

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was an immensely skilled and highly creative writer who penned plays and poems. He lived many centuries ago but modern readers still love and admire his work, and many people consider him to be the most talented wordsmith who has ever lived.

His Life

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 and baptised a few days later on the 26th of April at Holy Trinity, his local parish church. It is believed that his birthday was the 23rd of April, although no records exist to prove this. His father, John Shakespeare, was a wool and leather merchant who made and sold leather gloves and later rose to the positions of alderman and bailiff (official town positions a bit like a modern day mayor). His mother was called Mary Arden; the daughter (and heiress) of a wealthy landowner from nearby Wilmcote. William spent his youth with his five siblings; two older sisters called Joan and Judith and three younger brothers called Gilbert, Richard and Edmund. The Shakespeare family resided in a relatively small market town called Stratford-upon-Avon.

It is not known for certain where William was educated, but most scholars 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 studied many texts written by Roman authors. A clear knowledge of these ancient tales and references to them are obvious in his plays and poetry, and several of the narratives he wrote focus on historical Roman characters. The plays 'Julius Caesar' and 'Anthony and Cleopatra' are all about prominent Roman leaders, and the grand poem 'Venus and Adonis' is based on a story originally written by the Roman author Ovid.

When William was eighteen years old he wedded a woman called Anne Hathaway who was eight years his senior, and already expecting their first child. She was a resident of 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 twins called Judith and Hamnet. Unfortunately, Hamnet perished from unknown causes when he was only eleven years old.

There is no conclusive evidence to tell us what William did for the seven years after the birth of the twins, and so scholars refer to these years as 'The Lost Years'. Several theories exist; perhaps William was in hiding after committing a crime, or maybe he was a school master in Lancashire. Unless more evidence is discovered, it will remain a mystery. But we 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.

Sixteenth Century London was one of the most populated cities in the world, and certainly much larger than Stratford! It was swelling in size, with new settlements and slums constantly springing up outside the strong city walls. To the eyes of a young man from Stratford, it must have appeared as if the city was bursting with people, like an overflowing cup! William seized hold of the opportunities he found in the rapidly expanding city. Selecting the theatre as his path, he performed as an actor and penned several plays. In those days, theatre groups put on a different play each day, so it was essential to have a

wide variety of scripts! Different acting companies were competing with each other and other forms of entertainment, such as public executions and bear-baiting (watching dogs and bears fight), so it was useful to have a writer who could devise humorous, heart-wrenching or bloodthirsty plays.

Alongside his stage work, William was also paid to write some lengthy narrative poems by a wealthy man called Henry Wriothesley, who was the Earl of Southampton. Aristocrats often sponsored poets and playwrights, and if they did, they were known as 'patrons'. Eventually William became one of the managing partners of a popular theatre group known as 'The Lord Chamberlain's Men'. They became increasingly famous and when James the First was coronated as the King of England, they quickly (and shrewdly!) altered their name to 'The King's Men'.

Rich and poor people alike really enjoyed Shakespeare's plays for their witty characters and compelling narratives; 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 invested money in the construction of a new theatre. They named it 'The Globe'. This project, and the increasing popularity of his writing, made him even more successful and he soon purchased some land near Stratford. The land doubled in value and with this extra source of income he was able to buy 'New Place', the second-largest house in Stratford, for his family. He also bought an expensive new house for himself in London, on a fashionable road called 'Silver Street'.

In 1611, William finally moved back to Stratford and spent the rest of his days there until he died, apparently of a fever, 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; historians wonder what that says about their marriage! By the time of his death William had penned 37 plays, 154 short poems (known as 'sonnets' because of the structural pattern they always followed) and five long narrative poems.

His Plays

Shakespeare's plays were designed to entertain and captivate audiences, and so they all contain elements of happiness, sadness and action. However, modern scholars separate his plays into three broad categories. Some of William's plays tend to be more humorous and are known as 'comedies'. They often end with major predicaments being resolved, marriages taking place and villains getting punished. Some of the plays are more sinister, 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 darker side of human nature. Other plays are dramatic narratives about epic events from the past and are called 'histories'. These are about the old kings of Britain, their wars and the struggle for power.

