

*Pathway Advanced: Elizabethan Theatre – William Shakespeare, As You Like It* (ca. 1599/1600): “A View on Life”

## Material

*The situation: This soliloquy by Jaques, a character in the play, is spoken in the Forest of Arden where a number of noble people have taken refuge after their expulsion<sup>1</sup> from court. Moved by their fate (and his own), Jaques reflects about the meaning of life.*

Jaques: All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players.  
They have their exits and the entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
5 His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,  
Mewling<sup>2</sup> and puking<sup>3</sup> in the nurse's arms.  
Then, the whining<sup>4</sup> school-boy with his satchel<sup>5</sup>  
And shining morning face, creeping like snail<sup>6</sup>  
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,  
10 Sighing like furnace<sup>7</sup>, with a woeful ballad  
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,  
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard<sup>8</sup>,  
Jealous in honour, sudden, and quick in quarrel<sup>9</sup>,  
Seeking the bubble<sup>10</sup> reputation  
15 Even in the cannon's mouth. And then, the justice,  
In fair rounded belly<sup>11</sup>, with good capon<sup>12</sup> lin'd<sup>13</sup>,  
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,  
Full of wise saws<sup>14</sup>, and modern instances<sup>15</sup>,  
And so he plays his parts. The sixth age shifts  
20 Into the lean<sup>16</sup> and slipper'd<sup>17</sup> pantaloen,  
With spectacles on nose, and pouch<sup>18</sup> on side,  
His youthful hose<sup>19</sup> well sav'd, a world too wide  
For his shrunk shank<sup>20</sup>, and his big manly voice,  
Turning towards childish treble, pipes  
25 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion<sup>21</sup>,  
Sans<sup>22</sup> teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

*As You Like It*, Act 2.7.139-166,

From: *The Arden Shakespeare: Complete Works*, eds. Richard Proudfoot / Ann Thompson / David Scott Kastan. London: Thomson Learning 2000, p. 173. 210 words

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<sup>1</sup> expulsion = *Vertreibung*

