

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

(William Shakespeare)

About the Poet

William Shakespeare is considered the greatest among English writers. He occupies a proud place in the literature of all times. Though he used his pen in the Elizabethan period, his poetry and plays have appeared for all ages. He has become immortal due to his incomparable poetry and insight into human nature. Particularly, he is known for his plays. He has put beautiful lines of poetry into the mouth of his dramatic characters. Another source of his poetry is his sonnets numbering about 154. He wrote all these sonnets at different occasions. His theme in this poem has a universal ring. Universality is in fact, the very core of Shakespeare's poetry. This is the reason that he has been read lovingly through out all the ages.

Introduction to the Poem

"All the World's A Stage" is an extract from Shakespeare's well known and very famous play "As You like It". There is a character who is rather cynic in life gives his conception of life. According to him, life is like a drama. As a drama is divided into seven acts, similarly, life is divided into seven stages. As a man plays many roles in his life time, so he has to perform different parts. These stages are that of infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, middle age and old age and extreme old age. Thus the present poem is not a poem as such. It is only dramatic speech in a comedy.

Summary

According to Shakespeare, the world is like a stage and all men and women are like actors and actresses respectively. Each one comes to play his or her role. He makes his entrance on the stage and after playing his role, he makes exit. His entrance is his birth and his exit is his death. A man plays many parts in his life. In each act of drama, he has a different role to play. They are in all seven acts.

The first part of his life is that of an infant crying and vomiting his nurse's arms. This is a period of complete dependence on mother or nurse. At the second stage, he becomes a school boy prepared in the morning for his school. Fresh and bright faced, school bag whining on his shoulder, he walks unwillingly to go to the school. Boyhood is followed by youth, which is the third stage of life. He, then becomes lover heaving deep sighs and singing a sad love lyric composed in praise of his beloved's eye-brow. At the fourth stage, he is a soldier having a shabby beard and a ferocious out look. He becomes very sensitive about his honour and ready to pick up quarrel. He is always ready to do a dangerous and risky work for the sake of fame in life. After that the fifth stage of life comes. He becomes a middle aged man. He becomes a magistrate with a big belly stem. He has beard of formal cut. He is

experienced and well-read. His mind is full of many wise quotations. In this way, he plays his roles.

When old age comes, his teeth are declined. He becomes lean and thin. His clothes become loose. He begins to wear spectacles slipping to the nose and his breaches look very loose for his thin and lean legs. His voice turns to the high pitched voice of a child. Then comes the seventh stage of life. So the last scene of drama is sad one. This closes the eventful history of life. This is called the conclusion of the drama of life. This is the period of extreme old age which is a second childishness. It is a time when he is forgetful. He becomes toothless and all his senses turn weak. He is extremely weak in an Old age depending upon others.

3. Describe the fifth age of man in your own words.

Ans. At this stage of life which is a fifth stage, man is old and experienced enough to pass judgement on the different aspect of life. He acquires much knowledge and wisdom. So he is a magistrate or judge. He can easily distinguish between the good and the evil. He fairly knows what should be done and what should not be done. He has grown fair round belly. He possesses stern appearance. His eyes are grave. His beard is of formal cut. He is well read. He cites many sayings and illustrations. He is mentally very sound. His mind is stocked with many wise quotations and examples from modern life. In this manner he plays the role of a magistrate who has acquired the clever sense of judgement.

4. Why does the poet William Shakespeare say that all the world is a stage ? (2007 JAC, Sc. & Com.)

Ans. In Jacques's famous speech in "As You Like It" the stress is on the pretentiousness of man's life. There is little genuineness in what man does. His life is all play-acting. This idea is very well expressed by the metaphor of the stage of the theatre. The world is compared to a stage. Men and women are compared to actors and actresses. Actors and actresses come on the stage through an entrance and go out after playing the roles through an exit. Similarly men and women come on to the stage through their birth (entrance) and go out of it through their death (exit). Unlike real actors of dramas men and women play several roles in their lives. In Jacques's opinion each person plays seven different roles in course of the life-span. Every man's life is a part of the vast drama of existence. ✓

5. What are the first two stages of man's life ? How are they different from other stages ?

Ans. According to Jacques a man performs seven different roles in his terrestrial life. The first stage is that of a helpless baby. The second is that of a school-going boy. In these two stages man, though helpless, is unaffected by the infection of the world. He is not part of the sinful pretentious world. He tries to keep aloof from the play-acting of the world. In later stages, however, he has become part and parcel of the pretentious world and so has contracted diseases like pride, jealousy, egotism and thirst for fulfilment. Thus he becomes showy and pretentious through and through. ✓

Sect IV
Q. 2. (Q.)
✓

How does man play the role of a lover ?

Or

What does Jacques think of the lover ?

Ans. In the third stage of his life man appears as a lover. He has become quite self-conscious by now. His ego has been inflated. He thinks he is the best of the lot. Thus he thinks he is destined to fulfilment in love. But he finds that his lady-love does not require his love. He goes on sighing and composing sad songs to please his mistress. But all in vain. A pretentious person can have no access to real love. ✓

7. (i) Which is the fourth stage of man's life ?

(ii) Which stage of man's life is most severely indicated and why ?

(iii) Seeking the bubble reputation

Even in the cannon's mouth

About whom has this been said and why ?

Ans. From the third stage onwards man tries to dominate the world. He thinks he is the best of the lot and so fit for any and every achievement. But in Jacques's view man is basically a flawed creature and is not capable of real achievements. As a philosopher Jacques is fed up with soldiers, so he indicts the fourth stage (the stage of a soldier) the most. By his dress and demeanour man appears disgusting in the role of a soldier. He cuts his beard in such a fashion as looks like a leopard. He is full of oaths for achieving great victories and there by earn honour and fame. He is very touchy about his importance. He recklessly quarrels and fights with others. He tries to achieve victory even in cannon's mouth. But this is all play-acting. In fact he cannot acquire fame that at best is as momentary as water bubbles.

