

## William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was an immensely skilled writer who wrote plays and poems. He lived many centuries ago but people still love and admire his work today. Many people consider him to be the most talented writer who has ever lived.

### His Life

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and baptised a few days later on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April at Holy Trinity, his local church. It is believed that his birthday was the 23<sup>rd</sup> of April, although no records exist to prove this. His father was a wool and leather merchant called John Shakespeare who made and sold leather gloves and later became a town official. His mother was called Mary Arden and was an heiress, the daughter of a wealthy landowner from nearby Wilmcote. William had five siblings; two older sisters called Joan and Judith and three younger brothers called Gilbert, Richard and Edmund. The Shakespeare family lived in a relatively small market town called Stratford-upon-Avon.

It is not known for certain where William was educated, but most experts believe he learned to read and write at the King's New School in Stratford. It is likely that he was taught the ancient Roman language of Latin, and read many books and stories written by Roman authors. Many references to these ancient tales can be found in his plays and poetry, and several of the stories he wrote focus on historical Roman characters. For instance, the plays 'Julius Caesar' and 'Anthony and Cleopatra' are all about well known Roman leaders.

When William was eighteen years old he married a woman called Anne Hathaway who was eight years his senior, and already pregnant. She was from the tiny nearby village of Shottery and their wedding was held on November 28th, 1582 in the city of Worcester. They had three children together; a daughter called Susanna and a pair of twins called Judith and Hamnet. Sadly, Hamnet died of unknown causes when he was only eleven years old.

Nobody knows for sure what William did during the seven years after the twins were born so experts call these years 'The Lost Years'. There are several theories about these years; perhaps William was in hiding after committing a crime, or maybe he was a school teacher. Unless more evidence is found, we will never know. But people do know that by 1592, he had made the 103 mile journey to live in the bustling city of London while his family remained in Stratford.

London at that time had one of the largest populations of any city in the world; certainly much larger than Stratford! It was growing in size, with new settlements constantly appearing outside the strong city walls. To the eyes of a young man from a small town, it must have seemed as if the city was bursting with people, like an overflowing cup! William made the most of the opportunities he found in the quickly expanding city. He chose theatre as his career path, performing as an actor and writing several plays. In those days theatre groups put on a different play each day, so it was important to have a

wide variety of scripts! William was also paid to write some lengthy narrative poems by a wealthy man called Henry Wriothesley, who was the Earl of Southampton. Rich people often paid for poets and playwrights to work, and if they did, they were known as 'patrons'. Eventually, William became one of the leaders of a popular group of actors known as 'The Lord Chamberlain's Men'. They became increasingly famous and when James the First was crowned the King of England they quickly (and cleverly!) changed their name to 'The King's Men'.

Rich and poor people alike really enjoyed Shakespeare's plays for their witty characters and strong storylines; even Queen Elizabeth the First of England requested to see some of them performed at the Royal Court! His writing made him relatively rich and by 1599 he and several other men had paid for their own theatre to be built. They named it 'The Globe'. This project, and the increasing popularity of his writing, made him even more successful and he soon bought some land near Stratford. The land became worth more and more money, and as his wealth grew he was able to buy 'New Place', the second-largest house in Stratford, for his family. He also bought a posh new house for himself in London on a high-class road called 'Silver Street'.

In 1611, William finally moved back to Stratford and spent the rest of his days there until he died in 1616, aged fifty-two. Legend has it that he died on his birthday but we do not know for certain. In his will he left his 'second-best bed' to his wife Anne. People have often wondered what that tells us about their marriage. By the time of his death he had written 37 plays, 154 short poems (known as 'sonnets' because of the pattern they always followed) and five long narrative poems.

### His Plays

Shakespeare's plays were written to entertain audiences so they all contain elements of happiness, sadness and action. However, modern experts have sorted his plays into three broad categories. Some of William's plays tend to be more happy and humorous and are known as 'comedies'. They often end with major problems being solved, people getting married and villains getting what they deserve. Some of the plays are darker, more sorrowful and violent and are known as 'tragedies'. They often end with the death of a main character (or several characters!) and portray the eviler side of human beings. Some of them are dramatic stories about events from the past and are called 'histories'. The histories are all about old kings of Britain, wars and the struggle for power.

Here are examples of some of his plays:

**The Comedy of Errors** – This is a complicated comedy about a pair of twin brothers who were separated just after birth in a shipwreck. Bewilderingly, their servants are also identical twins who were separated at birth. A final further confusion for the characters is that both twin brothers are called Antipholus, and both twin servants are called Dromio! In the play, circumstances bring them all to the same town and as you can imagine, everyone gets very mixed up! One twin is dragged away by the other twin's wife because she is convinced he is her husband! At the end everyone's real identity is discovered and everyone is joyful as the two sets of long-lost brothers are reunited.

