

Sample Answer
(for Question #1, on “significance”)

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son of York; . . .
Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths. . . .
Grim-visag'd War hath smooth'd his wrinkled front;
And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.

Explain 1) the context (who is talking? to whom? when? why-- to achieve what or accomplish what?)
Explain 2) the significance (how does the quote relate to a concept/issue explored in the play?)

(Notice that the "significance" section of the answer deals with how particular phrases-- connotations, metaphors, and dramatic irony-- relate to concepts explored in the play. Instead of dealing with the characters as if we want to understand them as our primary purpose-- as if they are real people worth understanding, think of them as pieces in a complex whole that is a communication (a work of art is a rich communication). Think of the play as a communication from Shakespeare on the complexity of human existence. That's what I mean by "explain the significance." You have to relate what you're saying to a question posed by the play.

How to answer #1): Richard speaks these lines as a soliloquy at the very beginning of the play. He shares with the audience his discontent and his future plans. He seems to want to demonstrate his “control”-- to the audience? to himself?

How to answer #2, the “significance” section)

A) State a question or issue the play explores:

R3 explores the possibilities and limits of self-fashioning and control, as well as the validity of Richard's definition of “strength.”

B) State what the quote contributes to an understanding or exploration of that issue:

The fact that Richard introduces the play establishes him as the “author” or stage manager of his world: he is the one who introduces and runs the plot, an indication of how he delights in control and in fictively creating himself. The play demonstrates his success in doing so, but ultimately the failure generated by that very success. This speech also introduces Richard's value system, the fact that he respects war as “natural” and has contempt for peace because it is weak. Again, the play to some extent supports such a definition, but also undermines it.

C) Support what you said in #2 with associations/connotations of particular words, relating them back to your statements in #2:

Portraying an adult male as “capering nimbly to the lascivious pleasing of a lute” implies that peace encourages triviality and even decadence— peace is described as indulging in silly and demeaning pleasures (“capering” is a word usually applied to children and when it is not, it implies a loss of dignity, as in “the professor capered around the room”). By personifying war as just smoothing his clothes and face to attend a party, he implies there really is no such thing as “peace,” because peace is just an interlude (war being the true reality). Furthermore, Richard equates peace-time activity with femininity and has contempt for both as “soft.” Saying that his brows are “bound” implies that peace (even victorious peace) is somehow constricting. The play explores the validity of his definition of strength and his ideas about control.