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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!

Are you interested in writing a piece for our Significance of the Insignificant series?

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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Chapter One – Story of the Door

How has Stevenson presented Mr Utterson in Chapter One?

Mr Utterson acts as our anchor in the novella; he guides the reader and has the same questions we have as the novel progresses and develops. He is our rational, mild-tempered companion when we encounter the supernatural and mystic throughout the novella. Utterson is unable to help Jekyll, and we as a reader feel as powerless as he does, intensified through the third person narrative. Stevenson shows the protagonist Utterson as a contrast to the antagonist Mr Hyde; he is presented as a detective-like character, and in contrast to Mr Hyde, Utterson himself proclaims to be “Mr Seek.” This is, after all, “The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.”

“Cold, scanty and embarrassed in discourse; backward in sentiment; lean, long, dusty, dreary, and yet somehow loveable.”

The above quotation is how Stevenson describes Utterson; full of believable contradictions but ultimately flawed, like all of us. In a sense, Utterson comes across as an uninteresting character – unsmiling, “scanty” in speech, “lean, long, dusty, dreary” in person. Utterson is our protagonist, and the story unfolds through his eyes, and Stevenson has intentionally provided Utterson as a steady, reliable narrator throughout the unpredictable nature of the text, particularly as the novella unfolds. The contradiction of Utterson being “cold,” suggesting a heartless man with a lack of warmth, and at the same time being “dreary,” suggesting he is both unkind and mundane, juxtaposed with being “lovable,” ultimately reveals Utterson as complex once the layers are peeled away. Furthermore, this contradiction in character also represents the duality of human nature and its conflicting personalities.

Stevenson introduces Mr Utterson as the first character in the novella and, interestingly, he is one of the few characters to have a detailed and thorough description. Contrasting with other characters, Utterson’s description focuses on personality, unlike Hyde, which focuses on his physical appearance. We see Utterson’s behaviour remains the same as the novella progresses; Stevenson shows that Utterson has an ability to detach himself from the crime, supported by description of his personality, as he is able to act in multiple situations through the lens of his occupation, a lawyer. Chapter One as a whole emphasises Utterson as a stable character through his friendships, associates, job, and his personal life; he is the predictable and reliable narrator.

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Chapter One – Story of the Door.

How has Stevenson presented Mr Hyde in Chapter One?

From the very beginning of the novel, Stevenson wants the reader to dislike Mr Hyde; we are meant to be repulsed by his actions. The way Stevenson creates this characterisation is through Hyde's action of crushing a child, reinforced by Enfield's language regarding the incident, including the aftermath.

Hyde is portrayed as “ugly.” Victorian standards and literature viewed beauty with kindness, and contrastingly viewed ugliness with unkindness. Hyde's unpleasant and hideous appearance cause the reader to not only be physically disgusted by him, but also to be repulsed by his character too. Enfield is able to identify Hyde as malicious through both his appearance and actions; this judgement on the character of an individual through their external appearance was also a typical stereotype of Victorian behaviour. It is interesting to note that although in Chapter One we are told about Mr Hyde, we are in fact yet to meet him; it is only through Utterson and Enfield that we are discovering his character. Enfield uses the word “hellish” to describe both the situation and Mr Hyde himself, although we know Hyde is unpleasant through his actions. Stevenson does not, in fact, delve into the detail; the antagonist's ugliness develops as the novella progresses, and Stevenson is sparse with physically describing Mr Hyde in Chapter One. In terms of first impressions, Chapter One emphasises the consequences of My Hyde's actions, such as the “screaming” and the trampling. His actions are what makes him a terrifying antagonist; the reader is left to question what heartless creature could hurt a child?

“It was like some damned juggernaut.”

