



The Seven Ages: A Comprehensive Study Guide

I. Overview of the Poem

"The Seven Ages" is a famous monologue delivered by the character Jaques in William Shakespeare's play *As You Like It*. The poem presents a cynical, yet insightful, view of human life, likening the world to a stage and all individuals to actors who play distinct roles throughout their lives. It details seven chronological stages, each with unique characteristics, from birth to death. The central theme revolves around the transient nature of human existence and the predictable progression of life.

II. Key Themes

- **The World as a Stage:** This is the central metaphor of the poem, emphasizing that life is a performance where individuals play various roles.
- **The Cycles of Life:** The poem highlights the inevitable progression from infancy to old age and death, demonstrating the natural life cycle.
- **Transience of Life and Reputation:** Shakespeare underscores that life and its achievements, including reputation, are fleeting and ultimately insignificant in the grand scheme.
- **Helplessness and Dependence:** The poem portrays the vulnerability of humans, especially in infancy and extreme old age, where they become dependent on others.
- **The Predictability of Human Experience:** Despite individual differences, the poem suggests a universal pattern to human life and its stages.

III. Summary of Each Stage

- **Infant: Characteristics:** Helpless, dependent, cries ("mewling"), vomits ("puking").
- **Imagery:** "Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms."
- **Whining Schoolboy: Characteristics:** Unwilling to go to school, slow, sulky, bright face in the morning.
- **Imagery:** "creeping like snail / Unwilling to school," "shining morning face."
- **Lover: Characteristics:** Emotional, theatrical, sighs deeply, writes sad poems to his beloved.

- **Imagery:** "Sighing like furnace," "woeful ballad Made to his mistress' eyebrow."
- **Soldier: Characteristics:** Full of strange oaths, fierce, quick to quarrel, protective of honour, seeks fleeting reputation.
- **Imagery:** "feared like a pard" (leopard), "Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth."
- **Justice (Judge): Characteristics:** Prosperous, well-fed, stern look, formal beard, full of wise sayings and modern examples, self-satisfied, impressive.
- **Imagery:** "fair round belly with good capon lined," "eyes severe and beard of formal cut," "Full of wise saws and modern instances."
- **Lean and Slippered Pantaloone (Old Man): Characteristics:** Thin, wears slippers, loose clothes, spectacles, pouch on side, youthful clothes too wide for shrunk legs, voice turns childishly high-pitched.
- **Imagery:** "lean and slippered pantaloone," "shrunk shank," "voice, Turning again toward childish treble, pipes And whistles in his sound."
- **Second Childishness and Mere Oblivion (Extreme Old Age/Death): Characteristics:** Extremely old, dependent, like a child again, loses senses (teeth, eyes, taste), forgets everything and is forgotten.
- **Imagery:** "second childishness and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

IV. Literary Devices

- **Metaphor:** "All the world's a stage"
- "All the men and women merely players"
- Life as a "strange eventful history"
- "bubble reputation"
- **Simile:** "creeping like snail" (schoolboy)
- "Sighing like furnace" (lover)
- "feared like a pard" (soldier)
- "Turning again toward childish treble" (old man's voice)
- **Alliteration:** e.g. "shining morning face" or "shrunk shank".
- **Repetition:** The word "sans" (without) in the final stage emphasizes complete loss.
- **Imagery:** Vivid descriptions that appeal to the senses, helping the reader visualise each stage (e.g., "fair round belly," "shrunk shank").

V. Character of Jaques (Implied)

Jaques, the speaker of these lines, is known for his melancholic and philosophical observations on life. His cynical outlook shapes the tone of the poem, presenting human existence as a predetermined series of roles rather than a path of free will.

