

# RESEARCH PAPER

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William Shakespeare was a late 16<sup>th</sup> century writer, and he is regarded as one of the greatest playwrights of British literature. He had an astonishing skill of communicating universal experiences of humanity. Although he wrote over 400 years ago, the characters, struggles, and themes found in his plays relate to modern readers and audiences. Researchers can only speculate about his life and the influences on him, but they do know that he vastly contributed to the development of literature and has been an influential figure in subsequent history.

Understanding the life of any artist is critically important to understanding their art. Although Shakespeare left behind over a hundred works for scholars to analyze, very little can be known for certain about him as a person. A number of church registries and legal documents have survived, but he left behind no personal letters or diaries.<sup>1</sup> Many biographers read his sonnets and plays like they are autobiographies.<sup>2</sup> However, most agree that the best way to construct a picture of his life is to look at his historical context. Then, based on official records and knowledge of 16th century England, readers can make educated assumptions about how important life events likely influenced him as a writer.<sup>3</sup>

Shakespeare was born in April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, England.<sup>4</sup> His parents were John Shakespeare and Mary Arden and came from families of farmers. Since there were no schools in their hometowns,<sup>5</sup> they were probably illiterate.<sup>6</sup> John was a glover-whittawyer by

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<sup>1</sup> Lois Potter, Lois. *The Life of William Shakespeare: A Critical Biography* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> David Ellis, *The Truth About William Shakespeare* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 74.

<sup>3</sup> Ellis, 152-153.

<sup>4</sup> Many people celebrate his birthday on April 23, but there is no historical record of his actual birthday. According to the parish register, Shakespeare was baptized on April 26, 1564. "Children Baptized on the 26<sup>th</sup> would have been those born between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup>," Potter, 1.

<sup>5</sup> His father grew up in Snitterfield, and his mother grew up in Wilmocote. Ellis, 22-29.

<sup>6</sup> Potter, 9.

trade<sup>7</sup>, but he was also involved in the local government.<sup>8</sup> Although there are no official school records for Shakespeare, he was most likely educated in a Stratford grammar school.<sup>9</sup> Local public schools during the 16<sup>th</sup> century met six days a week and focused on classical education. They taught Latin and English grammar and basic arithmetic.<sup>10</sup>

In 1582 Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, and over the course of their marriage, they had three children.<sup>11</sup> In the following years, he became a well-known actor and a playwright. By 1592, he had moved to London and had helped found The Lord Chamberlin's Men.<sup>12</sup> The company performed in outdoor theatres and royal courts,<sup>13</sup> and Shakespeare wrote the majority of his famous plays, such as *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*, while he was touring with them.<sup>14</sup> Shakespeare kept writing plays until several years before his death.<sup>15</sup> He lived to be fifty-two years and died on April 23, 1616.<sup>16</sup>

Biographers are not certain what influenced him to become a playwright. While he was growing up in Stratford, he was probably introduced to drama and stage conventions by bands of traveling players.<sup>17</sup> As theater grew in popularity, the demand for new plays increased.<sup>18</sup> When he wrote his plays, he was most likely influenced by his personal experience and current events.

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<sup>7</sup>A whittawyer (also called white-tawyer) is someone who softens white leather. Potter, 8.

<sup>8</sup> When Shakespeare was five, his father was the elected bailiff in Stratford. The duties of a bailiff would have been like those of a mayor. Ellis, 23.

<sup>9</sup> "His writings prove him to have been educated and there does not appear a reasonable alternative to his having acquired that education in the only public school." Ellis, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Ellis, 40.

<sup>11</sup> "William Shakespeare Biography," Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/william-shakespeare/william-shakespeare-biography/> (accessed 13 October 2019)

<sup>12</sup> "The company would later become The King's Men under the patronage of King James I (from 1603). "William Shakespeare Biography."

<sup>13</sup> Potter, 67.

<sup>14</sup> "William Shakespeare Biography."

<sup>15</sup> Potter, 401.

<sup>16</sup> "He certainly appears to have died in Stratford." Ellis, 127.

<sup>17</sup> Potter, 14-16.

<sup>18</sup> Potter, 68.

However, readers of Shakespeare can only speculate on how many of his plays were pure imagination and how many were inspired by his lived experience.

