

William Shakespeare: The Man Who Changed the English Language

More than 400 years ago, in the bustling market town of Stratford-upon-Avon, a boy was born who would grow up to become one of the most famous writers in history. His name was William Shakespeare.

From Stratford to the Stage

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564. We do not know his exact birthday, but records show that he was baptised on 26th April, and his birthday is traditionally celebrated on 23rd April. His father, John Shakespeare, was a glove maker and businessman, while his mother, Mary Arden, came from a farming family.

Young William probably attended the local grammar school, where he would have studied subjects including Latin, history and literature. Books were expensive and there were certainly no televisions, computers or tablets, so stories, plays and performances were an important form of entertainment.

At the age of 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, and together they had three children: Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith.

A New Life in London

As a young man, Shakespeare eventually left Stratford and travelled to London, where the theatre was becoming enormously popular. Crowds gathered to watch everything from comedies and romances to bloody battles and terrifying tragedies.

Shakespeare became an actor and playwright and joined a successful theatre company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later known as the King's Men.

He wrote around 38 plays (the exact number depends on how jointly written works are counted), as well as poems and 154 sonnets. His plays included frightening tragedies such as *Macbeth*, hilarious comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and historical plays about kings and battles.

Many of his plays were performed at the famous Globe Theatre in London. Unlike a modern theatre, the Globe had an open roof, and many audience members stood throughout the performance. These spectators were sometimes called groundlings.

Did Shakespeare Invent Words?

You may have heard that Shakespeare invented hundreds or even thousands of English words. The truth is a little more complicated. Shakespeare used an astonishing variety of vocabulary, and his works contain some of the earliest surviving written examples of many words. However, this does not always prove that he personally invented them — some may already have been spoken or written elsewhere.

Words strongly associated with early appearances in Shakespeare's works include assassination, lonely, majestic, countless, and bedroom.

Shakespeare loved experimenting with language. He could turn nouns into verbs, combine existing words in unusual ways and use familiar words with new meanings. For a writer, language was something to play with.

Shakespearean Phrases We Still Use

Even more remarkably, you may have used Shakespearean expressions without knowing it!

If something suddenly “vanishes into thin air,” you are using a phrase found in *The Tempest*. If you say someone has “a heart of gold,” you are repeating words from *Henry V*. We also find familiar expressions such as “wild-geese chase” in *Romeo and Juliet* and “break the ice” in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

And if someone tells you that “the world is your oyster,” they are using an expression that comes from *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Four centuries later, Shakespeare’s words are still hiding in our everyday conversations!

Shakespeare's Incredible Impact

Shakespeare died in 1616, but his stories certainly did not die with him.

His plays have been performed for centuries and translated into languages around the world. His characters have inspired novels, films, television programmes, musicals and other stories. Even modern tales about forbidden love, jealous villains, mistaken identities and battles for power often explore ideas Shakespeare wrote about centuries ago.

Part of Shakespeare's lasting success comes from the subjects he explored. His characters experience love, friendship, jealousy, ambition, fear, anger, betrayal and grief — emotions that people still understand today.

Most importantly, Shakespeare demonstrated just how powerful words can be. He stretched language, played with it and used it to make audiences laugh, cry, think and imagine.

More than four centuries after his death, schoolchildren still study his work, actors still perform his plays and people still speak phrases found in his writing.

That is quite a legacy for a glove maker’s son from Stratford-upon-Avon.

Comprehension Questions

1. Where was William Shakespeare born?

- A) Oxford
- B) London
- C) Stratford-upon-Avon
- D) Cambridge
- E) Canterbury

2. Why is Shakespeare's exact birthday uncertain?

- A) His family forgot when he was born.
- B) Only a record of his baptism survives.
- C) His birth certificate was destroyed in a fire.
- D) Shakespeare refused to reveal it.
- E) Different calendars were being used.

3. What was the Lord Chamberlain's Men?

- A) A group of soldiers
- B) Shakespeare's school
- C) A group of wealthy businessmen
- D) A theatre company
- E) A group of writers who published books

4. Which statement best describes Shakespeare's writing?

- A) He only wrote tragedies.
- B) He mainly wrote books for children.
- C) He wrote plays and poetry covering many different subjects.
- D) He only wrote about real historical events.
- E) He mainly wrote about his own life.

5. Why does the text say that claiming Shakespeare "invented" hundreds of words can be misleading?

- A) Shakespeare wrote in Latin rather than English.
- B) Other writers invented all of them.
- C) Many of the words no longer exist.
- D) We cannot always prove he was the first person to create or use them.
- E) Shakespeare deliberately copied dictionaries.

6. Which expression is associated with *The Tempest*?

- A) A heart of gold
- B) Vanish into thin air
- C) Wild-geese chase
- D) Break the ice
- E) The world is your oyster

7. What does the word “legacy” mean in the final sentence?

- A) A large amount of money
- B) Something valuable or influential left behind
- C) A difficult problem
- D) A type of performance
- E) A person's childhood

8. Why might Shakespeare's plays still appeal to modern audiences?

- A) They are all based on modern life.
- B) They are very short and simple.
- C) They explore emotions and experiences people still recognise today.
- D) They were originally written for children.
- E) They contain instructions for modern actors.

9. What does the phrase “language was something to play with” suggest about Shakespeare?

- A) He did not take writing seriously.
- B) He enjoyed experimenting creatively with words.
- C) He frequently made spelling mistakes.
- D) He preferred games to writing plays.
- E) He wanted to make English more difficult.

10. Which is the best summary of the passage?

- A) Shakespeare became famous mainly because he was an actor.
- B) Shakespeare's plays tell us exactly what Tudor life was like.
- C) Shakespeare was a successful London businessman who occasionally wrote poems.
- D) Shakespeare was an influential writer whose stories and creative use of language continue to affect culture and English today.
- E) Shakespeare invented most of the words used in modern English.

Answers

1. **C**
2. **B**
3. **D**
4. **C**
5. **D**
6. **B**
7. **B**
8. **C**
9. **B**
10. **D**