<sup>2</sup> mewl = cry noisily

<sup>3</sup> puke = to be sick, vomit

<sup>4</sup> whine = mewl

<sup>5</sup> satchel = school bag

<sup>6</sup> snail = *Schnecke*

<sup>7</sup> furnace = oven

<sup>8</sup> pard = [*short for:*] leopard

<sup>9</sup> quarrel = disagreement, fight

<sup>10</sup> bubble = *Seifenblase*

<sup>11</sup> belly = tummy

<sup>12</sup> capon = chicken

<sup>13</sup> lin[e]d = shaped

<sup>14</sup> saws = saying, slogans

<sup>15</sup> instance = example

<sup>16</sup> lean = thin, slim

<sup>17</sup> slipper[e]d = wearing slippers

<sup>18</sup> pouch = bag

<sup>19</sup> hose = breeches, trousers

<sup>20</sup> shrunk shank = reduced body

<sup>21</sup> oblivion = forgetfulness, dementia

<sup>22</sup> sans = incomplete, without

## Tasks

### Comprehension

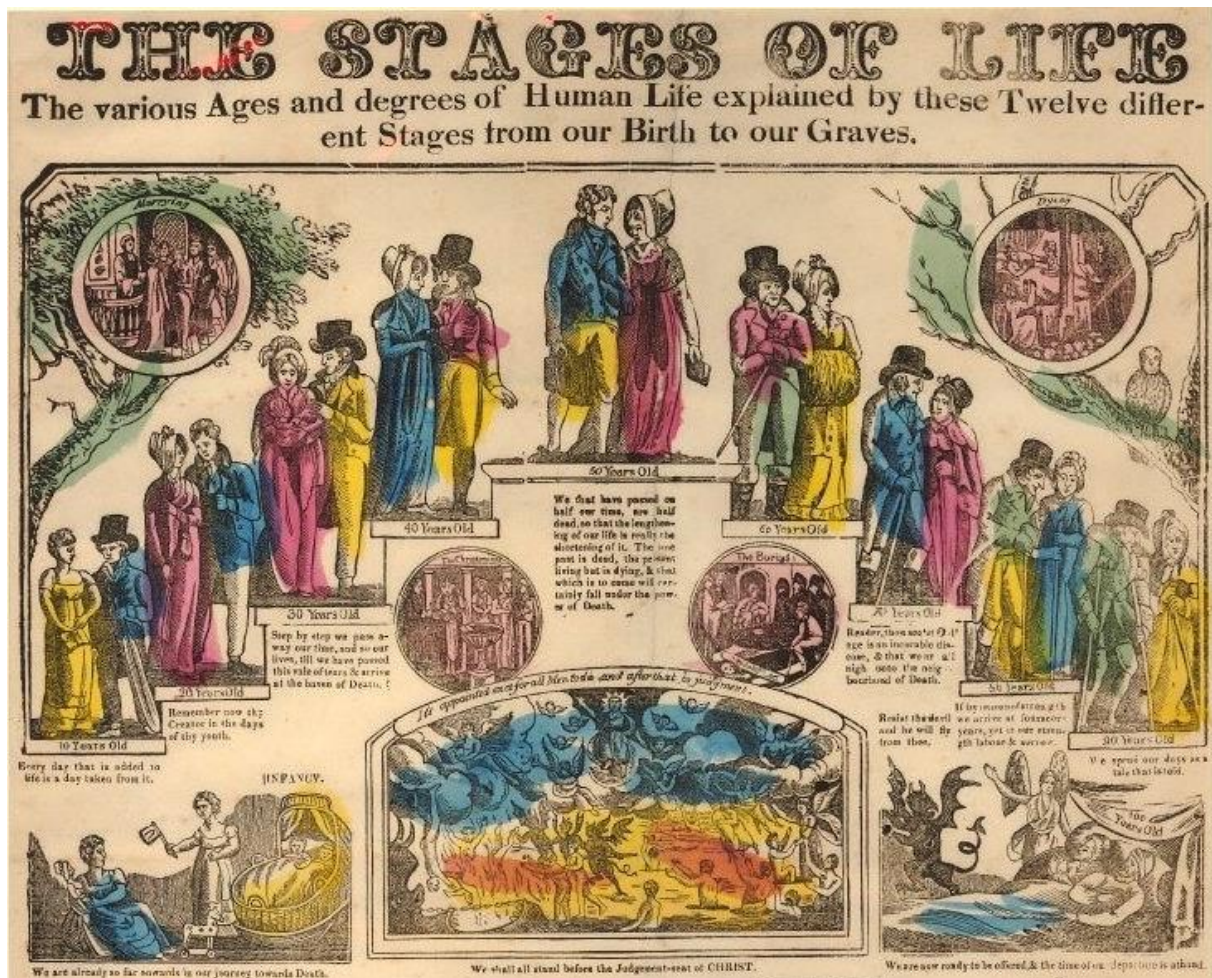
1. Sum up the passage in your own words.

### Analysis

2. Analyse the language and style of the soliloquy, including its tone. Give quotes from the text to underline your points.

### Evaluation

3. \*Write a comment on Jaques' view on Renaissance man's life course: Is it, in your opinion, a valid description of a life course? Give reasons for your statement.
4. \*Compare Jaques' soliloquy with the illustration of "The Stages of Life" by John Pitt (1811). Point out the most important similarities and differences in the respective medium and the representation of developmental stages, gender/class foci and attitudes towards life and death.



John Pitt, "The various ages and degrees of human life explained by these twelve different stages", London 1811  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/26/The\\_various\\_ages\\_1811\\_recto.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/26/The_various_ages_1811_recto.jpg)

- 4 assignments:  
2 Must-do (1, 2)  
2 Can-do (3, 4)

Minimum: 3 assignments

## Solutions

### *Introductory remark:*

*This worksheet deals with the analogy of theatre and life, a key image in Renaissance literature. It is closely related to, and prepares, the worksheet analysing and discussing Edmund Spencer's sonnet "Of this world's theatre..."*

*Fokus Literaturvermittlung: pp. 267-268*

### **Task 1: Summary**

In his soliloquy, Jaques muses about the meaning of life. He sees life as a succession of parts an actor plays in the theatre performance. According to this description, men pass through the stages of childhood to adolescence and early adulthood. These phases are followed by maturity, which see the adult in his profession and in his well-situated retirement, before he finally proceeds into dementia.

### **Task 2: Analysis of language and style**

The soliloquy, comprising 28 lines, is presented in plain style considering the fact that thinking about life as such may be a very philosophical activity. Jaques, however, dresses his ideas into a rather simple image, which refers to a popular cultural institution: the theatre. This makes his ideas easily understood by anyone who is not a well-educated philosopher, and he begins his soliloquy with an analogy between world as stage, people as actors, and life as a play (l. 1-5). In the course of his soliloquy, he does not get lost in details, but reminds himself and the audience of the fact that he continues his analogy, briefly interrupting himself by a phrase as "And so he plays his parts" (l. 19) and in his concluding remarks on "this strange eventful history" (l. 26).

While these phrases structure the contents of Jaques' analogy, the rest of the soliloquy characterizes the seven individual stages: All the descriptions of the respective life phase use only very few words, usually synecdoches and metonymies, representing characteristic actions or objects for each. The pre-school "infant" is limited to elementary natural, bodily activities ("mewling and puking", l. 6), whereas the schoolboy is sketched as little motivated to learn, therefore "whining" (l. 7) and "creeping like a snail" (l. 9) towards school. The adolescent lover, in contrast, is presented as hot and impatient as a furnace (l. 10), but also singing a "woeful ballad [about] his mistress' eyebrow" (l. 10/11). Finally, Jaques outlines the young soldier, who is easily provoked, quarrelsome, and seeks reputation and thus promotion. These stages of the first half in life, according to Jaques' representation, are all reduced to the bare minimum in order to become recognizable, and present these stages in an ironic light, thus creating a comic effect: This is particularly obvious in the descriptions of the poet-lover and the soldier; the first being made ridiculous by the inappropriate object of his ballad (the "mistress' eyebrow") where a sonnet might be a better choice than a lengthy narrative poem; whilst the second is shown as an ambitious, quarrelsome fighter whose only interest is in insubstantial values, such as glory, "honour" and "reputation" (l. 13/14).

The subsequent stage shows the man in his 'best years', as a judge, summarizing the material achievements of a good career and focusing on his well-situated life-style (symbolized in the image of a "fair rounded belly", l. 16) which allows such luxuries as a well-laid table ("good capon", l. 16), as well as alluding to the respect he receives from his outward appearance (by means of *pars pro toto* in phrases such as "eyes severe and beard of formal cut", l. 17) and professional expertise ("wise saws and modern instances", l. 18). It is with retirement that this man slowly recedes back to ridicule, dressed in lounge-wear ("pantaloon") with clothes that no longer fit (a "youthful hose well saved, a world too wide", l. 22). Here, the first signs of mortality and disease show up, beginning with a weakening of his sight ("spectacles on nose", l. 21), his shrinking in size ("shrunk shank", l. 23), and eventually a formerly "big manly voice" (l. 23) that develops a high pitch ("childish treble", l. 24) and indicates increasing problems to catch breath ("pipes / And whistles in his sound", l. 24/25). The final part can no longer be represented as period in active life, but only as a state of affairs that 'happens' to the old person who enters a phase of "second childhood and oblivion" (l. 27), bereft of all the senses and any participation in life ("sans everything", l. 28).

Apart from this irony, created by the descriptions in reductionist images, it is noteworthy that Jaques attributes different verb-forms to the individual stages: Those associated with childhood and adolescence, that is, the first parts, are characterized by various progressive verb forms ("mewling and puking", "whining", "creeping", "sighing", "seeking"), expressing a certain sense of dynamics. In contrast, the judge and later the pensioner has achieved some position in life, indicated by physical items indicating wealth and status in the grammatical form of prepositional phrases ("into", l. 15; "with...", ll. 16, 17, 21). The closer "man" advances death (which, according to Jaques, does not appear to belong to life and therefore is not represented in this life course), the more passive he becomes, and processes beyond his power begin to take effect on his body (including the voice "turning" into a high pitch).

### Task 3/4

Please note: Tasks 3 and 4 are similar in design; students' more subjective comments in task 3 may mention some of the more analytically founded observations in task 4.

Category	Text	Picture
<b>Medium</b>	Williams Shakespeare's play: Jaques' reflexion on life (soliloquy)	John Pitt's broadsheet public medium explicit reader address
<b>Developmental stages</b>	<i>seven "acts"</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Infant</li> <li>- Schoolboy</li> <li>- Lover</li> <li>- Soldier</li> <li>- Justice</li> <li>- Pensioner</li> <li>- Demented individual</li> </ul>	<i>decades</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Infancy/Playchildren below 10 yrs</li> <li>- Schoolchildren 10 yrs</li> <li>- Adolescents 20 yrs</li> <li>- Parents 30 yrs</li> <li>- Married 40 yrs</li> <li>- Established 50 yrs</li> <li>- Aging 60 yrs</li> <li>- Advanced age 70 yrs</li> <li>- Old age 80 yrs</li> <li>- Ancient Couple 90 yrs</li> <li>- Dying Couple 100 yrs</li> </ul>
<b>Gender focus</b>	<i>exclusive</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- men rather than women (mentioned only in I. 2)</li> </ul>	<i>inclusive</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- men and women shown as couples</li> </ul>
<b>Class focus</b>	well-situated, 'average man', not on peasants or nobility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- school education</li> <li>- military service</li> <li>- "civil servant"</li> <li>- "pensioner"</li> </ul> focus on individual social interaction is limited to only three out of seven "acts" (lover, soldier, justice)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- middle class couple, without specifications of any profession</li> <li>- men and women unified from birth to death by shared rites:</li> <li>- highlighted in the round, embedded vignettes: baptism, marriage, dying, burial</li> </ul>
<b>Attitudes</b>	<i>physical focus</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- few attributes for each "act" (developmental stage), which reduce a person to a caricature, but which may stress significant (negative) characteristics of a person in the respective age</li> <li>- nihilistic attitude, although death is not included in the phases: no hope for redemption</li> </ul>	<i>physical focus</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- old age as "incurable disease"</li> <li>- immanence of death in life, its inevitability</li> <li>- morbidity, vanity in life</li> </ul> <i>religious focus</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- death as ever-present power which gains momentum after reaching the age of 50 years (= "we ... are half dead")</li> <li>- life as a "vale of tears", but with hope for a better afterlife:</li> <li>- purgatory and redemption</li> </ul>