8. 'In fair round belly, with good capon lin'd'. About which stage of man's life has this been said and why ?

Or

What picture of the Judge do you find in Jacques account.

Ans. In the fifth stage man plays the role of a judge. This line refers to this very stage. In this stage man's hypocrisy and pretentiousness are the most obvious. Outwardly he shows that he is very wise and just. His mouth is full of maxims and proverbs. But his claim to justice and wisdom is all play-acting. He is more inclined to serve his physical and social needs than to serve the cause of justice, truth and wisdom. The cocks lined at his door is a hint at the corruption of judges and magistrates of Shakespeare's age. So by his severe look and formal dress and beard-cut he can not deceive people. This judge has not only the feet of clay but is also an ordinary deluded person trying to prove his wisdom by common-place statements and examples which are untenable.

Long Questions

1. Show your acquaintance with 'All the World's a Stage'.

Or

Show that you have read and appreciated the poem 'All the World's a Stage'.

Or

Give a brief critical appreciation of 'All the World's a Stage'.

(2006 JAC, Arts)

Ans. All the World's a Stage is One of the most famous poems in English. It is an extract from Shakespeare's great comedy, "As You Like It". It comes in the VIIth scene of Act II of the play. It comes as a significant speech delivered by the philosopher Jacques in the Forest of Arden where the banished Duke of France is living in company of his faithful followers. The speech is on the seven stages of man's terrestrial existence. The dark aspects of man's life like jealousy, enmity, pride, selfishness and lust for power are in the background of this golden world of the Forest of Arden. Jacques himself is a pessimist. Hence his speech on seven ages of man pictures not the whole human life but only a few fragments of it that are very appealing to Jacques to be ours. But there is no denying the validity of his exploration. Human conditions are such as our cherished values remain only slogans. Love, friendship, loyalty and such other values rarely get fulfilment. Only in the Golden world our deepest idealisms get fulfilment. The real world is all show and play-acting.

The key-note of the poem is thus very pretentiousness of human existence. Men are called upon to work as soldiers, lovers, justices, rulers, friends and so on. But they fail to be real in any action. Mostly they are not soldiers or judges but the players of these roles. There is no escape from it. In the first two stages (of helpless baby and school-going boy) man is as he is. Thus he hates to be involved in the ways of the world. And shining morning face, creeping like snail unwillingly to school. But from the third stage in the role of a lover man becomes part of this pretentious world. He yearns for fulfilment in love which he cannot find. As a soldier, he denatures himself. He becomes as fierce as leopards. He seeks victories, fame and reputation. He is very touchy about his importance. He thinks he is the best of the lot. He seeks fame even in the cannon's mouth. But how can real honour and fame come to a crippled play-actor. In the world as it is there can only be 'bubble reputation'. In the fifth stage in the role of a judge his pretentiousness is supremely exposed. He talks of wisdom, justice and truth. For this he makes himself different from the common people. He is full of formality. Even his looks are made up. So is the cut of his beard. His mouth is full of maxims, proverbs and sayings. But in reality far from acting in the interest of truth, justice and wisdom, he acts in the interest, of his physical and social needs. The cocks lined at his door steps show him in his true colours.

Man is subject to Adam's curse. Goodness always deludes him. The greatest truth about man is his mortality. In the sixth stage he gets physically and mentally weakened. The dress and behaviour of the young age do not fit him. His senses give way. He becomes ridiculous like the buffoons of the Italian operas. His manly voice begins to tremble. And in the last stage he becomes very much a

bare forked animal'. All pretensions of civilization can not save him from this lot.

Thus ends "this strange eventful history. 'Tis second childishness, and mere oblivion, Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything. The blank verse of this poem is a very powerful vehicles for setting forth this profound vision of life. The verse glows and glitters with beautiful and apt metaphors and similes. The very sound and rhythm of the verse add to its effects. The words do not just express truths. They rather enact them. Only greatest of poets like Shakespeare has this magic power.

2. Is man's life a mere play-acting and a mere oblivion ? Would you agree with this view of All the World's a Stage ?

Ans. Life can be seen from different angles. But it can also be seen from great heights and from great depths. Shakespeare does the same in "All the World's a Stage". For this he uses distancing device. It is not Shakespeare but a character of his "As You Like It", Jacques who sees man from that angle. And judged by that high standard life is bound to appear a mere play-acting. Has not our own philosopher Adi Shankaracharya said 'Ned Neti' (not this, not this).

This view, however, is not a cut and dry message. It is only one of the so many segments of complex human life. It is only one way of looking at life. There are several other ways that we find in "As You Like It" itself. A great artist like Shakespeare gives different facts of reality seen from different angles. The aim is to give a vision of life in its totality. A verse speech can not be expected to express life in its totality. Jacques's views are significant as far as they go. But they are not the only realities about life. Jacques's own views give hint to other views. Great poetry lives by its suggestiveness. If we note the suggestive overtones of the poem we would not think it as top-sided as we normally do.

Man has always fallen short of the ideals set about him and his capability. Who can deny man's mortality and his flawed nature ? So seen from a great height human life is bound to appear as it appears to Jacques. When the poem points at man's flaws there is also implicit the point there that the flaws can be removed to prove Jacques wrong. In the play this is what happens. There are answers to all the questions raised by Jacques. But still we can't reject Jacques views. It is only in the ideal make-believe world that man, his acting and his institution are perfect. In the real world Jacques have always been having the last laugh.