VI. Connection to *As You Like It* (Implied)

The poem is part of a larger play, indicating its function as a philosophical reflection within a dramatic context. It serves to deepen the audience's understanding of human nature as perceived by one of the play's characters.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Acts:** In the context of the poem, refers to the different roles or parts a person plays throughout their life.
- **Bubble Reputation:** A metaphor for fame or honour that is fleeting and short-lived, much like the fragile existence of a soap bubble.
- **Cannon's Mouth:** Refers to the opening of a large gun or artillery piece, symbolising extreme danger or the front lines of battle.
- **Capon:** A castrated male chicken, often fattened for eating; in the poem, it signifies prosperity and being well-fed.
- **Exits and Entrances:** Metaphorical terms for death and birth, respectively, within the poem's analogy of life as a play.
- **Hose:** Tight-fitting leg coverings, stockings or breeches, worn in Shakespearean times.
- **Justice:** A judge or a person who administers justice; refers to the fifth stage of life where a man is seen as wise and authoritative.
- **Lean and Slippered Pantaloon:** Refers to an old man who has become thin and frail, wearing slippers. "Pantaloon" specifically denotes a foolish or decrepit old man in traditional Italian comedy.
- **Mewling:** Crying softly, like a cat; used to describe the helpless cries of an infant.
- **Oblivion:** The state of being unaware or unconscious of what is happening, or the state of being forgotten. In the poem, it signifies the final loss of memory and awareness in extreme old age.
- **Oaths:** Solemn promises, often made with great intensity; attributed to the soldier.
- **Pard:** An archaic term for a leopard; used as a simile to describe the soldier's fierce and bearded appearance.
- **Pouch:** A soft fold of loose skin that hangs down, often a result of illness or old age.
- **Puking:** Vomiting or being sick.
- **Sans:** A French word meaning 'without'; used repeatedly in the final stage to emphasize the complete loss of senses and faculties.

- **Satchel:** A small bag, often with a shoulder strap, used for carrying books or other items, typically associated with a schoolboy.
- **Saws:** Old sayings or proverbs, indicating wisdom or established truths.
- **Second Childishness:** A state of extreme old age where a person becomes as helpless and dependent as a child, losing their physical and mental faculties.
- **Shank:** The leg from the knee to the ankle. "Shrunk shank" refers to legs that have become thin and weak due to old age.
- **Sighing like furnace:** A simile describing the deep, exaggerated sighs of a lover, indicating intense emotional distress or passion.
- **Slipped:** Wearing slippers, often associated with indoor wear and comfort, but here implying the infirmity of old age.
- **Treble:** A high-pitched voice, similar to that of a child.
- **Whining:** Making a long, high-pitched cry or sound, often indicative of complaining or sadness, attributed to the schoolboy.
- **Woeful ballad:** A very sad song or poem, typically written by a lover to express his sorrow or devotion.

REFERENCE TO CONTEXT QUESTIONS

Read the given extracts and answer the questions that follow:

"Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms."

1. Which stage of life does this line describe?
2. What do the words "mewling and puking" suggest?
3. Who is mentioned as caring for the child?

Answers:

1. Infancy.
2. The helplessness and weakness of the infant.
3. The nurse.

*"And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school."*

1. To what creature is the boy compared?
2. Why is his face called "shining"?
3. Why does he go "unwillingly" to school?

Answers:

1. A snail.

2. It shows his freshness and innocence.
3. Because he dislikes leaving home and play.

*"Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow."*

1. What is the lover compared to?
2. What does he write about?
3. Which emotion does this extract show?

Answers:

1. A furnace.
2. His mistress' eyebrow.
3. Passionate and exaggerated love.

*"Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel."*

1. What animal is the soldier's beard compared to?
2. What is the soldier quick to do?
3. What does he mainly seek?

Answers:

1. A pard (leopard).
2. To quarrel suddenly.
3. Honour and reputation.

*"In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut."*

1. What does the "round belly" suggest?
2. How does the justice's beard look?
3. What quality does the justice show in this stage?

Answers:

1. Comfort and good living.
2. It is neatly trimmed (formal).
3. Wisdom and authority.

*"His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank."*

1. What does "shrunk shank" mean?
2. Why are his clothes too wide?
3. Which stage of life is described here?

Answers:

1. Thin, weak legs.
2. Because of old age and weight loss.
3. The pantaloons or old age.

"Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

1. What does the word "sans" mean?
2. Name two things man loses at this stage.
3. Why is this called "second childishness"?

