**Why is Shakespeare famous?**

**Who was William Shakespeare?**  
William Shakespeare is one of the world's greatest writers. He wrote [plays](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) for the [theatre](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml). He wrote poetry too.

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, in England. Later he went to London, to be an [actor](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml). But he became famous for writing plays. His friends said he was the best writer of his time. Most people now say he was the best of all time.

**Why is Shakespeare so famous?**  
Shakespeare lived more than 400 years ago. Yet people still go to see his plays.

Shakespeare plays are [*performed*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) all over the world. Students study Shakespeare in school and at university. People write books about Shakespeare. There are Shakespeare theatres and Shakespeare festivals.

**When did Shakespeare live?**  
William Shakespeare was born in 1564. He grew up in [*Tudor*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) England in the time of Queen Elizabeth I.

He lived in exciting times. Francis Drake sailed around the world (1577-1580). Shakespeare was probably in London when the [*Spanish Armada*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) sailed to attack England in 1588. He saw the coronation of King James I in 1603. 1605 was the year of the [*Gunpowder Plot*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) and Guy Fawkes. Shakespeare died in 1616.

**The young Shakespeare**

**The Shakespeare family**  
Baby William was christened (baptised a Christian) on 26 April 1564. Many people think his birthday was 23 April - St George's Day.

William Shakespeare was probably 'Will' to his family.

Shakespeare's father was John Shakespeare, a glove-maker. His mother Mary was the daughter of a farmer named Robert Arden. His grandfather was a farmer too.

**School days**  
John Shakespeare was an important man in the town of Stratford. In 1568, he was [mayor](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml). He sent William to the town [grammar school](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml).

The boys at the school had lessons in Latin, Greek and history. They had to work hard. If boys were naughty, the teacher beat them.

**Having fun**  
Shakespeare and his friends played in the fields. They went fishing and swimming in the River Avon.

When Shakespeare was about 5, a group of [*actors*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) came to Stratford. Perhaps he was taken to see their show. When he was 11, he may have seen Queen Elizabeth, who made a visit to Kenilworth Castle. For her, there were plays, dances, music, feasts and fireworks!

**Shakespeare gets married**  
Young Shakespeare left school by the time he was 16. We do not know what job he did. Perhaps he worked as a teacher. Perhaps he helped his father.

In 1582, Shakespeare got married. His wife, Anne Hathaway, was a farmer's daughter. She was 8 years older than him. Soon they had a family - a daughter Susanna, and in 1585 twins, named Judith and Hamnet.

**Shakespeare in London**

**The mystery years**  
Shakespeare did not write his life story. Some of his life is a mystery.

Some time before 1590, he left Stratford. One story says he had to run away from home, after [poaching](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) deer. But this is probably just a story.

He may have been a [tutor](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) in a rich family's home. He may have joined a travelling group of [actors](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml). He may have gone off to be a soldier. In the end he went to London.

**Why London?**  
London was the biggest city in England, though much smaller than today. London had markets, shops, taverns (inns), churches and palaces. The River Thames was busy with ships.

London was where poor people went hoping to make their fortunes. And London had [*theatres*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml)!

**London's theatres**  
London's first theatre or 'playhouse' opened in 1576. By 1590, there were several theatres, such as the Rose, the Theatre and the Curtain.

Shakespeare became an actor. Soon he was writing plays too.

**Making his name**  
By 1592 Shakespeare was being talked about. A jealous writer named Robert Greene wrote rude things about a newcomer he called 'an upstart crow'. He meant Shakespeare.

In 1593, a terrible disease called the plague hit London. Thousands of people got sick and died. The theatres shut. Shakespeare turned to writing poems instead of plays. He may have been helped by a rich [*nobleman*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml), the Earl of Southampton.

Soon the theatres were open again.

**Plays in Shakespeare's time**

**A new theatre**  
Shakespeare was a member of a [*company*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) of [*actors*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml), called the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

In 1598, they built a new [*theatre*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml). It was round. They called it the Globe.

The Globe was open to the sky. A flag was raised to show a play was about to begin. Plays began at 2 in the afternoon.

**What were theatres like?**  
Some people stood in front of the stage. Others had seats. Rich men paid 12 pennies (one shilling) to sit on the stage. The audience shouted and clapped, laughed and booed.

Over the stage was a roof, to keep off the rain. Actors could be lowered from the roof on wires. There was a [*trap door*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) in the stage too. So actors could pop up to surprise the audience.

**The new Globe**  
The modern Globe Theatre in London is a replica (copy) of Shakespeare's Globe. People can watch plays just as people did in Shakespeare's day.

The new Globe opened in 1997. The first play was Henry V - just as when the first Globe opened in 1599.

**Actors in Shakespeare's day**  
In Shakespeare's time, there were no women actors. Women's parts were played by boys. For a time, child actors were more popular than grown-actors.

Actors wore the clothes of the day, with wigs and make up. Shakespeare is said to have played the Ghost in his play Hamlet.

**Special effects**  
Plays had exciting special effects. There were ghosts, witches, loud bangs, flames and smoke, drums, and even [*cannons*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml).

In 1613, during Shakespeare's play Henry VIII, a cannon set fire to the straw in the roof. The Globe burned down.

**Shakespeare's plays**  
Shakespeare wrote comedies, stories with a happy ending. These plays often have people falling in love, wearing disguises, and generally getting mixed up. A Midsummer Night's Dream is a comedy with fairies and humans.

He wrote tragedies, stories with a sad ending. Romeo and Juliet is a tragedy, because the young lovers, Romeo and Juliet, both die.

Shakespeare's history plays are about real people, such as Julius Caesar, the Roman general, or the English kings Henry V and Richard III.

**More about Shakespeare**

**A famous man**  
By 1598, Shakespeare was rich and famous. He owned houses in Stratford. He also had homes in London, near the theatres. For a time, he lived with a French family in London.

In 1603, Queen Elizabeth died. The new king was James I, from Scotland. James liked the theatre. Shakespeare's actors became The King's Men. They walked in the king's [*coronation*](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/famouspeople/william_shakespeare/glossary/index.shtml) procession.

Between 1600 and 1608, Shakespeare wrote some of his greatest plays. They include Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth.

**Shakespeare's last years**  
By 1613, when the Globe burned down, Shakespeare had left London. He lived quietly in Stratford.

In 1616, his friend Ben Jonson came to visit. They drank wine and ate pickled herrings. Then Shakespeare fell ill. He died on 23 April 1616. He was 52.

**Shakespeare's plays**  
Shakespeare wrote (or helped write) at least 38 plays.

The plays were first printed as books in 1623. His friends wanted to stop other people selling bad copies of the plays, full of mistakes.

**What else did Shakespeare write?**  
Shakespeare wrote some long poems, and lots of short poems called sonnets. In his plays, people speak in poetry too.

**The language of Shakespeare**  
Shakespeare used more English words than any other writer. He made up words and expressions too. When someone says quick as a flash, blinking idiot or I haven't slept a wink, you are listening to Shakespeare.

The English language has changed since Shakespeare's time. So he is not always easy to read. But it's worth the effort.