**Romeo and Juliet** – This is a sorrowful romantic tragedy about Romeo and Juliet, a pair of young lovers. Their families, the Montagues and the Capulets, are bitter enemies who have been feuding for many years. As a result of this, Romeo and Juliet's relationship is not allowed by either family. They marry in secret but then Romeo is provoked into a duel by Juliet's cousin, Tybalt. Tybalt is killed and Romeo is sent away from the city. Juliet makes a plan to run away and join him but the plan goes terribly wrong and at the end of the play they both end up dying.

**Richard the Third** – This is a historical play about a villainous, manipulative man called Richard who desires to be the King of England. The play begins at the end of a long war between two families which has raged across the whole of the country. Richard's brother, Edward, has become King and finally England is at peace. But Richard is envious and is desperate for power. He makes lots of evil schemes and brutally murders many people, including his brother and his wife! Soon, he was so terrified even his allies that an army rises up against him and marches out to defeat him. At the end of the play Richard sees visions of the ghosts of all the people he has murdered, and they victoriously proclaim to him that he will die the following day. The new day dawns and both sides prepare for war. There is an enormous battle and Richard is finally killed.

### His Words

William invented (or 'coined') an abundance of new words and phrases, and was the first person to write down plenty of others. It is impossible to say for certain how many because experts are always discovering new evidence, but Shakespeare's works may contain as many as 1,700 words that do not appear in the English language before his writing. He was particularly clever with words and people remember things he wrote because he was so good at describing life and the experiences people have. His words entered into everyday speech and as a result, plenty of phrases that are still used every day were actually invented by him!

Have you ever heard someone say that 'love is blind'? What about a joke which starts 'knock, knock! Who's there?'. Have you ever heard of someone being sent on a 'wild-goose chase'? If you have, then you already know some of Shakespeare's writing!

People from all walks of life enjoy and admire what William Shakespeare wrote. He was intelligent and witty and his stories are amazingly powerful, containing characters and ideas which all sorts of people can understand. His words have the ability to make people laugh, cry, think and wonder. Here are some quotations from his writing, with modern day translations; a pair of insults and two declarations of love:

'This sanguine coward, this bed-presser, this horseback-breaker, this huge hill of flesh' – This red-faced coward, this squasher of mattresses, this breaker of horses' backs (when he rides on them), this huge hill of flesh. (Henry IV Part 1)

'Thou cream-faced loon!' – You white-faced idiot! (Macbeth)

'My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep.' - My generosity to you is as endless as the sea and my love is as deep. (Romeo and Juliet)

'For thy sweet love remembr'd such wealth brings, That then I scorn to change my state with kings.' - Because when I think about your love for me I am so rich in happiness that then I would not swap my life for living like kings do. (Sonnet 29)

### Shakespeare Today

William Shakespeare's works remain enormously popular with modern audiences. They are widely read, they are still regularly performed and a large selection of them have been reproduced as feature-length blockbuster films. His plays are seen worldwide and actors and directors are always devising clever and intriguing new settings and interpretations of them. The scripts were originally written hundreds of years ago but performances have placed the characters in a huge variety of countries and eras! In Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare's home town, there is a theatrical group called 'The Royal Shakespeare Company' who have their own theatre complex on the bank of the River Avon. Famous actors and actresses from films and television programmes join the company to perform new versions of Shakespeare's plays all year round. The houses which William and his family members owned in and around Stratford have been turned into museums, and people travel from all over the world to visit the little town and walk the same streets and floorboards the Bard (as he is often known) walked. The Globe Theatre that Shakespeare bought in London was demolished in 1644, but a replica of it has been built in the heart of the city and this allows people to experience the plays the way they would have been seen at their original performances. William's writing is now celebrated internationally. Not bad for the son of a leather merchant from Stratford!

Scholars, their pupils and all kinds of other people are very keen to study Shakespeare's plays and poetry. He wrote about love, life, death, loss and a full range of human emotions and experiences. Enthusiasts and students alike enjoy carefully considering what he wrote and analysing what his stories say about the world and the way people are. Many clever researchers try to uncover new facts about him and ponder the details of his life.

Now that you have read this, you can too!

## William Shakespeare

Match the information to the place where you find it in the text.

Romeo and Juliet

His Words

words we use were made up by Shakespeare

Shakespeare Today

Shakespeare bought a new house in London

His Plays

Shakespeare's plays have been made into films

His Life

What had happened by 1592?

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Find and copy the names of Shakespeare's children.

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Was Hamnet a boy or a girl? How do you know?

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Which of the three plays would you most like to see? Give a reason for your answer.

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Which section was the most interesting? Why?

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How old was Anne Hathaway when she got married?

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What sort of text have you just read? Underline one.

- A. play
- B. instructions
- C. information
- D. story

Who is the 'son of a glove maker from Stratford'?

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Read the last two paragraphs. What do you think the author wanted to achieve by writing this text?

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Do you think the author admires Shakespeare's writing? Find and copy a phrase from the text which supports your answer.

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Here are four extra pieces of information. Each one would make sense in a different section of the text. Which section would you put each of them in?

A. Millions of copies of his writings are sold each year around the world in over 100 languages!

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B. Some words from his plays are so famous people know them off by heart, even if they have never seen the play!

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C. William's land ended up earning him sixty pounds per year, which was a lot of money at that time.

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D. Some of the plays are sometimes called 'tragicomedies' because they are both funny and sad.

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Where would you expect to find the same type of text as the one you have just read? Tick TWO answers.

- A. on an informative website
- B. in a biography
- C. in a book of poetry
- D. in a novel

What does 'legend has it' mean?

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Circle the word which best describes the author's tone in the sentence below.

*'Not bad for the son of a leather merchant from Stratford!'*

- A. angry
- B. disappointed
- C. hopeful
- D. impressed

Write down two differences between a tragedy and a comedy.

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Introductions are useful in non-fiction texts.

1. Where is the introduction in the piece of text you have just read?
2. Why is the introduction helpful to a reader?

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Look at the 'His Words' section. Using the quotations found there, write a translation of the following insult: 'Thou sanguine loon!'

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## William Shakespeare

Match the information to the place where you find it in the text.

Romeo and Juliet

His Words

words we use were made up by Shakespeare

Shakespeare Today

Shakespeare bought a new house in London

His Plays

Shakespeare's plays have been made into films

His Life

What had happened by 1592? **Shakespeare had gone to London and was working as an actor and playwright.**

Find and copy the names of Shakespeare's children. **Susanna, Judith and Hamnet**

Was Hamnet a boy or a girl? How do you know? **A boy, because the author says 'he' died aged 11.**

Which of the three plays would you most like to see? Give a reason for your answer.

**Various answers; must be justified.**

Which section was the most interesting? Why? **Various answers; must be justified.**

How old was Anne Hathaway when she got married? **Twenty-six years old**

What sort of text have you just read? Underline one.

- A. play
- B. instructions
- C. information**
- D. story

Who is the 'son of a glove maker from Stratford'? **William Shakespeare**



Read the last two paragraphs. What do you think the author wanted to achieve by writing this text? **The author was hoping to give facts and information about Shakespeare in order to enable and encourage readers to participate in the activities described in the penultimate paragraph.**

Do you think the author admires Shakespeare's writing? Find and copy a phrase from the text which supports your answer. **The author does admire it. Various justifying quotations are possible, but must be positive and relating to Shakespeare's writing or works.**

Here are four extra pieces of information. Each one would make sense in a different section of the text. Which section would you put each of them in?

- A. Millions of copies of his writings are sold each year around the world in over 100 languages! **Shakespeare Today**
- B. Some words from his plays are so famous people know them off by heart, even if they have never seen the play! **His Words**
- C. William's land ended up earning him sixty pounds per year, which was a lot of money at that time. **His Life**
- D. Some of the plays are sometimes called 'tragicomedies' because they are both funny and sad. **His Plays**

Where would you expect to find the same type of text as the one you have just read? Tick **TWO** answers.

- A. **on an informative website**
- B. **in a biography**
- C. in a book of poetry
- D. in a novel

What does 'legend has it' mean? **It means that what you are saying is a commonly held belief or idea but that no one knows for sure if it is true.**

Circle the word which best describes the author's tone in the sentence below.

*'Not bad for the son of a leather merchant from Stratford!'*

- A. angry
- B. disappointed
- C. hopeful
- D. impressed**

Write down two differences between a tragedy and a comedy. **Any version of the following differences is correct:**

- **Comedies 'tend to be more happily humorous', where tragedies 'are darker, more sorrowful and violent'.**
- **Comedies 'often end with major problems being solved, people getting married and villains getting what they deserve', where tragedies 'often end with the death of a main character (or several characters!) and show the worse side of human beings'.**

Introductions are useful in non-fiction texts.

1. Where is the introduction in the piece of text you have just read? **At the beginning**
2. Why is the introduction helpful to a reader? **It gives them a small idea of who Shakespeare was, which helps them to read the main sections with the help of a little context.**

Look at the 'His Words' section. Using the quotations found there, write a translation of the following insult: 'Thou sanguine loon!' **'You red-faced idiot!'**