

(Ir)relevant details in a story*

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In the folds of a story, details are often met (when they don't just stay hidden) by readers who would deem them unessential. Apparently useless elements, but capable of enriching the narrative, by showing it truer, more complete, more meaningful, and therefore – more beautiful.

Those who read stories, or novels, tend to follow the plot to fully understand their development, trying to grasp their meaning and purpose. The reader lets themselves be guided by the words, and by their own imagination, to “rob” the author of their story, to experience it fully, in a way that is suited to them personally. Characters meet, kiss, fight, sometimes they hit each other, even to death. Places appear, their details gradually unfolding in the reader's minds, inside their eyes. Here's a road, here's a mountain, here's the seashore, here's a snowfall, a cheerful crowd, or a somber and lonely woman walking down the street or just sitting in a dirty train station, waiting.

As we devour the story, we often engage in attentive reading, focusing on all the details we consider important, because we don't want to skip any fundamental aspects of the main narrative path, built by the author to guide us readers, only apparently passive, through the unfurling of the plot. Sometimes as we read, be it by necessity or scant attention, we leave behind those small details that sometimes appear in the sentences as we decode them. Details tucked in between the lines as we scroll through them to reach the end of an action, of a character's thought, or just to get to the bottom of the page. And yet, these many tiny elements that the novelist has spread along the reader's path, and that the reader occasionally stumbles upon, are not always marginal or minor, even when it seems so. There must be a reason for them to be there, following Mosca Lamberti's famous quote "cosa fatta capo ha" ("what has been done, cannot be undone").

These are little pauses in a plot, minimal spaces in which it feels like the story itself is slowing down to better breathe, to halt – even just for a moment – the succession of events and turn to seemingly unimportant, negligible aspects, that are nevertheless always present in a novel, or a story, be it long or short.

They are micro-interruptions that divert the reader's mind, presenting them with little things, nuances, trifles. They force the reader to become distracted from the narrative thread and turn their attention to some "almost nothing" that sheds light on a minor event, perhaps useless, not decisive, but pleasant in its inessentiality.

A pen rolling and then stopping by the edge of a table, a drop of coffee falling to the floor and expanding, dark and round. A sudden breath of wind ruffling a child's hair. A woman's scent slightly felt by the young man walking next to her. A little old door, opening in front of the protagonist. The white dots on a blue tie, knotted in English style. These are things that do not alter the course of events, they are not powerful enough to reframe a story. Sometimes, these details remain in the background; some other times instead they get to us, and we can't forget about them anymore. Some gain a deeper signification in our mind, while others get lost among other words and seemingly disappear, to our eyes at least, like they were never assigned any object, any quality, any event to refer to, any meaning to convey.

In *Don Quixote*, Sancho Panza's "bottle in the saddlebag", that he keeps hanging from his donkey, won't change the events in which Miguel de Cervantes drags his heroic knight; same goes for the "many birds joyfully greeting the new day", that won't have any influence on our protagonists' adventures during that day. However, these details, just like the description of Sancho's "ruffled head" as he leans over his apparently dead master, remind us that life, even in books, is not just made up of epic deeds, but finds its expression in the little things, too.

Little things, like the "black buttons" of young Charles Bovary's "green cloth jacket" as he comes to class, or "the leafless branches of the apple trees" and the "dark violet spots" in the French countryside, or the "satin book bindings" that Emma touches gently. Flaubert throws all these things at us, and many more, but none of this can prevent Madame Bovary from dying by arsenic poisoning. The same fate awaits Matvej's "creaking shoes" as he goes to Stepan

Arkad'ic, and Kitty's "farsighted eyes", as she realizes her "downfall is complete" just by looking at Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky.

These are the details that we find in the classics; however, all of this does not only apply to them. Opening Elsa Morante's *Menzogna e sortilegio* ("House of liars") to a random page would be enough to notice how the author describes the "singing of the greenfinch" the protagonist listens to, the "foot in the slipper" that Eduardo swings and mother's purse with its "worn out cords".

As Roland Barthes would put it, we are facing little narrative "luxuries", apparently useless elements with an aesthetic purpose, but there's more to them than just that. They are "left-overs", apparently meaningful (or meaningless), that can play a role in the semantics of the narration. A meaning that lives by brief appearances, not always easily or directly grasped – but it still exists, more or less openly. Quoting Barthes' words on the topic: "... right when those details should directly denote reality, all they can do is *mean* it, without ever stating it".

These are all minor elements, unessential on a surface level, rather marginal to the great semantics of storytelling. A work of literature would thrive even without them, it would stand on its own, healthy and well-fed, like an impeccable gentleman wrapped in an elegant grey suit. Nevertheless, those details add color to the story: they embellish the suit, make the narration steeper or rounder, sweeter or more bitter, truer, or unclear. In a word: real, just like life.

Unfortunately for them, details are more on the side of describing than on that of narrating; they appear to be part of the frame more than part of the painting; but thanks to them, a literary description can narrate the world, the people in it, their little habits, their hidden fears, their feelings that intertwine to become meaningful plots. They are tiny wildflowers dotting the green fields of a story that would go on without them. Tiny flowers, but full of potential to surprise and upset with their colors and fragrances. Minimal elements that are alive, and that wouldn't be mad at being crossed out or deleted, by virtue of their intimate modesty; but the reader should know better than to just think of them as some sort of "syntactic sugar".

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The article is an expression of appreciation for a way of reading that notices the smallest elements in a text, and the richness of the world it portrays. By comparing the reader who follows the main line of action in a story, and therefore goes with its rapid flow, to the reader who instead frequently pauses to look at those details that have been hidden in the folds of a work, the author acknowledges the latter as the one who fully grasps and enjoys the literary sense: someone who sees the work of literature as a faithful representation of life.

NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Domenico Talia is Professor of Computer Engineering at the University of Calabria. Among other things, he studies the creation and operation of new generation knowledge models, the presence and specifics of information in the cloud, and modeling tools; his citation index on Google Scholar exceeds 9,000 items. He graduated in Physics; however, more in general, the expression “Renaissance man” fits him very much. On one hand, he indulges in creative literary production: *Il sole e il sangue* (“The sun and blood”, a collection of short stories, 2014), *Il colore del cielo e altre ipotesi* (“The color of the sky and other hypotheses”, a collection of short stories, 2017), *Brevi finestre* (“Brief windows”, notes and excerpts, 2020). On the other hand, he also expresses himself critically on literary topics, as highlighted by the translated article: *I dettagli (in)influenti in un racconto*.