Answers:

1. Without.
2. Teeth and eyes (also taste, speech, etc.).
3. Because man becomes helpless like a child again.

GENERAL QUESTIONS (1 MARK EACH)

1. What is the world compared to in the poem?
2. What do 'exits and entrances' refer to?
3. How many ages does Shakespeare describe?
4. In which play does this poem appear?

Answers:

1. A stage
2. Death and birth
3. Seven ages
4. As You Like It

Answer each of the following questions in 2-3 sentences.

- 1. According to Shakespeare, what is the world compared to, and what do men and women represent within this comparison?**

According to Shakespeare, the world is compared to a stage of a theatre. Within this comparison, all men and women are merely players who have their entrances (births) and exits (deaths).

- 2. Describe the key characteristic of the infant stage as presented in the poem.**

The key characteristic of the infant stage is utter helplessness and dependence. The infant is described as "mewling and puking in the nurse's arms," indicating an inability to care for itself.

3. How does the schoolboy demonstrate his unwillingness to go to school?

The schoolboy demonstrates his unwillingness to go to school by "creeping like snail." This simile highlights his slow, reluctant pace, contrasting with his "shining morning face."

4. What literary device is used to describe the lover's sighing, and what does it suggest about his emotions?

The literary device used to describe the lover's sighing is a simile: "Sighing like furnace." This suggests that his emotions are intense and profound, much like the deep, hot exhales of a furnace.

5. What kind of reputation does the soldier seek, and what does the phrase "bubble reputation" imply?

The soldier seeks "bubble reputation," which implies that the fame or honour he desires is short-lived and fragile. He is willing to risk his life "even in the cannon's mouth" for this fleeting glory.

6. What are two distinct features that describe the physical appearance and intellectual capacity of the "justice"?

The "justice" is described as having a "fair round belly with good capon lined," indicating prosperity and being well-fed. Intellectually, he is "Full of wise saws and modern instances," meaning he is full of wise sayings and contemporary examples.

7. Explain the meaning of "shrunk shank" in the description of the sixth stage of life.

"Shrunk shank" means that the man's legs have become weak and thin. This detail highlights the physical deterioration that occurs in the sixth stage of life, making his youthful clothing appear too large.

8. How does the voice of a man change in the sixth stage, and what does it begin to resemble?

In the sixth stage, the man's big manly voice turns "again toward childish treble." This means his voice becomes shrill and high-pitched, resembling that of a child, and pipes and whistles as he speaks.

9. What does "second childishness" signify in the final stage of life?

"Second childishness" in the final stage signifies that the extremely old man becomes as helpless and dependent as an infant. He loses his faculties and needs constant care, mirroring his initial state of life.

10. The poem uses the word "sans" repeatedly in the last line. What does this word mean, and what does its repetition emphasize?

The word "sans" means 'without'. Its repetition in the last line ("Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything") powerfully emphasizes the complete and utter loss of physical and mental faculties in extreme old age.

Essay Format Questions

Q1. Discuss how Shakespeare uses the extended metaphor of "All the world's a stage" to comment on the nature of human existence and the roles individuals play throughout their lives.

Shakespeare compares the world to a stage and human life to a play. He shows that people, like actors, come and go, each playing different roles during their lifetime. These roles, from infancy to old age, reflect the duties, struggles, and emotions of different life stages. This metaphor makes us see life as temporary, where everyone has a part to perform before leaving.

This idea makes us realise that life is not permanent and every person has a fixed time and role. Just like an actor cannot stay on stage forever, people also cannot hold on to one phase of life. Childhood, youth, and old age all pass, and each has its own duties. Shakespeare teaches us that life is like a drama where joy, struggle, and decline are all natural scenes in the play of existence.

Q2. Analyse the progression of physical and mental decline across the seven ages, particularly focusing on how Shakespeare portrays the transition from the vigour of youth to the helplessness of extreme old age.

In "The Seven Ages," Shakespeare carefully describes how human life moves from strength to weakness. The young years are filled with fire and passion, shown in the lover and the soldier, while the justice stage reflects maturity and wisdom. However, with time, both the body and the mind begin to decline. Old age brings forgetfulness, weakness, and helplessness, and finally a second childhood without strength or independence. Shakespeare shows this journey as a natural cycle, where vigour slowly fades away. His description reminds us that human life is short, and the shift from energy to helplessness must be accepted with patience and humility.

