

A Model for Answering the Test Question: “Why is this quote significant?”

(Using Theseus’ speech in *MND*)

1) State a question or issue the play explores:

“MND explores the relation of the imagination to reality and challenges the idea that imagination and reality are opposites. The play challenges the idea that imagination just provides entertainment or decoration.

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

“This speech both presents the position that imagination is not reality and undercuts that same position. Theseus says in the speech that people with imaginations live in la-la land: they are subject to emotional excesses and they believe in things that do not exist (unaware of their own foolishness). His comparisons of lovers and poets to madmen and lunatics and the associations of many of the words he chooses support his point [Now cite examples of such words: *antique*, *seething brains*, ‘heads that glance back and forth from Heaven to Earth’ like the bobbling head of a clown]”

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

“*Seething*, for instance suggests that a person’s head has boiling water in it instead of brains, that the mind is completely uncontrolled and cannot pursue any logical train of reasoning. Things that seethe have no control; they are moved by outside forces, constantly in motion that moves toward no goal.” [take several more words or phrases and do the same thing].

Since the statement in #2 asserted a contrast, here is support for the contrast:

“However, connections in this speech to things that have occurred in the play that the audience knows, although Theseus does not, undercut his position, as do alternate associations of words he chooses (associations he does not intend). These connections and associations imply that the imagination not only reflects reality at a personal level, but that it also has a creative force that can change the world and make a new reality. For instance, Lysander has seen the beauty of Helen in a brow of Egypt-- Hermia is a brunette, and his choice has had ‘real-world’ repercussions. Also, we know that the “fairy toys” exist as much as Theseus does-- we’ve seen Oberon and Puck in action. The character Theseus, in fact, has its origin in ‘fable’ or myth, so Theseus undercuts his own reality. Also, “fables” do provide insights into reality, or we wouldn’t still be reading the Classics and this play. Shakespeare himself is one of the people Theseus dismisses as a lunatic, but he wrote Theseus into existence in this play, and we read the play as a perspective on “reality.” ‘Giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name’ is what God did in Genesis-- so that means a poet is godlike.

Although the word *seething* has negative connotations in this context, it also suggests high energy and incipient action (‘seething anger’), the ferment that produces new life, like the seething primordial mud. (In this sense, it almost has a ferocious quality, because one is not sure what will emerge, but not something trivial. I don’t know why I think of a sci-fi movie with seething mud and Yeats’ ‘Second Coming’ where something ‘slouches toward Bethlehem waiting to be born.’” [Take several more words and phrases and do the same thing.]