

# William shakespeare - an analysis



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## **Why was William Shakespeare regarded as the best English play writer?**

In his book *Will in the World*, Stephen Greenblatt describes Shakespeare as “the greatest playwright not of his age alone but of all time”. This echoes the fact that ‘the Bard’ is often considered to be one of England’s greatest authors. Even today his work is read by thousands of schoolchildren, his plays are performed in many theatres (including the replica Globe in London which is named after him), his plays have been repeatedly filmed and turned into parts of popular culture, and his language is often quoted in various forms. In addition, his home town of Stratford has become one of England’s premier tourist attractions.

Considering Shakespeare is such a famous figure, it is remarkable how little we actually know about his life. In fact, some critics have suggested that this is one reason for his continuing success or for the ‘cult’ of ‘The Bard’: if the man himself is a myth then he can be permanently recreated for many generations. However there are some details that we can identify with relative confidence. Shakespeare was born in 1564, probably on April 23rd as he was baptised on the 26th. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in the county of Warwickshire where his father was a glover and alderman. He received a good education at the local grammar school, the Kings New School, where boys were taught Latin grammar and classical texts (he later used Latin sources for the plots of some of his plays, for example *Titus Andronicus* refers to Ovid’s tales *Metamorphoses* ).

By the time Shakespeare was 18 he was married to a relative and local woman named Anne Hathaway, with whom he eventually had three children,  
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called Susanna, Hamnet and Judith. Between 1585 and 1592 there are few records to indicate where Shakespeare was living and under what occupation, though a number of different stories suggest he was already in London, or had fled accused of poaching, or was in fact himself a teacher: “ He had been in his younger years a schoolmaster in the country” wrote John Aubrey. But by 1592 records suggest that he was established in London as a playwright, where he continued to write and perform plays with considerable success until shortly before his death in 1616 (coincidentally, on April 23rd, his birthday).

When Shakespeare’s plays were originally published all together in the First Folio of 1623, they were collected for the first time, and were divided into comedies, tragedies and histories. While these generic categories are not always upheld today, and there are some plays such as *Measure for Measure* which do not easily fit into one group or another, there are consistencies between some of the plays which allow them to be grouped in this manner.

We can identify certain patterns based upon genre. For example, in *Othello* , Othello’s murder of Desdemona followed by suicide restores the social status quo of a powerful state under white leadership. Hamlet’s death in *Hamlet* disrupts the royal line but succeeds in first purging the state of the corruption, the “ something rotten”, that affects the country. However both of these plays, like *Macbeth* , are mainly concerned not with social relations but with following the decline of a powerful character. It is true that there is often a comic subplot in the plays to provide a light relief, but the main plot follows a tragic flaw in character to a tragic conclusion usually of multiple deaths.

By contrast, where tragedy has multiple deaths, the comedy plays usually offer multiple marriages – this is one of their most characteristic features. Confusion and misinterpretations are resolved not in duels or deaths but in reconciliation and the restoration of characters to their proper social roles. At the end of *Twelfth Night*, Orsino responds to the revelation of Sebastian and Viola's identities with the following lines:

“ If this be so, as yet the glass seems true,  
I shall have share in this most happy wrack” (V. i)

Although “ wrack” suggests the potential for catastrophe, it has found its proper romantic conclusion and the love-plot is untangled. Viola is released from her disguise as the boy Cesario and restored to her proper female role, and everyone's identity revealed. Social reconciliation usually takes this form in Shakespeare's comedies as lovers are united in marriage, usually in groups of two or three pairs whose plots are followed together throughout the play. Multiple narratives are drawn together often in the final scene. The ability to resolve complex plots in such a way is one of the features that make Shakespeare such a great dramatist.

