

## 9. All the World's a Stage

*William Shakespeare*

### About the poet

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), the bard of Avon, commands world-wide respect and appreciation, and is esteemed as the poet of the world. His plays have been translated into several languages and performed even in the remotest corners of the world. Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small town around a hundred miles away from London, and situated on the River Avon. William was the third child of John Shakespeare, a leather merchant, and Mary Arden. By 1592, Shakespeare had begun his career as an actor and playwright in London. In 1594, Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's, the most popular of the theatre companies in those times. Shakespeare wrote about thirty-seven plays. These are usually divided into four categories—histories, comedies, tragedies and romances. Some of his most famous plays are *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's poetic works include his 154 sonnets and his long poems, *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594).

### About the poem

The following poem is a monologue, an extract from Act II Scene vii of the play *As You Like It*. The speech, spoken by the character Jaques, compares the world to a stage and all men and women to actors. Although such an analogy has been made by several writers before Shakespeare, the passage below is perhaps the most well-known instance. Shakespeare uses striking imagery and figures of speech to develop the central metaphor of the passage: life is compared to a play in seven acts. The speech traces a person's life, from infancy through youth to old age, giving vivid descriptions of the many stages of life.



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.  
 Then the **whining** schoolboy, 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**,  
 Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,  
 Seeking the bubble reputation  
 Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the **justice**,  
 In fair round belly with good **capon** lined,  
 With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,  
 Full of **wise saws** and modern instances;  
 And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts  
 Into the lean and slippered **pantaloon**,  
 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 teeth, **sans** eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

## Glossary

*mewling*: soft, crying noises

*puking*: vomiting

*whining*: complaining

*satchel*: schoolbag

*furnace*: a closed place where something is heated at very high temperature

*woeful*: sad

*ballad*: a slow song about love; a poem that tells a story

*pard*: leopard

*justice*: judge

*capon*: a castrated rooster, a delicacy

*wise saws*: clichés or well-known proverbs

*pantaloon*: a person everyone makes fun of (from Pantalone)

*breech*: tightly fitting pants/trousers

*shank*: the portion of the leg between the knee and ankle

*sans*: (French) without

## Comprehension

### 1. Answer the following questions in a sentence or two each.

- What are the seven ages referred to in the poem?
- Why is the school boy referred to as 'creeping like snail'?
- Which stage in a man's life is referred to as 'second childishness'?
- Who is described as 'Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth'?

### 2. Answer the following questions in about 30 to 40 words each.

- What do people do when they are at the stage of youth?
- What happens in the last stage of life?
- Why does the poet use the analogy of a soldier to describe the fourth stage of life?
- Which stage is described using the image of a 'justice'? Why?
- What happens in the sixth stage of a man's life, according to the poet?

### 3. Answer the following questions in about 150 words each.

- In just a few lines the poet conveys the gist of life. Do you agree? Use examples from the text to explain.
- The poet takes the most ordinary traits and transforms them into something philosophical. Explain using examples from the poem.
- Comment on the poet's description of each age. Are the images used appropriate?
- What are the ways in which the soldier and the judge are depicted? Comment on the comparisons the poet makes.

## 10. La Belle Dame sans Merci

*John Keats*

### **About the poet**

John Keats (1795–1821), an apothecary's apprentice, abandoned his medical profession to become a poet of beauty and verbal felicity. His imagery is colourful and sensuous and his word paintings are remarkable. Influenced by Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, Keats's poetry blends the Romantic with the philosophical. Keats's poems were panned by critics during his lifetime, but his reputation as a poet grew steadily after his death with the increasing popularity of Romanticism. He is now seen as a key figure of the Romantic Movement in English literature. His works have greatly influenced later writers, and his letters and poems are still very popular today and studied in detail by students of literature. Keats is well-known for his famous odes such as 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode to a Nightingale' and 'To Autumn', and his longer poems such as 'Lamia' and 'The Eve of St Agnes'.

### **About the poem**

'La Belle Dame sans Merci' (1918) was based on a French song and is written in the form of a ballad. Despite the beguiling simplicity of its surface narrative, the poem is open to many interpretations. There is a lot of mystery and enigma in the portrayal of the story. The knight, who is found on top of the hillside, has a story to tell. The story is of how he was trapped by a wicked maiden who took him to her arbour and lulled him to sleep. She is aptly called 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' as she seems to be one without mercy. And when he wakes up from his sleep, he finds himself all alone on the hillside. That is why he is found 'alone and palely loitering'. There is a lot left to the reader's imagination

to piece together, but the overall impression is that the maiden without mercy had influenced the knight in some way either before or during his slumber. The poem is said to be a record of Keats's experience of love. It conveys a note of betrayal. The loss of freedom that goes along with love is clearly hinted at.



'O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
 Alone and palely **loitering**?  
 The **sedge** has wither'd from the lake,  
 And no birds sing.

'O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,  
 So haggard and so **woe-begone**?  
 The squirrel's granary is full,  
 And the harvest's done.

'I see a **lily on thy brow**  
 With anguish moist and fever dew,  
 And on thy cheeks a fading **rose**  
 Fast withereth too!

'I met a lady in the **meads**,  
 Full beautiful—a faery's child,  
 Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
 And her eyes were wild.

'I made a garland for her head,  
 And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;  
 She look'd at me as she did love,  
 And made sweet moan.

'I set her on my pacing steed,  
 And nothing else saw all day long,  
 For sidelong would she bend, and sing  
 A faery's song.

'She found me roots of **relish** sweet,  
 And honey wild and manna-dew,  
 And sure in language strange she said—  
 "I love thee true."

'She took me to her **elfin grot**,  
 And there she wept and sigh'd full sore,  
 And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
 With kisses four.

'And there she lulled me asleep,  
 And there I dream'd—ah! woe betide!  
 The latest dream I ever dream'd  
 On the cold hill's side.

'I saw pale kings and princes too,  
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all:  
 They cried—"La Belle Dame sans Merci  
 Hath thee in **thrall!**"

'I saw their starved lips in the **gloom**,  
 With horrid warning gaped wide,  
 And I awoke and found me here,  
 On the cold hill's side.

'And this is why I **sojourn** here  
 Alone and palely loitering,  
 Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
 And no birds sing.'

## Glossary

*loitering*: wandering

*sedge*: grass-like plant growing on low-lying wet ground

*woe-begone*: very sad in appearance

*lily on thy brow*: white and pale; the lily was regarded as a symbol of death

*rose*: considered a symbol of beauty

*meads*: (poetic) meadows

*relish*: enjoyment

*elfin*: relating to or made or done by or as if by an elf

*grot*: a natural cave; short form for 'grotto'

*La Belle Dame sans Merci*: means 'the beautiful lady without kindness'

*thrall*: a kind of bondage subject to a spell

*gloom*: (archaic) twilight

*sojourn*: (verb) to spend a certain length of time somewhere

## Comprehension

### 1. Answer the following questions in a sentence or two each.

- Who is the central character in the poem and why?
- Who is described as 'haggard and so woe-begone'?
- Who does the knight narrate his experience to?
- Where did the lady lead the knight to?

### 2. Answer the following questions in about 30 to 40 words each.

- What does the speaker ask the knight-at-arms?
- How does the appearance of the knight reflect his mental state?
- What is responsible for the knight's condition?
- How did the knight and the lady spend their time?
- What did the knight see in his dream?
- How does the poet establish the eerie and mystical atmosphere of the poem?

### 3. Answer the following questions in about 150 words each.

- The poet uses the form of a dialogue in the ballad. What effect does this have on the reader?
- The poem is about the joyous and sad aspects of love. Discuss.
- Examine the character of the 'lady in the meads'. Argue whether or not she is worthy of the title 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'.
- Describe the knight's meeting with the beautiful lady in your own words.

# 11. The Charge of the Light Brigade

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson*

## About the poet

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–92) was a leading poet of the Victorian Age. He was born on 6 August 1809, at Somersby, Lincolnshire, to George and Elizabeth (Fytche) Tennyson. In 1827, Tennyson joined Trinity College, Cambridge, and established his fame in Cambridge through his poems. In 1829, Tennyson joined The Apostles, an undergraduate club at Cambridge. This is where he met his dear friend Arthur Henry Hallam, whose influence on the poet was immense. However, at the age of 22, in the year 1833, Hallam died from an illness—an incident that affected Tennyson so greatly that he wrote the memorable poems ‘In Memoriam’, ‘The Passing of Arthur’, ‘Ulysses’, and ‘Tithonus’. Though his early poems were not very well received, his 1842 *Poems* made Tennyson very popular. His appointment in 1850 as the Poet Laureate of England gave him the honour he richly deserved. Tennyson died in 1892.

## About the poem

‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’ is a narrative poem that celebrates the heroism of a British cavalry brigade. It commemorates the Battle of Balaclava, during the Crimean War, fought (1853–56) between Russia and an alliance of powers that included France, Britain and the Ottoman Empire. At Balaclava, the British forces had to charge towards their Russian enemies through an open terrain and 247 men of the 637 in the charge were killed or wounded in this suicide mission. This poem was written by Tennyson in December 1854, minutes after he read an account of the tragedy. The poem became hugely popular and was used as a pamphlet to inspire British soldiers during the Crimean War.





I

Half a league, half a league,  
Half a league onward,  
All in **the valley of Death**  
Rode the **six hundred**.  
“Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!” he said.  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

II

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”  
Was there a man **dismayed**?  
Not though the soldier knew  
Someone had **blundered**.  
Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die.  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.

III

Cannon to right of them,  
Cannon to left of them,  
Cannon in front of them  
**Volleyed** and thundered;  
Stormed at with shot and shell,  
Boldly they rode and well,  
Into the jaws of Death,  
Into the mouth of hell  
Rode the six hundred.

