

# William Shakespeare

1564-1616



William Shakespeare was born in April of 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon to Mary Arden, daughter of a farmer, and John Shakespeare, a glovemaker. Both parents were illiterate.

William had a rigorous educational upbringing, which allowed him to become one of the most widely educated men who ever lived — despite the fact that he never went to college. He was interested in almost every aspect of human life, and he must have acquired vast knowledge from doing a great amount of reading.



Once his school days ended (similar to graduating from high school), Shakespeare married, at age eighteen, a woman who was eight years older than he and pregnant with their first child. Her name was Anne Hathaway. The Shakespeares had three children: a daughter Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith. Sometime after the children were born (late 1580's), the family moved to London.

By the time he was 28, Shakespeare had established himself in London as an actor and had written at least three plays. London during Shakespeare's day was a booming city of about 160,000. The Ruler of England at the time was probably one of the greatest monarchs of all time, Queen Elizabeth. London was similar to a Los Angeles of today. It was a social and cultural center, as well as a city with a high crime rate. It was in such a setting that William Shakespeare wrote and performed the greatest plays the world has ever seen.

The theatres Shakespeare performed in were open to the sky and therefore the plays were not well suited for inclement weather or darkness. There were no spotlights or modern special effect equipment, and the stage usually did not have much scenery. Although we may see these things as limitations, it was actually liberating for the playwright and actors. They had to be flexible and inventive. The audience was very close to the stage, which enabled Shakespeare to use "asides" and "soliloquies" to make for a more intimate relationship with the audience. The audience wasn't watching, they were participating.

Attending a dramatic performance in Elizabethan times was an exciting event. Large numbers of people gathered in an open area where they ate, shouted to their friends, and generally socialized. The lower classes stood in large open areas near the stage. They were referred to as groundlings, different from the wealthier playgoers who sat in raised boxes around the perimeter of the groundlings area. There was no curtain, no darkening of lights to signal the start of the action.

Read the opening of the play and note the ways in which the dramatist gets the attention of his audience. Also notice the lines in the play that signal the end of one scene and the beginning of another.

Shakespeare made a great deal of money during his lifetime, and he invested it wisely in real estate. Around 1613, he retired comfortably in the second largest house in Stratford-upon-Avon. On March 25, 1616, Shakespeare made his will, in which he bequeathed most of his money to his daughter Susanna, hoping that she and her husband, Dr. John Hall, would carry on the family. About a month later, on the same date as his birth, he died at the age of 52. The Halls had three boys, all of whom died in infancy, and a daughter, Elizabeth, who remained childless.

William Shakespeare is buried at Trinity Church, where he was baptized. Carved on the flat stone of his grave cover are words that he wrote himself:

*Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbear  
To dig the dust enclosed here!  
Blest be the man that spares these stones  
And curst be he that moves my bones.*



Shakespeare was often called a "The Bard of Avon." A bard is a poet or traveling actor. So many people have grown to love and appreciate what William Shakespeare wrote that Shakespeare festivals are held throughout the world. Shakespeare's plays continue to be performed today, and have been made into countless movies and spinoff plays.