Shakespeare's construction of love, though often seemingly simplistic in its conclusion, is sophisticated in being able to question each character's ability to make the right decisions for themselves, and the different layers of narrative serve as comments upon the other plots that work alongside them. In the complex reversals of affection in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one of Shakespeare's most popular romantic comedies, the proper order of the lovers is disrupted and then restored by Oberon and his servant Puck:

“ When they next awake, all this derision,  
Shall seem a dream and fruitless vision” (III. ii. 370-1)

A popular theme running throughout the plays is disguise and the complication of identity which in the case of gender roles enables Shakespeare to further entangle the male-female tensions which are at the centre of marriage plots. Famous heroines who dress up as boys include Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Rosaline in *As You Like It*, who are able under the cover of their male identities to act out courtship activities, Viola acting on behalf of Orsino in carrying his suit to Olivia and Rosaline teaching Orlando to woo in the guise of Ganymede. In *Twelfth Night* this then creates comic confusion (and sometimes pain) in a typical love triangle:

“ My master loves her dearly,  
And I (poor monster) fond as much on him,  
And she (mistaken) seems to dote on me” (II. ii)

Viola is a “ monster” in the play because she is not in her proper position as a woman, and cannot express her feelings to the Duke. It is only when she is restored to her female role that the plot can be properly concluded. In speeches such as this one, the audience’s ability to see which way love is really directed in the play create a distance of dramatic irony that reduces the damaging effect of characters who are experiencing pain. Also, the passionate language that Shakespeare is sometimes so flowery that it enables him to generate comedy from expressions of passion: “ O when mine eyes did see Olivia first, / Methought she purged the air of pestilence” (I. i). Unlike in tragedy, when Gertrude “ protests too much” in *Hamlet* and is

then horribly implicated in the crimes which have so upset her son, this kind of exaggeration in comedies creates the effect of laughter, because the audience realise that they have more knowledge than the characters in the play.

One of the reasons often given for Shakespeare's enduring popularity is his "universal" appeal: his stories cross many genres and different places and periods in history and thus they always seem relevant to a particular society at a particular moment in time, or can be adapted to seem relevant (and they have been adapted into many languages around the world). Sometimes this provides a political context for the plays, sometimes it merely serves to add fresh ways of interpreting the language and the scenery, for example in Baz Luhrman's film *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* the story takes place in a futuristic modern-day setting at 'Verona Beach' in America, where the commercial rivalry of the Capulets and Montagues replaces their social positions and where guns and advertising are everywhere, contrasting with the romantic poetry as it is retained from the play. But it remains a tragic and affecting story.

Shakespeare himself created an impression of universal drama in the language that he uses in suggesting that what was represented in the theatre could represent the whole world. In *As You Like It* he wrote the following famous lines,

" All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts" (II. vii)

Here he refers to the activities in the theatre, the actors coming on and off stage, to suggest a metaphor for how people live their lives. He suggests that anybody could play a different part, or any part, so we could all recognise ourselves in a Shakespeare play. It also hints towards the way that characters such as Olivia and Rosaline dress up as other than they are, assume different roles or become different 'players'. It was common in Shakespeare's time for the actors in each company to play many different roles, sometimes within the same plays and sometimes across several plays that were being performed in the same week. This kind of language is also reflected in plays such as *Macbeth*, in tragedy rather than in comedy, where in the dying speech of the play's hero or antihero he says,

" To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing." (V. v)

Here the metaphor extends to the process of life itself, which is only like a “poor player” who has only an “hour” to perform. This is perhaps wishful thinking on the part of Macbeth who would like to imagine that his actions were only “performed” and that they “signified nothing”, as he is now consumed by guilt for the murder of Duncan. The metaphors of theatre run right through the plays in a way that both playfully emphasises their artificiality, as stories and characters who are performed many times in many different ways, and a way that makes them feel eternal, that they *could* be acted a countless number of times and still have something to say to us. Also, it is notable that the theatre in which Shakespeare spent the longest years working was called The Globe, drawing attention again to the round stage as representing the universe.

The legacy of Shakespeare’s language can be observed not just in how frequently his plays are quoted but also in everyday language and conversation; even without realising it we have absorbed many of his sayings into modern English which we now take for granted. From Lady Macbeth saying “what’s done is done” in *Macbeth* to Juliet parting from Romeo in “such sweet sorrow,” these phrases have become part of our vocabulary so that often their use is unconscious. Shakespeare also used proverbs which may have been popular at the time and which have been handed down to us through the medium of his plays, including phrases like “to the manner born” and “brevity is the soul of wit”, both of which can be found in *Hamlet*.

By the time Shakespeare died in 1616 he had written a remarkable quantity of plays and enjoyed a successful career as both playwright and actor. When

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his plays were finally published together in 1623 they were preserved for future generations to enjoy and to adapt. Today the popularity of Shakespeare appears to be as high as ever, as people all over the world continue to read the plays and to recognise the universal value of the ' great Bard'.

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