**VIGNETTE**

**Definition of Vignette**

In literature, a vignette is a short scene that focuses on one moment that is especially powerful or significant. Vignette examples can be found in plays, poems, and novels. Though vignettes are brief, they often carry proportionately more emotion since the author has chosen that brief moment to highlight for some important reason.

The word vignette comes from the French word *vigne* for vineyard; the diminutive form “*vignette*” means “a little vine.” The original definition of vignette referred to the sketch at the beginning of a book which summed up the [narrative](http://www.literarydevices.com/narrative/) to come; the sketch was usually surrounded by small vines of ivy. Later, the term that only was applied for literal pictures of vines came to mean any small scene in the written word as well.

**Common Examples of Vignette**

There are some filmmakers who use the technique of vignette to build an entire film, such as in the following examples:

* “Short Cuts” Robert Altman
* “Magnolia” by Paul Thomas Anderson
* “Go” by Doug Liman
* “Babel” by Alejandro González Iñárritu
* “Paris, je t’aime” by 22 directors (a group of 18 different vignettes set in different arrondissements, each of which is directed by a different director)

Many blog posts are modern examples of vignettes, as they reveal a short, important scene in the writer’s life. Other forms of social media also encourage very short scenes, such as videos on Snapchat, Instagram, and Vine. Even media creators such as venerable news organizations feel the pressure to edit their videos down as much as possible to get to the very crux of the matter. Viral videos are often vignettes that are funny or dramatic and thus produce an emotional reaction in the viewer in very little time.

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**Significance of Vignette in Literature**

Vignette examples have become more common in literature over time. Whereas in the past there was a more strict adherence to plot structure, with every scene written in a linear way chronologically, modern and post-modern literature has experimented with different ways of putting a story together. Vignettes are especially popular in television and film, especially to show [flashback](http://www.literarydevices.com/flashback/) examples or concurrent scenes. In this multimedia era, literature continues to influence and be influenced by moving images and techniques in film. Examples of vignettes are especially common in post-modern theater.

**Examples of Vignette in Literature**

**Example #1**

Master Brunny Lynam ran across the road and put Father Conmee’s letter to father provincial into the mouth of the bright red letterbox, Father Conmee smiled and nodded and smiled and walked along Mountjoy square east.

Mr Denis J. Maginni, professor of dancing, &c., in silk hat, slate frockcoat with silk facings, white kerchief tie, tight lavender trousers, canary gloves and pointed patent boots, walking with grave deportment most respectfully took the curbstone as he passed lady Maxwell at the corner of Dignam’s court.

Was that not Mrs M’Guinness?

Mrs M’Guinness, stately, silverhaired, bowed to Father Conmee from the farther footpath along which she smiled. And Father Conmee smiled and saluted. How did she do?

(*Ulysses* by James Joyce)

In Episode 10 of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “The Wandering Rocks,” there are many interweaving episodes of citizens of Dublin walking its streets and meeting each other. Each small bit functions as an example of a vignette.

**Example #2**

Where do you live? she asked.

There, I said pointing up to the third floor.

You live there? There. I had to look to where she pointed—the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn’t fall out. You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing. There. I lived there. I nodded.

I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to. But this isn’t it. The house on Mango Street isn’t it. For the time being, Mama says. Temporary, says Papa. But I know how those things go.

(*The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros)

Sandra Cisneros is famous for her novel *The House on Mango Street*, which is written entirely of vignette examples. Every chapter presents a new vignette that adds on to the information and [characterization](http://www.literarydevices.com/characterization/) that the reader has already seen. Therefore, there is no plot in the traditional sense, but instead a new way of building momentum revolving around small, relatively unrelated scenes.

**Example #3**

We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.  
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,  
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.  
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush  
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.  
I always felt like crying. It wasn’t fair  
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not.

(“Blackberry Picking” by Seamus Heaney)

This is an example of a vignette in a poem. It was common for poets to choose one small scene to illustrate a broader and more abstract idea. In this case, Seamus Heaney writes a [stanza](http://www.literarydevices.com/stanza/) that is grounded in visceral details, and yet hints at a greater meaning about the ephemerality of all things.

**Example #4**

In the first week of April, before Lavender died, Lieutenant Jimmy Cross received a good-luck charm from Martha. It was a simple pebble, an ounce at most. Smooth to the touch, it was a milky white color with flecks of orange and violet, oval-shaped, like a miniature egg. In the accompanying letter, Martha wrote that she had found the pebble on the Jersey shoreline, precisely where the land touched water at high tide, where things came together but also separated. It was this separate-but-together quality, she wrote, that had inspired her to pick up the pebble and to carry it in her breast pocket for several days, where it seemed weightless, and then to send it through the mail, by air, as a token of her truest feelings for him. Lieutenant Cross found this romantic. But he wondered what her truest feelings were, exactly, and what she meant by separate-but-together.

(*The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien)

Tim O’Brien’s collection of short stories shares a name with the first story of the book, “The Things They Carried.” This story contains many concrete examples of things that men in Vietnam carried with them during the Vietnam War. The list of things that O’Brien presents is surrounded with short vignettes showing the importance of some of the more sentimental objects they carried.

**Example #5**

“Apparently wizards poke their noses in everywhere!” said Petunia, now as pale as she had been flushed. “Freak!” she spat at her sister, and she flounced off to where her parents stood. . .  
The scene dissolved again. Snape was hurrying along the corridor of the Hogwarts Express as it clattered through the countryside. He had already changed into his school robes, had perhaps taken the first opportunity to take off his dreadful Muggle clothes. At last he stopped, outside a compartment in which a group of rowdy boys were talking. Hunched in a corner seat beside the window was Lily, her face pressed against the windowpane.  
Snape slid open the compartment door and sat down opposite Lily. She glanced at him and then looked back out of the window. She had been crying.

(*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by J. K. Rowling)

One of the magical devices in J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series is called a “pensieve,” in which someone can look into another person’s memory. At the end of the final book, Harry is able to collect a series of memories from his arch-[nemesis](http://www.literarydevices.com/nemesis/), Professor Snape. These vignette examples last only a few moments, but construct a different narrative of Snape’s life than Harry had previously known.

http://www.literarydevices.com/vignette/