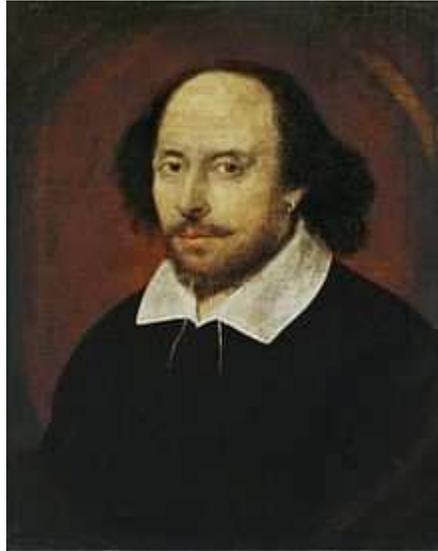


William Shakespeare



The third son of a rich merchant, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, in central England. His birthday is not sure, but many biographers say it was on 23rd April, St. George's Day, that is the same day on which he died : 23rd April 1616.
(in the photo below you can see his birthplace)



Only rich people could afford to send their children to school at those times, and young William went to the local Grammar School, where he studied Latin and Roman history.

At the age of eighteen he married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than himself. They had three children: a daughter, Susanna, and the twins Hamnet(who died at eleven) and Judith.

Some years after his marriage, maybe for financial difficulties, Shakespeare left Stratford and moved to London in search for fortune. There he became involved in the theatre scene, first as an actor and then as a playwright for the company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men. (see page..) At the same time William started to write plays for his company. In 1599 the company built its own theatre -The Globe – on the south bank of the Thames. Unfortunately it burnt down a few years later.

On Queen Elizabeth's death the Chamberlain's Men changed their name to the King's Men and in 1609 they took over the Blackfriars Theatre.

By that time Shakespeare had written lots of works for the theatre : plays and tragedies as well as some poetry. Some of his plays had already been published between 1594 and 1598 and he was a rich and popular man.

In 1613 he retired to his native Stratford-upon-Avon where he died in 1616.

Nowadays Stratford is a popular tourist destination where visitors can see Shakespeare's birth-house, his wife's cottage, the old Grammar School and the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, where his plays are staged.

The Elizabethan Theatre.

The name of Queen Elizabeth I is known as a "golden age" for England: wealth poured in from the colonies and the Royal Navy commanded the seas after they had defeated the Spanish Armada. But that was also a great time for culture : the Queen and the court enjoyed poetry and the theatre. Elizabeth herself wrote some poetry and short plays which were performed for of her friends. Shakespeare is usually considered the most prominent representative of the Elizabethan culture, but other great writers were as popular as him : the playwrights Christopher Marlowe – Shakespeare's rival – Edmund Spenser and Ben Jonson.

As most people could neither read nor write, tragedies and plays were the only way people could learn about past and present events, and share information: a kind of newscast. And the theatre was the place where people met and shared a laugh or cried without minding social differences.

At first actors were considered a bit more than beggars and had to seek the protection of some wealthy nobleman, or patron. Plays were performed in the courtyards of pubs and inns or of some rich house.

The first theatre was opened in Shoreditch, an ill-famed area on the outskirts of London , in 1576 and was strictly controlled by authorities who were afraid riots may take place during performances. Gradually political authorities became more tolerant and many noblemen even set up their own theatre companies such as Lord Chamberlain's Men.

The Elizabethan theatres were very different from modern ones: they were in the open air and had a hexagonal or octagonal shape with a central yard surrounded by galleries. A theatre performance was an important event which attracted lots of people, so a playhouse normally had room for thousand viewers. Rich people could afford to pay a more expensive ticket sat in the galleries while poor people stood in the space opposite the stage (called **pit**).

As there was no electricity performances took place in the daylight in the afternoons.

Women could not appear on stage, so women's roles were played by young boys (in some Shakespearian comedies women characters wore men's clothes to pretend to be a man so on the stage there was a boy who pretended to be a woman who pretended to be a man!)

The Globe Theatre was destroyed by a fire a few years after it had been built. A new theatre stands now on its original place, it was rebuilt in the 1990s.



Who is Hamlet?