IV

Flashed all their **sabres** bare,  
Flashed as they turned in air  
Sabring the gunners there,  
Charging an army, while

All the world wondered.  
 Plunged in the battery-smoke  
 Right through the line they broke;  
**Cossack** and Russian  
 Reeled from the sabre stroke  
 Shattered and **sundered**.  
 Then they rode back, but not  
 Not the six hundred.

## V

Cannon to right of them,  
 Cannon to left of them,  
 Cannon behind them  
 Volleyed and thundered;  
 Stormed at with shot and shell,  
 While horse and hero fell.  
 They that had fought so well  
 Came through the jaws of Death,  
 Back from the mouth of hell,  
 All that was left of them,  
 Left of six hundred.

## VI

When can their glory fade?  
 O the wild charge they made!  
 All the world wondered.  
 Honour the charge they made!  
 Honour the Light Brigade,  
 Noble six hundred!

## Glossary

*the valley of Death*: reference to the Balaclava valleys where the battle took place

*the six hundred*: the soldiers of the 'light brigade'

*dismay*: fear resulting from the awareness of danger

*blundered*: reference to the fact that the tragedy occurred because of the wrong decisions taken by the army commanders such as Lord Raglan

*volley*: rapid simultaneous discharge of firearms

*sabre*: a sword with a v-shaped blade and a slightly curved handle

*Cossack*: a member of a Slavic people living in southern European Russia and Ukraine and adjacent parts of Asia and noted for their horsemanship and military skill; they formed an elite cavalry corps in czarist Russia

*sunder*: break apart or in two

## Comprehension

### 1. Answer the following questions in a sentence or two each.

- What was the order given to the soldiers by their commander?
- What does the poet mean when he says, 'Then they rode back, but not / Not the six hundred'?
- Who is referred to as the 'Noble Six Hundred'?

### 2. Answer the following questions in about 30 to 40 words each.

- Why does the poet say that the soldiers were not meant to 'reason why'? What were they supposed to do instead?
- Were the soldiers aware of the fact that the charge was a tactical mistake? What do you gather from the poem?
- Describe how the British men fought the Russians and Cossacks.
- The poem repeats the line, 'All the world wondered'. What do you think the world was wondering about?

### 3. Answer the following questions in about 150 words each.

- 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' is a narrative poem. Describe the events narrated in the poem in your own words.
- Comment on the way the poem portrays war. Does it glorify or criticise war?
- How does the poet celebrate the heroism of the British cavalry brigade in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'?
- Attempt a critical appreciation of the poem 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'.

## 12. How Do I Love Thee?

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning*

### **About the poet**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–61) was a well-known poet of the Victorian era. Elizabeth Barrett was born in Durham and was home-schooled. Her talent for writing was evident from a tender age and her mother compiled a collection of the verses Elizabeth Barret had written as a child. However, Barrett was a sickly child and had to resort to the use of laudanum to escape from pain. This grew into an addiction and affected her health. Elizabeth Barrett's first collection, *The Seraphim and Other Poems*, was published in 1838, and she wrote prolifically. She was also considered for the position of the Poet Laureate which eventually went to Tennyson. During the 1840s she met Robert Browning, the poet, who admired her work. They married in secret and moved to Italy in 1846, where she died in 1861. She is best remembered for the poem 'How Do I Love Thee?' and *Aurora Leigh* (1856).

### **About the poem**

'How Do I Love Thee?' is a sonnet that was written around 1845. It first appeared in the collection *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) as Sonnet No 43. The poem has been interpreted as expressing Elizabeth Barret's love and affection for her husband Robert Browning. She characterises her love for Browning as 'spiritual' and 'pure'. It is a love that will remain even after her death. This poem is, thus, a statement of intense love. The sonnet is a poetic form that consists of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter and follows a fixed rhyme scheme. The sonnet form was traditionally used by poets to express their love for and attitude towards their lovers in a highly metaphorical language.



How do I love **thee**? Let me count the ways.  
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
 For the ends of being and ideal **Grace**.  
 I love thee to the level of every day's  
 Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.  
 I love thee **freely**, as men strive for right.  
 I love thee **purely**, as they turn from praise.  
 I love thee with the passion put to use  
 In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
 I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
 With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,  
 Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,  
 I shall but love thee better after death.

## Glossary

*thee*: you; can be read as addressing the poet's husband, Robert Browning

*grace*: the kindness and benevolence of God

*freely*: here, willingly

*purely*: here, genuinely

## Comprehension

1. Answer the following questions in a sentence or two each.

- Who does the poet address in the poem?
- What is referred to as 'an ideal Grace'?
- What do the 'sun' and 'candle-light' stand for in the poem?
- According to the poet, what will happen to the love once she passes away?

2. Answer the following questions in about 30 to 40 words each.

- Explain the lines: 'I love thee to the level of every day's / Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.'