Q3. Compare and contrast the characteristics of the soldier and the justice, exploring how their pursuit of reputation and wisdom respectively reflect different values or priorities at distinct life stages.

The soldier and the justice represent two very different priorities in life. The soldier is young, fiery, and ambitious. He seeks honour, reputation, and bravery, even at the cost of danger. In contrast, the justice reflects a mature stage of life. He is calm, wise, and values fairness, balance, and knowledge. Shakespeare highlights this contrast to show how human priorities change with age. In youth, people chase fame and recognition, while in maturity they prefer wisdom and stability. Through these two stages, he explains how experiences shape human behaviour, proving that the same person plays different roles with different values at different times in life.

Q4. To what extent does "The Seven Ages" present a cynical or melancholic view of human life? Support your answer by referencing specific descriptions and the overall tone of the poem.

"The Seven Ages" often seems to present a melancholic view of life. While some stages like youth and justice are filled with energy and wisdom, Shakespeare's overall tone is serious and realistic. He shows how life begins with innocence, passes through passion and ambition, and finally ends in helplessness. The last stage, described as "second childishness,"

without teeth, eyes, or taste, gives a sad picture of human decline. Yet, this picture is also truthful, reminding us that no stage lasts forever. Happiness and strength are temporary, just like weakness and sorrow. Shakespeare's view may feel gloomy, but it reflects the reality of human existence.

Q5. Examine Shakespeare's use of imagery and similes in the poem to vividly portray each of the seven ages. Choose at least three stages and discuss how these literary devices enhance the reader's understanding of their unique characteristics.

Shakespeare uses imagery and similes to make each stage lively. Shakespeare makes each stage of life memorable through powerful imagery and similes. For example, the schoolboy is compared to a snail, dragging unwillingly to school, which shows his laziness and reluctance. The lover sighs like a furnace, showing the heat of passion. The soldier is "bearded like the pard," meaning fierce like a leopard, full of courage. These vivid comparisons help readers picture each stage clearly. By using such imagery, Shakespeare not only describes actions but also brings out the emotions of each stage, making the cycle of life more striking and relatable.

VALUE- ADDED QUESTIONS

Q1. What values can we learn from Shakespeare's description of the seven ages of man?

Answer:

Shakespeare's "Seven Ages of Man" teaches us that life is a journey with many phases, each having its own importance. Childhood is full of innocence, youth is filled with passion and ambition, maturity brings wisdom, and old age brings decline. The poem reminds us not to be proud of one stage, because nothing lasts forever. We should make the best use of every age and accept the changes that come with time. It also shows the value of patience, humility, and respect for the old, who were once energetic like the young. Above all, the poem teaches us that life is temporary, so we must live meaningfully, contribute positively, and treat every stage as part of a larger play.

Q2. How does Shakespeare's description of life in "The Seven Ages of Man" encourage us to live wisely?

Answer:

Shakespeare compares life to a play where each person has roles to perform. This image makes us realise that every stage of life is brief and will soon pass. The energetic lover becomes a calm justice, and the strong soldier turns into a weak old man. By showing this cycle, Shakespeare reminds us not to waste time on pride or anger but to use each stage wisely. In youth, we should learn and grow, and in maturity, we should act with fairness and responsibility. Old age must be respected as part of the natural process. The poem teaches us to live with awareness, to be kind, and to use every phase to make life more purposeful and valuable.

Q3. “Life is like a drama, and each person has a role to play.” Explain this idea with reference to the poem.

Answer:

In “The Seven Ages of Man,” Shakespeare says, “All the world’s a stage,” meaning that life itself is like a drama. People enter the world as infants and exit after completing their parts. Just like actors change costumes, people also change roles—first as children, then students, lovers, soldiers, and wise judges. Finally, old age makes them helpless again, like in the beginning. This comparison shows that nothing in life is permanent. Every stage is important but temporary. The value lies in performing each role with sincerity. If we act responsibly in our stage of life, we add meaning to the play. Shakespeare’s idea encourages us to live truthfully and fulfil our duties before leaving the stage of life.