About 400 years before Shakespeare wrote his tragedy, an old document mentioned the story of a king in Denmark who killed his brother and married his sister-in-law. The dead king had a son Amleth who killed his uncle and then married a beautiful Scottish princess. This story was written by Saxo Grammaticus and - differently from Shakespeare's- has an happy ending. This story fascinated many writers and poets from all over the world who wrote about revenge: the young prince wants to avenge his father. Of course Shakespeare read these works and but his HAMLET is not only a drama of revenge, it is by far more complex. He sees the world as a terrible place and wants to eliminate all evils. He feels unable to take action and has a lot of psychological problems, which is typical of many young people. Also Hamlet's girlfriend Ophelia has inspired writers and painters of all ages.



Her character has been associated with madness : she becomes mad when she discovers that Hamlet has gone mad does not love her any longer. When Hamlet kills her father and then her dear brother Ophelia drowns herself . Ophelia is a good daughter who always obeys her father but she is destroyed by her family and social conventions. Like Hamlet she can be seen as an adolescent girl with typical problems of her age.

Hamlet on the screen.

TO BE OR NOT TO BE?

To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;

For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
 The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
 The insolence of office and the spurns
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
 When he himself might his quietus make
 With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
 No traveller returns, puzzles the will
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
 And thus the native hue of resolution
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
 And enterprises of great pith and moment
 With this regard their currents turn awry,
 And lose the name of action.--Soft you now!
 The fair Ophelia!
 Nymph, in thy orisons
 Be all my sins remember'd.

Translation

Essere, o non essere, questo è il dilemma: se sia più nobile nella mente soffrire i colpi di fionda e i dardi dell'oltraggiosa fortuna o prendere le armi contro un mare di affanni e, contrastandoli, porre loro fine? Morire, dormire... nient'altro, e con un sonno dire che poniamo fine al dolore del cuore e ai mille tumulti naturali di cui è erede la carne: è una conclusione da desiderarsi devotamente. Morire, dormire. Dormire, forse sognare. Sì, qui è l'ostacolo, perché in quel sonno di morte quali sogni possano venire dopo che ci siamo cavati di dosso questo groviglio mortale deve farci riflettere. È questo lo scrupolo che dà alla sventura una vita così lunga. Perché chi sopporterebbe le frustate e gli scherni del tempo, il torto dell'oppressore, la contumelia dell'uomo superbo, gli spasimi dell'amore disprezzato, il ritardo della legge, l'insolenza delle cariche ufficiali, e il disprezzo che il merito paziente riceve dagli indegni, quando egli stesso potrebbe darsi quietanza con un semplice stiletto? Chi porterebbe fardelli, grugnendo e sudando sotto il peso di una vita faticosa, se non fosse che il terrore di qualcosa dopo la morte, il paese inesplorato dalla cui frontiera nessun viaggiatore fa ritorno, sconcerta la volontà e ci fa sopportare i mali che abbiamo piuttosto che accorrere verso altri che ci sono ignoti? Così la coscienza ci rende tutti codardi, e così il colore naturale della risolutezza è reso malsano dalla pallida cera del pensiero, e imprese di grande altezza e momento per questa ragione deviano dal loro corso e perdono il nome di azione.

COMMENTARY

In this universally famous soliloquy **Hamlet** is torn between suicide and life. Life appears to him as painful and full of troubles. Against this hard life suicide is a solution. The general idea about life is a negative one. In fact **Hamlet** sees life as a continuous fight against evils and pains. He also thinks there is no reward in the end he doubts life after death exists. So he wonders if it nobler to suffer and oppose hardship and choose death. Death, like sleep, is seen as a way out, because it puts an end to suffering. He is afraid of being accused of cowardice and he also fears that death would not be a solution.

Now watch the video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdp6dpiK8Ko>

Hamlet has always been a hit not only on the stage but on the screen as well.

In 1900 the great actress Sarah Bernhardt played the role of Hamlet (strange but true) in a silent movie. Other silent movies on Hamlet followed in 1907, 1908, 1910 and 1913.

Another woman played the role of Hamlet on the screen : it was the Danish actress Asta Nielsen in 1920.

One of the greatest British actors, sir Lawrence Olivier directed the 1948 film version of Hamlet where he also played the role of the Danish prince.

The Italian director Franco Zeffirelli chose the American star Mel Gibson and other famous actors such as Glenn Close to play the Shakespearean tragedy in 1990:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a38HZFbhB-M>

In 1996 Kenneth Branagh, a famous British actor and director, made a film of the complete tragedy.

An unusual Hamlet was played by the Hollywood star Ethan Hawke in **HAMLET 2000**, which is set in modern New York. In this film the actors are modern people and countries are corporations. Watch the famous soliloquy:

<http://www.google.it/>