



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 Four Scene Five (Peter and The Musicians)

Act Four, Scene Five is a rollercoaster of emotion: from the joyful intent for Juliet's wedding day to the intense expressions of grief and then the comic relief at the end, the audience are drawn through a vast spectrum of staged emotion. The end of the scene offers the aforementioned comic relief via the musicians and the character of Peter; the musicians deny the request for music from Peter (a mere servant) and so he poses a riddle for them, engages in some lightly insulting humour and then leaves the musicians concocting a plan to ensure they will be fed.

It seems, perhaps, an unnecessary addition at first, not least because there doesn't appear to be the need for a break for costume changes. One possibility is the intense outpouring of grief would leave the actors in need of rest, but the following scene involves different cast members, so this explanation seems unlikely. Practically speaking, the role of Peter was probably intended for the comedic actor Will Kempe (a member of Shakespeare's company) so this scene would offer an opportunity for him to perform in his usual popular role of comedy.

A more artistic explanation, particularly if we consider Shakespeare's frequent use of comedy to relieve dramatic tension, is that the audience need light relief before Romeo's reception of news that Juliet is dead. The construction of the scene as a whole is particularly dramatic - at times, almost farcically so, with the nurse and Lady Capulet rapidly delivering a series of exclamations.

NURSE

*Alas, alas! Help, help! My lady's dead!—
Oh, welladay, that ever I was born!—
Some aqua vitae, ho!—My lord! My lady!*

LADY CAPULET

*O me, O me! My child, my only life,
Revive, look up, or I will die with thee!—
Help, help! Call help.*

If an audience member is caught up in this display of grief, the musicians offer a break from such intensity and an opportunity to pause and prepare for more grief in the following scene. If, however, an audience member is distanced by the force of the emotion (particularly with the dramatic irony of Juliet's death being a façade), then the musicians offer a refreshing sense of realism: their concern is lunch, rather than the daughter of a family with whom they have little in common. For all but the most powerful and wealthy, this is probably a feeling with which they could identify (albeit, perhaps guiltily!).

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Act Five Scene Three (The manner of Romeo and Juliet's deaths)

In the final scene of the play, audiences see the deaths they have been expecting: a tragic inevitability foreshadowed from the sixth line of the play onwards. As well as the Prologue and the audience's existing knowledge of the plot from the source poem, (**'The Tragical Historye of Romeus and Juliet'** written by Arthur Brooke in 1562), it is worth noting Friar Lawrence's words to Romeo:

*Within the infant rind of this weak flower
Poison hath residence and medicine power:
For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part;
Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart.*

This reference to the potential of plants to create poison links clearly to Romeo's purchase of herbal "compounds" from the Apothecary, but also to the sleeping draught that the Friar creates for Juliet, which also plays a notable part in the deaths of the lovers.

The specific manner of these deaths is also telling: not only two suicides, but one by "poison" from a vessel and one by dagger. If we consider the symbolism of the methods, we see phallic and yonic imagery at play: the clear phallic imagery of the dagger (and Romeo's own dagger, no less) presents Romeo and his masculinity. Paired with this, the vessel containing the poison acts as a yonic symbol, presenting Juliet and her femininity. This symbolism is important for two reasons: firstly, the two eponymous characters are the symbolic 'vehicle' of one another's demise and secondly, they are finally and ultimately sexually united by the penetration of Romeo's dagger, again suggesting their sexual union is ultimately fatal.

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Juliet and her 'indoors' existence

Often analysed as the driving force of the play and an appeal to the strong female monarch of the time, Juliet is generally regarded as a courageous, strong-minded figure particularly for her context. The staging, however, reflects the confines of the society in which she lives: essentially, she is a character who exists indoors. From her initial meeting with Romeo to her final moments in the tomb, she is viewed within the confines of buildings throughout the play. Her furthest venture within these boundaries is in the famous 'balcony scene', but, despite this commonly-used label, Shakespeare's staging states only "at a window above"; Juliet does not, in fact, step outside. She is perhaps tempted or comes closest to leaving the Capulet mansion in these moments when she does, at least, gaze through the window and communicate with Romeo: he is the motivation to look beyond the confines of her family home.

Furthermore, in Act 4, Scene 1, directors often stage outdoors Juliet's interruption of Friar Lawrence and Paris's meeting, but Shakespeare himself seems to offer no indication of this, merely that Friar Lawrence says she moves towards "[his] cell". If we accept this as a room within the church structure, it becomes feasible that she is seen within the confines of a building at every point of the play.

If we accept this indoor staging as a conscious dramatic choice on Shakespeare's part, we could even go so far as to argue that her terror at the idea of waking in the confines of the tomb are terror at the final, symbolic enclosure. That she ultimately chose this end for herself might therefore make for interesting discussion about whether Juliet succumbs to the patriarchal society or takes control of her own fate.

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The Written Word as a plot device

There are two key moments in the play that depend on the written word: firstly, the Montague reading of the Capulet invitations and secondly, the failed delivery of the message to Mantua. Contextually, literacy is a much-discussed skill for Shakespeare himself with the illiteracy of his family an oft-repeated 'fun fact'. Under Queen Elizabeth's reign, through James I and into the reign of Charles I, the drive in education (largely by religious groups) meant that, towards the end of the sixteenth century, literacy was significantly greater, particularly for men and the wealthy. Therefore, the servant's inability to read the list of guests invited to the Capulet feast would be entirely feasible for audience members of the Elizabethan time. However, it also acts to appeal to the different types of audience members: for the literate wealthy viewers, the advantage of the educated Montagues is familiar, whilst the groundlings could identify with the frustration of the servant.

Context remains relevant for the failed message to Mantua. Not only does Friar John further the presentation of the Catholic Church as lacking, but his failure is because of the isolation of a village to prevent the spread of plague. A very real concern for the contemporary audience, this kind of quarantine was far from unheard of and, particularly given that Italy led the way in terms of quarantine (opening the first isolated plague hospital in 1423), in the Verona/Mantua setting, the events are reasonable. The written word once again furthers the plot.

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