



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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The Significance of the Golden Statues: an alternative view of the ending

Although the play begins in violence and civil unrest, driven by the 'ancient grudge' between the Montagues and the Capulets, it appears to end with peace. The prologue's proleptic declaration seems confirmed, and both fathers are contrite and solemn, meeting in amity over the bodies of their dead children. Capulet offers to shake hands, an act of goodwill suggesting an end to the feud. Montague responds with an extraordinary proposition; he generously offers to 'raise her statue in pure gold', to which Capulet responds with the counter-offer, 'As rich shall Romeo's by his lady's lie'.

These statues are probably effigies: likenesses carved on tombs. The fact that Montague offers one cast in 'pure gold' could be construed as a barely concealed egotistical boast. These are men who employ a semantic field of money to talk about their children at their death: 'jointure', 'demand', 'gold', 'rate', 'rich'; these fiscal metaphors communicate a greedy, materialist attitude at odds with the apparent reconciliation. Rather than a symbol of friendship, forgiveness and unity, this minor exchange about effigies seems jarring and an extension of the competitive enmity that has characterised the households throughout the play. Instead of ending the feud, this exchange implies that there is still simmering antagonism and resentment.

The statues are significant because they demonstrate that the parents have not changed. They have also won the battle with their recalcitrant children, as Romeo and Juliet will be forever frozen and displayed as golden statues in the shape their parents design. In their life, Romeo and Juliet could not be controlled. They tried to create a freely chosen, private relationship in a world where marriage is a transaction that happens in the public sphere, and women are a commodity to be traded. Death offered their only escape, and paradoxically, a way for these thwarted lovers to be together, eternally defying the restrictions of parents and a rigidly patriarchal and hierarchical society. We want to believe their death demonstrates their power to ultimately transgress a system that sought to contain them. Yet, the play concludes by shifting the power back to the parents, reinforcing that rebellion against parental authority is pointless. If the family is a microcosm of society, then resistance to authority in the macrocosm is also pointless. The system will always win.

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The Significance of Paris in Act Five

In Act Five, Paris doesn't seem that important and is often glossed over, or even cut, from productions. In particular, two famous film versions omit him from the final scene. In Act Five Scene Three, Paris challenges Romeo at the crypt, the two fight, and Paris is killed. Yet, Luhrmann and Zeffirelli cut this scene, one that Shakespeare deliberately includes. So, why is Paris significant?

A common structural antithesis in the play is between order and disorder, and may reflect a concept of universal order captured in the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being. The Early Modern idea that everything had its allocated place in society, and that any deviation from that place could have disruptive effects, is encapsulated in Ulysses' speech from *Troilus and Cressida*:

'Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows!'

Paris represents things in their proper place: a respect for 'degree'. Romeo represents a challenge to that order: he is 'discord'. The fight between Paris and Romeo is yet another manifestation of a series of collisions between order and disorder. If Paris is left alive, and forgotten, at the end, as he is in Luhrmann's and Zeffirelli's films, then the play becomes less about this conflict and more about the rebellious teenage lovers, elevated to tragic status (the films conclude with the dead lovers, artistically arranged), and the role played by authority in the play is diluted. This is an authority that is ultimately re-established. The deaths of Romeo and Juliet "buries their parents' strife". The lovers cause merely a brief, turbulent hiatus in the progression of proper, patriarchal order, and their death is a means by which the return to order can be achieved. Despite film attempts to valorise suicide and elevate the lovers to mythical status, theirs is a grim, lonely, pointless death.

Paris has a legitimate reason to be at the crypt to mourn the loss of his fiancé. His presence is lawful, his actions are justifiable, and he arrives with "flowers", suggesting his respect. Romeo has no legitimate right to be at the crypt and enters with a "mattock" (pickaxe) and a "wrenching iron" with which he intends to break into the tomb. He is an intruder, and his presence is unlawful. Paris is there to perform "obsequies" and pay his respects according to ritual. Romeo is there "to steal a ring". Killing Paris complicates the presentation of Romeo, as Shakespeare shows Romeo evolving into a volatile killer. And killer is most definitely what he is. Inadvertently a killer of Mercutio; but deliberate killer of Tybalt and Paris. Without Paris we can continue to view Romeo as an admirable, romantic hero, and our sympathy stays with him, but I'm not sure that the Early Modern audience would have applauded the actions of these rebellious teenage lovers, or have been sympathetic to their situation, in the way that we now seem to be.

Paris is significant because without him we lose the tension between order and disorder that the play explores. Without the presence of Paris, and remember his dead body is part of that final, bleak tableau, the end of the play validates 'discord' and focusses on the lovers' suicide that seems far from the original intentions of the play.

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