

# THE SEVEN AGES OF MAN

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

**Directions:** Read through this famous poem twice. On your first time through the text, make sure you understand the points the writer is trying to make. On the second pass through the text, mark phrases that you like, parts that you disagree with, and anything that leaves you confused.

After everyone is done quietly reading and marking his/her own paper, we'll come back together as a class to discuss the poem and its meaning. Be prepared to offer at least two comments to our group annotation of the poem.

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.  
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,<sup>1</sup>  
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation  
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,<sup>2</sup>  
In fair round belly with good capon<sup>3</sup> lined,  
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws<sup>4</sup> and modern instances;  
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons<sup>5</sup>,  
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes  
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans<sup>6</sup> teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

1. leopard
2. judge
3. fattened chicken
4. old sayings
5. silly old man
6. without

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All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,

FAMOUS lines. I've heard these lines before.

His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,  
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.

And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail

my little brother is like this - always whining

Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad

In this part, Shakespeare seems to be making fun of lovesick poets. This is funny because so many of his sonnets do this. Is he making fun of himself?

Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,<sup>1</sup>

3 similes

Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
Seeking the bubble reputation

alliteration

Wait - Is he saying that soldiers die for foolish reasons? All soldiers?

Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,<sup>2</sup>  
In fair round belly with good capon<sup>3</sup> lined,

With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws<sup>4</sup> and modern instances;

this is just like my English teacher. She must be in the 5th age.

These are the only two lines that rhyme. No noticable rhyme scheme. Most, but not all, lines are 10 syllables. Not a sonnet.

And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloons<sup>5</sup>,

With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,  
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide

more alliteration

For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,  
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes

And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,

Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
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This completes the circle.

- |                     |
|---------------------|
| 1. leopard          |
| 2. judge            |
| 3. fattened chicken |
| 4. old sayings      |
| 5. silly old man    |
| 6. without          |

Curious? foreign? bizarre?  
Interestingly, he used "strange" when describing the soldier, too  
Effective use of repetition.

Tone isn't sad, just matter-of-fact. This is what happens. Period.

## 7 Questions About The Seven Ages of Man

1. Look back over the poem and write down the seven roles that Shakespeare says each of us will play in life. All you need to write for this question is a list of the seven ages/acts of a man's life.

2. What simile does Shakespeare use to describe the schoolboy? Does this comparison still fit children today? Does it fit you?

3. When describing the soldier, Shakespeare describes reputation as a "bubble." What's his message to the reader here?

4. According to the poem, what's the most noticeable way that elderly people begin to resemble small children? Write the line from the poem that supports your answer.

5. Some people would argue that there are not just seven ages that we pass through in our lives, but that we also play several roles within each day, altering ourselves depending on

our company. What roles do you find yourself playing? When are you truly your full self?

6. Shakespeare most likely wrote these lines in 1599. Do his seven ages still apply to people today? If so, what does this show us about humanity? If not, what new or different stages do you think would better reflect the life path of people today?

7. This poem, taken from the play *As You Like It*, is an example of an extended metaphor. Shakespeare takes the idea of life being a stage and people being actors on that stage (the metaphor) and extends the comparison throughout the poem. In the "Seven Wheels of Mankind" illustration (below), the artist makes a similar visual metaphor about age and our modes of travel. Make up your own metaphor about the cycle of life. Your metaphor can be a straight-forward paragraph explanation, a poem, or even a drawing. Use your imagination as you create your comparison.



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