

Synopsis: William Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. He was an important member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men company of theatrical players, and over the course of 20 years, he wrote plays that capture the complete range of human emotion and conflict.

### **Mysterious Origins**

Known throughout the world, the works of William Shakespeare have been performed countless times for more than 400 years. And yet, the personal history of Shakespeare is somewhat of a mystery. Historians know about his life from his work and church and court records, but these only provide brief sketches of specific life events and provide little information about the actual person.

### **Early Life**

Though no birth records exist, church records indicate that a William Shakespeare was baptized at Holy Trinity Church in England on April 26, 1564. Based on this, scholars believe his birthday is April 23, 1564.

William was the third child of John Shakespeare, a leather merchant, and Mary Arden, a local heiress. He had two older sisters and three younger brothers.

Scant records exist of Shakespeare's childhood and virtually none regarding his education. Scholars say he most likely attended the King's New School in Stratford, which taught reading, writing and the classics.

### **Married Life**

Shakespeare was 18 when he married 26-year-old Anne Hathaway in 1582, and their first child, Susanna, was born on May 26, 1583. Two years later, they had twins.

After the birth of the twins, there are seven years of Shakespeare's life where no records exist. Scholars call this period the "lost years," and there is wide speculation on what he was doing during this time. He might have gone into hiding for stealing from the local landlord, or he might have been working as an assistant schoolmaster. It is generally believed he arrived in London in the mid-to-late 1580s.

### **Theatrical Beginnings**

By 1592, there is evidence Shakespeare was working as an actor and a playwright in London. By the early 1590s, documents show that he was a managing partner in an acting company in London called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men. From all accounts, the King's Men was very popular, and records show that Shakespeare had works published and sold as popular literature.

### **Establishing Himself**

By 1597, 15 of the 37 plays written by Shakespeare were published. By 1599, Shakespeare and his business partners had built their own theater, which they called the Globe. He also purchased real estate that earned him a lot of money. Scholars believe these investments gave him the time to write his plays uninterrupted.

### **Writing Style**

Shakespeare's early plays were written in the conventional style of the day. However, Shakespeare was very innovative, adapting the traditional style to his own purposes and creating a freer flow of words. He primarily used a metrical pattern consisting of lines of unrhymed **iambic pentameter** – that meant that each line had five pairs of syllables, the first

one short and the second one longer.

### **Early Works: Histories And Comedies**

With the exception of "Romeo and Juliet," Shakespeare's first plays were mostly histories written in the early 1590s. "Richard II," "Henry VI" and "Henry V" dramatize the destructive results of weak rulers.

Shakespeare also wrote several comedies during his early period: the **witty** "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the romantic "The Merchant of Venice," the amusing and wordplay-filled "Much Ado About Nothing," the charming "As You Like It" and "Twelfth Night."

### **Later Works: Tragedies And Tragicomedies**

It was in Shakespeare's later period, after 1600, that he wrote the tragedies "Hamlet," "King Lear," "Othello" and "Macbeth." In these, Shakespeare's characters present vivid impressions of human **temperament** that are timeless and universal. Possibly the best known of these plays is "Hamlet," which explores betrayal, punishment, incest and moral failure.

In Shakespeare's final period, he wrote several tragicomedies, including "Cymbeline," "The Winter's Tale" and "The Tempest." Though graver in tone than the comedies, they are not the dark tragedies of "King Lear" or "Macbeth" because they end with reconciliation and forgiveness.

Tradition has it that Shakespeare died on his birthday, April 23, 1616, though many scholars believe this is a myth. Church records show he was buried at Trinity Church on April 25, 1616.

### **Controversy And Literary Legacy**

About 150 years after his death, scholars and literary critics began to claim someone else had written the plays attributed to Shakespeare. Much of this stemmed from the **sketchy** details of Shakespeare's life. Official records indicate the existence of a William Shakespeare, but none of these mention him being an actor or a playwright.

Skeptics also questioned how someone could write so poetically and **perceptively** with so little education.

The most serious and intense skepticism began in the 19th century, when adoration for Shakespeare was at its greatest. Some said that English aristocrat Edward de Vere was the true author, pointing to his extensive knowledge of aristocratic society, his education and the structural similarities between his poetry and that found in the works attributed to Shakespeare.

However, the vast majority of Shakespearean scholars say that William Shakespeare wrote all his own plays. They point out that other playwrights of the time also had sketchy histories and came from modest backgrounds. They argue that the King's New School in Stratford could have provided a good foundation for literary writers. Supporters of Shakespeare's authorship argue that the lack of evidence about his life does not mean it didn't exist.

What seems to be true is that William Shakespeare was a respected man of the dramatic arts who wrote plays, and acted in some, in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. But his reputation as a dramatic genius was not recognized until the 19th century.

Today, his plays are highly popular and constantly studied and reinterpreted. The genius of Shakespeare's characters and plots are that they present real human beings with a wide range of emotions who experience conflicts that go beyond their origins in Elizabethan England.