The environment in which children grow up and their relationships with their parents usually have lasting impacts,<sup>19</sup> and research has shown that most people who are highly creative had strong mother figures in their lives.<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare was the first-born son, the first child to survive infancy, and an only child for two years.<sup>21</sup> During these formative years, he was likely spoiled by his parents, especially his mother.

Even though his plays already contained themes of sorrow, the death of his eleven-year-old son, Hamnet, most likely influenced his writing.<sup>22</sup> For example, *King John* is thought to have been written around the time of Hamnet's death. In one scene, Queen Constance fears her son might be killed by his abductors. Many biographers think that Shakespeare was describing his own grief when he wrote her monologue.<sup>23</sup>

Grief fills the room up of my absent child,  
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,  
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,  
Remembers me of all his gracious parts.<sup>24</sup>

Current events had a strong influence on Shakespeare's plays. Although he never explicitly reveals his personal opinions on the issues, the political setting of many of his plays reflects the political environment during his day. For example, during the prologue of the final act of *Henry V*, the Chorus describes Henry's triumphant return.

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<sup>19</sup> Ellis, 39.

<sup>20</sup> Potter, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Potter, 10.

<sup>22</sup> Shakespeare's eleven-year-old son, Hamnet, died in 1596. Ellis, 18.

<sup>23</sup> It is important to note that some scholars completely disagree and think that *King John* was written long before the death of Hamnet. Ellis, 18.

<sup>24</sup> All quotations of Shakespeare's plays come from Folger Digital Texts. William Shakespeare, *King John*, ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles, Folger Digital Texts, [www.folgerdigitaltexts.org](http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org) (accessed 2 November 2019), 3.2.95-98.

As, by a lower but loving likelihood  
Were now the general of our gracious empress,  
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,  
How many would the peaceful city quit  
To welcome him!<sup>25</sup>

No doubt this is a direct reference to events surrounding the Nine Years' War.<sup>26</sup> Near the time of writing, the Earl of Essex was leading an army into Ireland with orders by Queen Elizabeth I to suppress the rebels.<sup>27</sup>

Shakespeare wrote at least thirty-seven plays, four poems, and 154 sonnets.<sup>28</sup> His dramas are regarded as his most important works, and they are divided into three categories: comedies, tragedies, and histories. As a playwright, he would deploy poetic devices. For example, the witches from *Macbeth* speak in trochees:<sup>29</sup> "Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."<sup>30</sup> In contrast, all of the other characters speak in iambs.<sup>31</sup> For instance, in the same scene, Macbeth says: "I conjure you by that which you profess (Howe'er you come to know it), answer me."<sup>32</sup> The clash of meters is unexpected and adds tension to the scene. Moreover, trochaic meter sounds strange to the ear, representing the supernatural, while iambic meter sounds natural and pleasant.

One of Shakespeare's most significant influences was his role in the development of the modern English language. He had a remarkably large vocabulary<sup>33</sup>, and his works contain over

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<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 5.1.30-35.

<sup>26</sup> The Nine Years' War (1593 – 1603) is also called Tyrone's Rebellion. It marks the beginning of England's control over all of Ireland. This is not the same Nine Years' War as the War of The Grand Alliance (1688-1697). James O'Neill, "The Nine Years' War, 1593-1603: O'Neill, Mountjoy and the Military Revolution," *H-War* (March 2019), H-Net, <https://networks.h-net.org> (accessed 1 November 2019).

<sup>27</sup> Ellis, 111.

<sup>28</sup> "William Shakespeare Biography."

<sup>29</sup> A trochee is comprised of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. Janet Burroway, *Imaginative Writing: Elements of Craft*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, (Boston: Pearson, 2015), 375.

<sup>30</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 4.1.10-11.

<sup>31</sup> An Iamb is comprised of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. Burroway, 376.

<sup>32</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 4.1.10-52-53.

<sup>33</sup> Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 228.

20,000 different words.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, his vocabulary included words that were very new,<sup>35</sup> and he invented at least 1,700 of his own words.<sup>36</sup> For example, he coined the words assassination, premeditated, reliance, indistinguishable.<sup>37</sup> Many common expressions are attributed to him<sup>38</sup> including, “as dead as a doornail.”<sup>39</sup> “laughing-stocks,”<sup>40</sup> and “it was Greek to me.”<sup>41</sup>

Shakespeare had a profound influence on writers that followed.<sup>42</sup> For example, John Keats, one of the greatest English poets, admired Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays. In 1817, he wrote to his friend John Reynolds about Shakespeare’s poems.