The image of Mr Hyde “trampling” on a child is a powerful one and presents a number of nuances. The reader clearly engages with the brutality of the image, but it also suggests the patriarchy's influence to destroy all that is not considered male. We already know how contrasting Mr Utterson and Mr Hyde are, but this is intensified through violence both within the quotation, and within society. The “trampling” provides contrast between old and young; the powerful and powerless; and gender; but more importantly, a whole world view in which atrocities can go unpunished and, in some corridors of power, are allowed to happen with no consequence.

On a very real level, this could also be a nod to the industrial revolution and its negligent

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impact on Victorian culture. The phrase “some damned juggernaut” portrays Hyde as an unstoppable force, foreshadowing how Hyde will ultimately become uncontrollable. Stevenson has shown Hyde to be a merciless and destructive force of nature preying on innocent victims. Moreover, we as a readership are introduced to the antagonist through Enfield’s shocking revelation that Hyde “trampled calmly” over his innocent casualty. The juxtaposition of the violent verb “trampled” with the adverb “calmly” reveals Hyde’s lack of sympathy and sense of insignificance regarding his actions, and the sheer vicious force with which he strides over her. The brutal language shows how egregious the event was, shocking Utterson, Enfield and the reader, further intensified by the simile comparing Hyde to “some damned Juggernaut,” establishing him as a relentless force. In addition, the verb “dammed” has connotations of hell, showing Stevenson believes Hyde will end up in hell as a result of dabbling with science and not following Christian practices. This is further intensified with the term “hellish” also used within Chapter One, almost alluding to this event as a satanic sacrifice.

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The Carew Murder Case.

How does Stevenson intensify hostility in Chapter Four?

In Chapter Four, the structure is similar to that of Chapter One; an act of violence is then followed by an attempt to hold Carew's murderer responsible. There is, however, a notable change in the character of Mr Hyde in comparison to Chapter One. In Chapter One, he not only brutally attacks the young girl, but also exhibits unusual behaviour, "a kind of black sneering coolness—frightened too, I could see that—but carrying it off, sir, really like Satan"; this unusual behaviour is absent from Chapter Four, thus making the attack on Danvers Carew far more brutal, intense and vicious. Stevenson is clearly showing that Mr Hyde is only becoming more inhumane and savage as the novella develops. There are some similarities between the victim in Chapter One and Chapter Four, in that both victims were innocent, with Mr Hyde only attacking them through spiteful opportunity. Additionally, another similarity is that both incidents are set in the same way – they are at night, dark literally and metaphorically.

“Brilliantly lit by the full moon.”

However, despite taking place in the darkness of night, Stevenson describes the cloudless night that Danvers Carew was murdered as being “brilliantly lit.” This quotation itself is a classic gothic trope, almost working like a vivid spotlight that draws attention to both the scene of the murder, but also the sides of ourselves that we hide in plain sight. There's a duality to this phrase, in that murders are something usually hidden; however, this one is like a show, paraded around London for all to see. Victorian society would react in horror and the malevolent acts elicited fear.

The second component of the quotation is Stevenson alluding to Mr Hyde as a ferocious murderer. The phrase “full moon” has associations with lycanthropy, myths, and werewolves, with the quotation alluding to Mr Hyde's transformation into a violent murderer who killed his victim in a grotesque way. Just as there is a duality in Jekyll and Hyde, this can be mirrored in a werewolf also. Both are connected; the host is transformed into a primal and carnal sub-human creature. Stevenson's description of Hyde is usually linked with animals to describe his horrifying bodily transformations. Although Stevenson is not overtly referring to lycanthropy, but instead the dangers of science, the link between Hyde and lycanthropy is obvious. In *Ready to Teach: The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Curtis and Folan state that, “There's only one way to end the story of a werewolf and that's with its death. The two parts of the creature cannot harmoniously exit together and cannot exist in society.”

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In this deep-rooted sense of moral anguish of the character, Mr Hyde shows the very beginning of his murderous instincts. Stevenson has created a character who shows no remorse or lack of aggression in Chapter Four. He is a stone-hearted killer.

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