

William Shakespeare

¹ "To be or not to be; that is the question," is a well-known phrase by William Shakespeare, but many facts about his life remain a mystery. We know the dates of some events of his life because of baptismal and wedding certificates, but the famous English bard never kept a diary. He wrote 37 plays and 154 sonnets, but none of his personal letters have survived.

² Most scholars think that Shakespeare was born in the year 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. He was probably born around April 23 since his christening was on April 26. His father was the town's mayor and a prosperous glove maker. Shakespeare had seven brothers and sisters, and their home was small, noisy, and cramped.



³ Shakespeare's country upbringing made him familiar with farm animals and vegetation. Many images of plants and flowers "crop up" later in his writings in unique ways. For example, a wicked queen's servants gather violets, cowslips, and primroses to make poison, and in *Hamlet*, crazy Ophelia weaves garlands of crow flowers, nettles, and daisies. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet's father laments her death by saying, "Death lies on her like an untimely frost upon the sweetest flower in all the field."

⁴ William did spend a lot of time playing in the fields around Stratford, but he went to grammar school when he was six or seven. The schoolmasters were strict, and the lessons were torturously long. School went from six a.m. until six p.m., six days a week, all year round! Young William learned to read Latin and Greek, and he studied Roman classics. These writings may have inspired Shakespeare's great tragic plays.

⁵ For fun, young William probably tossed a football made from an inflated pig bladder, played backgammon, or watched the theatrical players who came to Stratford once a year. Everyone in England (even the queen) also enjoyed archery. Shakespeare graduated from school when he was 16. However, his father had fallen into debt, and William could not afford to study at the university. The great writer whose works are always studied at universities never attended one himself!

⁶ No one knows what Shakespeare did during the "lost years" from about 1580 until 1592. Maybe he helped his father make gloves, or perhaps he worked as a schoolmaster's assistant. He married a woman eight years his senior when he was eighteen years old. The couple had several children, but they all lived with William's father in his crowded house. The marriage didn't seem too happy. In 1587, a group of actors came to Stratford, and Shakespeare may have left with them to become an actor!

⁷ Shakespeare published his first play, *Henry VI*, in London in 1592. We do know that he went to London to find a new life. City life must have been a shock for the young man, with its smells, noise, and crowds. The rotting heads of traitors on poles around town must have seemed barbaric! London also had some beautiful architecture, like old churches and the majestic London Bridge.

⁸ Shakespeare's career had a major setback when all the London theaters closed for two years during the plague. English authorities believed that the disease would spread more quickly in large gatherings of people. The plague, or the Black Death, killed over 33,000 people in London. Shakespeare managed to preserve his health, and he wrote two long poems and possibly his famous sonnets during this period. He sold his poems for a large sum of money and became financially secure.

⁹ The theaters reopened in 1594. Shakespeare had written at least five plays by that time. He joined a group called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, and they performed three times a year for Queen Elizabeth. When Elizabeth died in 1603, James of Scotland became the new king of England. James I became the patron of Shakespeare's company. He loved plays and invited Shakespeare's company to perform 13 times a year!

¹⁰ Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, a tragedy with a Scottish setting, to please the new king. Three witches tell Macbeth, a Scottish lord, that he will become king. He wants to be king so badly that he kills everyone who stands in his way. This play is full of action and suspense, and the audience has the chance to understand what goes through Macbeth's mind. The elements of suspense, action, and beautiful language make *Macbeth* one of Shakespeare's greatest plays.

¹¹ Shakespeare's plots often came from history, and he wrote comedies, tragedies, and histories. Writing came so easily to Shakespeare that his fellow playwright, Ben Jonson, said, "Whatsoever he penned, he never blotted out a line." Shakespeare also followed certain rules in his writing that were common to Elizabethan dramas. For example, in a tragedy, the main characters died. In his comedies, the characters dealt with misunderstandings and confused identities, but they solved everything by the end of the play. The English people loved his historical plays because they often featured English kings. From 1585 to 1604, Protestant England was at war with Catholic Spain. Shakespeare wrote nine plays about battles for thrones and wars.

¹² Shakespeare sometimes had as much adventure as the characters in his plays! When his plays were first performed, they were done in a building called the theater in London. However, the lease ran out in 1598, and the landlord demanded a high rent. Shakespeare's friends did not give up! Sixteen men crept into the night right around Christmastime to steal the boards from the theater. They dismantled the old theater completely. Then they carried the wood across the river and used it to build the famous Globe Theater!

¹³ The new theater was circular with an open space in the middle. The stage was on one side and stuck out into the audience. Plays had no fancy sets, which is why characters in Shakespeare's plays often say what they see! The stage had trap doors, balconies, and pulleys. The theater survived until 1613. An actor fired a cannon in the opening scene of *Henry VIII* to make a big impression. Well, it worked, but not in the way that Shakespeare intended because the sparks set fire to the thatched roof! The Globe burned completely in less than an hour. Everyone was fine, but one man's pants caught on fire and had to be extinguished with a bottle of beer! The players rescued many props and costumes, as well as copies of Shakespeare's plays.

¹⁴ Shakespeare moved back to Stratford in 1611, and he died in 1616. He is one of the most famous writers of all time. Shakespeare influenced our language in surprising ways. If you have ever told someone that you won't "budge an inch" or said that someone is your "flesh and blood," you are quoting Shakespeare!