One of the three books I have with me is Shak[e]speare’s Poems: I never found so many beauties in the sonnets—they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally—in the intensity of working out conceits. Is this to be borne? Hark ye!<sup>43</sup>

In addition to reading Shakespeare, Keats may have borrowed ideas from *The Sonnets* because some of his poems have similarities in style and themes.

Charles Dickens was another famous writer who was influenced by Shakespeare. He was a was a member of the Shakespeare Club and owned a twenty-two-volume edition of *Shakespeare’s Plays and Poems*.<sup>44</sup> When he wrote *Oliver Twist*, he appears to allude to *Macbeth* through the character of Sikes.<sup>45</sup> After he brutally murders Nancy, Sikes shouts, “So much

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<sup>34</sup> In comparison, the King James Version of the Bible contains about 8,000 different words. Laurie J. White, *King Alfred’s English: A History of the Language We Speak and Why We Should Be Glad We Do*, (The Shorter Word Press, 2009), 130

<sup>35</sup> “The earliest instance of which we find them at all is only a year or two before he uses them” Baugh, 228.

<sup>36</sup> White, 130.

<sup>37</sup> Baugh, 228.

<sup>38</sup> White, 130.

<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare, *Henry VI, Part 2*, 4.10.41-42.

<sup>40</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 3.1.86.

<sup>41</sup> Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 1.2.295.

<sup>42</sup> Many titles of books are inspired by lines from Shakespeare’s plays. For example, *Brave New World* (*The Tempest*, 5.1.217), *The Sound and the Fury* (*Macbeth*, 5.5.30), *The Fault in Our Stars* (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.147) etc.

<sup>43</sup> John Keats, *Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends*, ed. Sidney Calvin, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org) (accessed 31 October 2019), 45.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Schlicke, “Dickens and Shakespeare” in *The Japan Branch Bulletin of the Dickens Fellowship* No. 27 (October 2004), The Dickens Fellowship: Japan Branch, <http://www.dickens.jp/bulletin/bulletin-e.html> (accessed 1 November 2019), 85.

<sup>45</sup> This literary analysis comparing Sikes to characters in *Macbeth* was made by Paul Schlicke. Schlicke, 94.

blood!” which may allude to Lady Macbeth’s lines “Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.”<sup>46</sup> Then, he is tormented by the memory of her eyes which parallels how Macbeth is tormented by the ghost of Banquo. In the end, Sikes is murdered in his sleep just like Macbeth.<sup>47</sup>

Over four hundred years later, Shakespeare’s works continue to impact the world. Many modern audiences are familiar with his works through education and entertainment. According to the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Research Report, Shakespeare dominated the required reading lists in most American high schools throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, data collected from a sampling of 322 public schools indicates that *Romeo and Juliet* was required by 90% of the schools and *Macbeth* was required by 81% of them.<sup>48</sup> The report cited that the major reason for *Romeo and Juliet*’s popularity was due to film adaptations.<sup>49</sup> Movies not only make his plays more accessible to high school students, but they also play a major role in his global influence.<sup>50</sup> *The Guinness Book of Records* named him “best-selling playwright” and “most filmed author,” and as of 2014, there have been 420 film adaptations of his plays.<sup>51</sup>

Although Shakespeare’s life is full of mystery, there is no question that he has been an important figure in literature and history. The quest to understand his life and study his works continues to this day, and the internet makes Shakespeare’s writings free and accessible to an

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<sup>46</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.1.43-44

<sup>47</sup> Schlicke, 94.

<sup>48</sup> In contrast, *Great Expectations* by Dickens was required by only 44% of the 322 schools. Arthur N. Applebee, *Literature in the Secondary School: Studies of Curriculum and Instruction in the United States*, (National Council of Teachers of English, 1993), 69-71.

<sup>49</sup> Applebee, 71.

<sup>50</sup> Potter, 429-430.

<sup>51</sup> Kevin Lynch, “William Shakespeare turns 450-Ten starting Great Bard-themed world records,” (23 April 2014) Guinness World Records, [www.guinnessworldrecords.com](http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com), (accessed 15 October 2019).

enormous audience. By writing so many brilliant, timeless plays, he has escaped the fate of the dusty death. Tomorrow has come, and he is still heard!<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 5.5.23-26.



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