

Shakespeare: unanswered questions

Nearly 450 years after his birth, William Shakespeare is still generally considered to be the greatest writer in the English language. Yet little is known about the man himself and some critics actually doubt whether he wrote the plays at all.

Shakespeare is generally believed to have been born on the 23rd April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England, the son of a glove maker. He died on the same day in 1616, at the age of 52, in the same town. He was buried in the church where he had been baptised.

Very few facts are known of Shakespeare's early life. He married at 18, but he soon left Stratford and his family to start his acting career. By 1610, Shakespeare had already written most of his 37 plays and his poetry. In this year, 400 years ago, at the age of 46, he retired from London, where he had been living and working for many years.

It is certain that this later period in Shakespeare's life was quieter. It was a time when his acting company toured much less across the country. Shakespeare was also in a very comfortable financial position and he was officially a 'gentleman', much admired by King James and other important figures. He had a very large house in Stratford, as well as being the owner and landlord of other property. In addition, he part-owned two theatres in London, where his plays were regularly performed.

However, this historical figure is still surrounded by mystery: details of Shakespeare's early life are thin; there is little information about his private life; for a literary genius, his education and also his life experiences seem surprisingly limited. Some critics even question whether the plays are actually his, and have suggested more educated, widely-travelled authors*. Others consider the size of his house and wealth to be evidence that William Shakespeare was in fact a businessman, not a playwright. He certainly had an eye for business and investment, as well as being a remarkable writer. That is, if you believe he wrote the plays!

James Shapiro, a Professor of English, recently published his book *Contested Will*, the latest in a line of books examining exactly who wrote these famous works. He concludes with certainty that the plays are Shakespeare's own, although he does highlight the theory that many of the later plays were actually co-written. This of course is not a popular theory with many lovers of Shakespeare who will prefer not to think of him as a team-player. All things considered, it is unlikely that this book will end the mystery and controversy which surrounds this literary giant.

* *Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, both published authors, and the Earl of Derby, a well-known figure in the theatre, are just some of the writers suggested.*

1 Read the text (paragraphs 1–4) and put these events in Shakespeare's life in order.

- a He was buried
- b He got married
- c He left his hometown
- d He lived in the city, acting and writing
- e He was born
- f He stopped working so hard and returned to his home town
- g He was baptised
- h He started acting
- i He died

- 2** Read the rest of the text (paragraphs 5–6) and find out:
- What are the ‘unanswered questions’, mentioned in the title?
 - What two important conclusions does Shapiro reach, in his new book about Shakespeare?

3 Answer these statements with true (T), false (F) or don’t know (?).

- Shakespeare was born in the spring.
- Shakespeare died on his birthday.
- He had many children.
- His father was a professional actor.
- He did not live with his wife and family for much of his working life.
- He enjoyed his retirement in Stratford.
- Shakespeare became poorer as he grew older.
- Shakespeare and the King were friends.
- He wrote most of his plays when in retirement.
- He had a very good education.
- Shakespeare was a good businessman.
- Shapiro’s book will clear up the mysteries about Shakespeare.

4 What do you find interesting or surprising in the text? Pick out two pieces of information and then tell your partner.

5 Answer question 1, then choose three of the other points that you have strong opinions about, to discuss in groups.

- Who is the greatest writer in your own first language? Why?
- It is pointless studying the literary classics at school – children cannot understand them so are bored by them.
- Young people these days rarely choose to go to the theatre over the cinema – cinema and film have killed the theatre and plays.
- Governments need to support theatres financially, to ensure that they can compete with film.
- The theatre is for the rich in most countries – tickets are overpriced.
- In Shakespeare’s day, actors were generally poor and had low status – this is more or less the same in my country these days.
- It’s much easier to act in a film than a play – if I was an actor, I’d always choose film.

Glossary

admire (*verb*) - to respect someone or something: *I’ve always admired her work*

controversy (*noun*) - a disagreement that a lot of people have strong feelings about: *the decision by teachers to work part-time is causing controversy*

co-write (*verb*) - to write with someone else

critic (*noun*) - someone who does not agree with something and gives their opinion about it

doubt (*verb*) - to think that something will not happen or that it is untrue

highlight (*verb*) - to describe something in such a way that makes people notice it

limited (*adj*) - not very good, or not very great in amount

mystery (*noun*) - a quality that makes someone or something difficult to explain, in a way which makes them seem interesting or exciting.

wealth (*noun*) - a large amount of money and other valuable things