Here are some examples of his plays:

The Comedy of Errors – This is a complicated but hilarious comedy about a pair of twin brothers who were separated just after their birth in a devastating shipwreck. Bewilderingly, their servants are also identical twins who were separated at birth. As if that were not confusing enough, a final further complexity for the characters to deal with is that both twin brothers are called Antipholus, and both twin servants are called Dromio! In the play,

circumstances bring them all to the ancient Greek town of Ephesus and as you can imagine, everyone gets very mixed up! One twin is dragged away by the other twin's wife because she cannot be swayed in her conviction that he is her husband. At the end, everyone's real identity is discovered and joy abounds 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 youthful lovers. Their families, the Montagues and the Capulets, are bitter enemies who have been participating in a vicious feud for many years. As a result of this hatred, Romeo and Juliet's relationship is not permitted by either family. The couple marry in secret but then Romeo is provoked into a duel by Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, when he kills Romeo's best friend. Romeo slays Tybalt but is then banished from the city. Juliet makes a plan to flee and join him. Unfortunately, circumstances conspire against them 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 civil war between the families of York and Lancaster, which has raged across the whole of the country. The Yorks have emerged victorious, Richard's brother Edward has been crowned King and finally England is at peace. But Richard is consumed with envy and desperately craves power. His twisted mind produces many evil schemes and he brutally murders many people, including his brother and his wife! Soon, his violence has 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 is tormented by visions of the ghosts of all the people he has murdered, and they victoriously proclaim to him that he will die the following day. As the new day dawns, both sides prepare for war. There is an enormous battle and Richard is knocked from his horse. He fights on, calling out the famous line 'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!' before he is finally slain.

His Words

William invented (or 'coined') an abundance of new words and phrases, and his writings are the earliest known recordings of many others. It is impossible to say with complete certainty how many because researchers 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! His words were memorable because he was so adept at cleverly describing life, emotions and experiences everyone can identify with. 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 William Shakespeare's skilful writing. He was intelligent and witty, and his stories are amazingly powerful, containing characters and ideas which still thrill, appal or entertain us today. 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 vicious insults and two heart-felt 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 the way kings do. (Sonnet 29)

His Legacy

William Shakespeare's works have remained enormously popular even to the present day. They are widely read, they are still regularly performed and a large selection of them have been turned into feature films. His plays are seen worldwide and actors are always devising clever and intriguing new settings and interpretations of them. 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 come and perform Shakespeare's plays with them 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!

People are 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 enjoy carefully considering what he wrote and what his stories say about the world and the way people are. Many clever researchers try to find out 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?

Find and copy the names of Shakespeare's children.

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

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

Which section was the most interesting? Why?

How old was Anne Hathaway when she got married?

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'?

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

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

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!
-
- B. Some words from his plays are so famous people know them off by heart, even if they have never seen the play!
-
- C. William's land ended up earning him sixty pounds per year, which was a lot of money at that time.
-
- D. Some of the plays are sometimes called 'tragicomedies' because they are both funny and sad.
-

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?

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.

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?

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

'To the eyes of a young man from Stratford it must have appeared as if the city was bursting with people, like an overflowing cup!' How is this simile effective in describing the London Shakespeare found himself living in?

Non-fiction texts such as the one you have just read are designed to help readers find relevant information quickly. What is the main way the author has tried to make information easy to find?

One section of the text is titled 'His Legacy'. What is a 'legacy'?

William Shakespeare

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

Romeo and Juliet

words we use were made up by Shakespeare

Shakespeare bought a new house in London

Shakespeare's plays have been made into films

His Words

Shakespeare Today

His Plays

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!'**

'To the eyes of a young man from Stratford it must have appeared as if the city was bursting with people, like an overflowing cup!' How is this simile effective in describing the London Shakespeare found himself living in? **Various answers are possible; answers must relate to the idea of people/residences spilling out beyond the city walls, and could draw out a sense of movement, of life, of constant increase.**

Non-fiction texts such as the one you have just read are designed to help readers find relevant information quickly. What is the main way the author has tried to make information easy to find? **The author has used subtitles and split the text into four clear sections.**

One section of the text is titled 'His Legacy'. What is a 'legacy'? **Any version of the following ideas is acceptable. A legacy is something left behind when someone dies which benefits and is enjoyed by further generations. A legacy continues as an active memory of the person who left it.**