” is a clear symbol of Macbeth (the “mousing owl”) killing Duncan (“a falcon”) and corrupting the natural hierarchy of power. However, the choice of the “falcon” and “mouse” have deeper connotations. Falconry was the sport of kings and nobility – “towering” emphasises the falcon’s elevated, regal position, and the alliteration of “pride of place” stresses the importance of “place” and hierarchy within society.

Much like falconry, which works on the premise that man can control the natural world around it, “Duncan’s horses” symbolise the taming and control of powerful natural beasts by mankind. “Stalls” represent mankind’s attempt to constrain and restrict the natural world, yet they “broke” free. However, Macbeth’s actions are so unnatural and corrupting that Duncan’s horses did “eat each other”; whilst this act is incomprehensible and beyond “amazement”, horses eating each other is still not as unnatural as Macbeth’s regicide, an act even more incomprehensible.





Act Three Scene Three and Four (Murderers kill Banquo)

In Act One Scene Two, the vanquishing of enemies is a noble, honourable act, and one that Macbeth is unafraid to do himself. Macbeth is introduced to the audience as a noble warrior; “brave Macbeth...smoked with bloody execution, like valour's minion”, and his actions lead to him becoming Thane of Cawdor.

The murder of Duncan in Act Two only takes place after Lady Macbeth “laid their daggers ready” – Macbeth is fading rapidly from the “brave Macbeth” of Act One.

In Act Three Scene Three, the killing of Banquo is lacking in all bravery or valour, emphasising how far Macbeth has fallen; indeed, he is so dishonourable that he cannot commit the deed himself. The scene begins with confusion and questions; “But who did bid thee join with us?” stresses the incompetency of the murderers and fills the scene with “mistrust”, further accentuated by the fact someone “did strike out the light”, leading to Fleance's escape.

Furthermore, there is a clear difference between Duncan's ability to lead his men and Macbeth's failed kingship. In Act One Scene Two, Duncan's cry of “what bloody man is that” refers to a “good and hardy soldier”, and he is acknowledged with a cry of “Hail, brave friend”. In contrast, Macbeth meets the murderer as an aside in a secretive and clandestine manner – “there's blood on thy face”, unlike the “bloody man” of Act One, highlights the brutal, unskilled attack on Banquo.

This brutality, rather than battlefield valour, is accentuated by the “twenty trenched gashes on his head”. The harsh alliteration of the ‘t’ as well as the disturbing associations of “trenched” and physical deformity of “gashes” accentuates the violence of the act, reinforced by the “twenty” blows used to kill him; this was not a skilful “execution” but rather a blundering attack.





Act Five Scene Three and Five (Seyton)

Seyton is one of very few attendants in the play to be named, and as the audience watch the final stages of the play unfold, with Macbeth on stage crying out the name of Seyton, it is a clear visual representation that Macbeth is engulfed by evil and, like the Porter forewarned, soon to enter through the gates of hell.

However, there are a number of significant actions in the brief time that Seyton is on stage, and it does aid the audience in their understanding of Macbeth's sin. Seyton's presence acts as a reminder that at the end of this great tragedy, Macbeth's greatest crime was to destroy the great chain of being and the divine right of kings - God is seeking to restore order with the advancement of forces led by the rightful king Malcolm, and Macbeth can only call on the devil for help.

Furthermore, it is important to note Seyton's wider role. In one of Macbeth's brief monologues he confirms that "I have lived long enough", signifying his life is almost at an end; in the same monologue he calls out for Seyton three times. After killing Duncan, Macbeth "had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' stuck in my throat", symbolising the rejection of Macbeth by God – the audience can be comforted by the knowledge that in death, Macbeth continues to be rejected by God and will suffer eternally in hell for his actions.

Seyton also heightens the diabolic nature of the witches. The witches are not physically present in Act Five, but Macbeth still seeks guidance from evil supernatural forces. He asks Seyton, "what news more", and when he seeks to control the situation by demanding "give me my armour", Seyton defies him by responding "'Tis not needed yet", much as the witches refuse to comply with Macbeth's demands earlier in the play and continue to act under their own power.

Finally, it is significant that Seyton's final act is to confirm that "the queen, my lord, is dead". Earlier in the play Lady Macbeth calls upon "spirits", "murdering ministers", and the "the dunnest smoke of hell" to make sure "heaven" could not "peep through the blanket of the dark, to cry 'Hold, hold!'" In having Seyton announce Lady Macbeth's death, the audience is left in no doubt that the devil heard and acted upon Lady Macbeth's original request and has now come to claim his reward.





Revision Activity

We have suggested two further scenes which we believe have greater depth to them than perhaps first appears.

- Act Three Scene Five (Hecate)
- Act Four Scene Two (Lady Macduff and Son)

Produce a revision mind map for these scenes (or any scene you wish) using the following headings:

- Interpretation
- Key quotations – don't forget to analyse them closely
- Links to the wider play
- Thematic links
- Character links