

# Shakespeare: Social and Historical Context

## Shakespeare's Life

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but he was baptised on 26th April. As babies were usually baptised soon after their births, his birthday is usually celebrated on 23rd April.

William was the son of John and Mary Shakespeare. His father was a glove-maker and merchant, and was a well-known figure in Stratford-upon-Avon. He held many positions of responsibility within the town, including a title that would be the equivalent of a mayor nowadays. William's mother, Mary, came from a farm in Wilmote, just outside Stratford-upon-Avon. Mary and John Shakespeare had eight children, although three of them died very young; William was the eldest surviving male.

William was educated at the local grammar school, where he would have learnt to read and write; he also got a good grounding in classical Greek and Latin literature, which he would later put to use in his plays. Relatively little is known about his life as a young man, but there are stories that he got himself into a few scrapes – including stealing a deer from the grounds of a local manor house!

When he was eighteen, William married Anne Hathaway, a twenty-six year-old local woman. The marriage appears to have been arranged in haste: only one set of banns (the notification of a marriage, usually read out three times in church) were read. A mere six months later, Anne gave birth to their first child, Susanna. Two further children followed: Judith and Hamnet. Sadly, Hamnet died in 1596.

At some point in the late 1580s, William moved to London. We don't know exactly when this happened, but we do know that his family stayed in Stratford-upon-Avon. In the capital, William worked as an actor and playwright. Again, little is known about the exact date that his first plays were published, but he had certainly written some by 1592. He would have acted in his own

plays. William also owned a share in a theatre company, known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. When Queen Elizabeth I died, King James I came to the throne and granted the theatre company his royal seal of approval: they became The King's Men.



William's popularity as a playwright grew steadily, and his plays became exceedingly popular. They are generally divided into the categories of comedies, tragedies and histories (plays telling the stories of kings and queens of England). As well as plays, Shakespeare also wrote many sonnets – fourteen-line poems which follow a classical form. He is believed to have written around 40 plays and 154 sonnets.

In 1597, William was part of a group of actors and producers who built a theatre called the Globe on London's South Bank. The theatre was finished in 1599 and many of William's plays were performed there. In 1613, the Globe Theatre burned to the ground when a cannon from a performance of Henry VIII set light to the thatched roof. The company built a new theatre on the site of the ruins.

Throughout his time in London, William is thought to have travelled back to see his family in Stratford-upon-Avon. He returned to his home town for good sometime around 1613. On 23rd April 1616, believed to be the same day as his birth, Shakespeare died. He was buried in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon.