Shakespeare, His Life and Plays

Will Fowler

About Shakespeare
William Shakespeare is the most famous writer of plays in the English language. He was born in 1564, in Stratford-upon-Avon. He wrote thirty-nine plays and hundreds of poems. In 1582 he married Anne Hathaway and they had three children. Living in London, while his family stayed in Stratford, he was a member of a theatre company which performed at the Globe and Blackfriars theatres. His plays were performed for Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. In 1610 he returned to Stratford and continued to write until his death in 1616.

Summary
In Shakespeare, His Life and Plays, Will Fowler describes Shakespeare’s life from the early times in Stratford, then as an actor and dramatist in London, to his final years.

Chapter 1: This chapter covers Shakespeare’s childhood and the influence of religion in the development of the arts.

Chapter 2: This chapter describes Shakespeare’s marriage and his family life, including the birth of his children.

Chapter 3: The biggest gap in knowledge about his life is between 1585 and 1592, during which he has already become an actor and playwright. Early plays included The Comedy of Errors and The Taming of the Shrew.

Chapter 4: This chapter explains how it was necessary for writers to have a patron who would support them. It also analyses Shakespeare’s relationship with the Earl of Southampton.

Chapter 5: This chapter describes his plays, amongst them Henry V, As You Like It, Julius Caesar and Much Ado About Nothing. We learn about actors, patrons and the state of the theatre.

Chapter 6: Between 1594 and 1598, Shakespeare wrote the very popular plays Richard II, Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Chapter 7: This chapter discusses the different versions of Hamlet and how Shakespeare designed his own version.

Chapter 8: Shakespeare stopped acting probably in 1603. Now famous, he spent his time directing his plays and writing. At this time he wrote three tragedies, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth.

Chapter 9: Shakespeare returned to Roman history for the subjects of the next three plays: Julius Caesar, Anthony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus.

Chapter 10: Shakespeare lived in London throughout most of his working life and his family stayed in Stratford. He returned to Stratford in about 1610, when he wrote The Winter’s Tale.

Chapter 11: In Stratford, he also wrote his final play, The Tempest. And that was the place where he died in 1616.

Chapter 12: Will Fowler discusses how and why Shakespeare’s work, (he wrote poetry as well as plays) is still enjoyable for people today.

Background and themes
Elizabethan times: This was an exciting period of history, with wars, plagues, the discovery of new continents, rebellions, and in 1605, the Gunpowder Plot, when Catholics tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament. It was a time when everyone had to please the king or queen if they wanted to succeed. If they didn’t, they sometimes lost their lives. It was a good time for the theatre in England, which helped Shakespeare become a great dramatist. The first public theatre was built in London in 1576, when Shakespeare was about seven years old. There were many other fine dramatists in his time, such as Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, and famous actors, who were Elizabethan celebrities. Going to the theatre was a very popular form of entertainment. Shakespeare was always experimenting with the style of his plays, responding to fashions and new ideas in the London theatre.

The Globe: A reconstruction of Shakespeare’s wooden theatre, also called the Globe, was built near the original site in 1997. Most of the audience have to stand, as they did in Shakespeare’s day.
Shakespeare nowadays: Shakespeare’s work continues to be performed around the world in different media – on television, radio and cinema, as well as in the theatre. The Royal Shakespeare Company, which employs some of Britain’s finest actors, is based in Stratford and London. They put on several Shakespeare plays every year.

Shakespeare’s work has been translated into almost every language, allowing non-English speakers to enjoy his exciting stories and studies of human feelings. But the beauty of Shakespeare’s English is a rich part of the experience, and even if the audience doesn’t understand every word or phrase, they can enjoy the sound of the language. Many English people find Shakespeare difficult to understand. He uses old words and phrases which we no longer use today, his grammar is sometimes very complex and he refers to contemporary events that mean nothing to us now.

Shakespeare’s plays mirror today’s society with their themes of love, forgiveness, loss, lust for power and deceit. Many of the themes in his plays are ones we are interested in today. One example is the theme of racism through his characterisation of Othello the Moor of Venice, and Shylock, the Jew in The Merchant of Venice.

Shakespeare, His Life and Plays gives us information about contemporary politics and culture. It helps us to understand what is happening in Shakespeare’s plays. It also helps to explain why Shakespeare is still popular today.

The film
Students may also have seen Shakespeare in Love, a film made in 1998 starring Gwyneth Paltrow and Joseph Fiennes as Shakespeare. The film was very successful and won many awards. It recreates Elizabethan London and gives an entertaining visual account of how the theatre worked in Shakespeare’s day.

Film directors can add a broad visual interpretation to Shakespeare’s beautiful words. They can show things that are difficult to show on stage – battle scenes, castles, forests and the ghosts, in Hamlet and Macbeth for example.

There are at least five film versions of Hamlet and three of Othello. Romeo and Juliet was filmed by Baz Luhrmann, who set the story in a violent urban multi-ethnic world of rival street gangs, but he kept Shakespeare’s original language.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

1 Pair work: Have students to write down everything they know about Shakespeare under the following headings:

- Personal information
- Plays he has written
- Characters from his plays

Ask them to work with a partner and discuss what each of them has written under the previous headings.

2 Discuss: Have students to read the Introduction and explain what they learn about Shakespeare’s:

- student’s life?
- feelings?
- private life?
- political opinions?

While reading

3 Group work: (page 9) Nobody knows what happened to Shakespeare between 1585 and 1592. Get the students to work in groups and try and explain why this is so. Where does historical information come from? Students may like to start the work by discussing what Shakespeare did in the years after he left for London. (Historical information comes from official records, surviving diaries, etc).

After reading

4 Discuss: Ask students to work in pairs or small groups. They choose three facts about Shakespeare’s life from this section that they think were important in Shakespeare becoming a successful dramatist. Compare facts in a class discussion.

5 Pair work: Ask students to work in pairs. Imagine they were a reporter and could have a conversation with Shakespeare in 1585. They role play the conversation. Student A will play the role of the reporter and Student B will be Shakespeare.

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

6 Discuss: Have students to have a class discussion based on this question:

Why do you think that Robert Green, the first person to write about Shakespeare, criticised him? Ask students to keep a record of their hypotheses.

While reading

7 Group work: Ask students to work in 4 groups. Give each group a slip of paper with some names connected to Shakespeare. They discuss and report how those names are connected to Shakespeare’s life:

Group 1: Venus and Adonis
- The Comedy of Errors

Group 2: Edward Alleyn
- Lord Ferdinando

Group 3: The Rape of Lucrece
- James Burbage
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Group 4: The Earl of Southampton
The Earl of Essex

After reading
8 Pair work: Have students to work in pairs. They choose five plays mentioned in this section. They write one sentence describing it, without using the title of the play in the sentence, for example: An Italian businessman borrows money from a Jew in this play. (The Merchant of Venice). Ask pairs to swap sentences. Which pair can find the correct five titles first?

9 Discuss: Have students to discuss the following statement: ‘Shakespeare’s greatest characteristic as a playwright is the fact that he copied ideas from other writers.’ Ask them to express their agreement or disagreement, supported by evidence.

10 Check: Ask students to browse the chapters to confirm or refute their hypothesis in point 10.

Chapters 5–6
Before reading
11 Discuss: Have students to discuss the following questions in groups:
How do you think writers managed to represent when and where a story took place during 1950s?
How different could that be from the way this can be done today?
Each group will report ideas to the class.

While reading
12 Discuss: Have students to write down the names of plays they read about and to choose one and explain why they would like to see it.

After reading
13 Answer: Have students to tell you: WHO …

was Thesecus? was Lord was Lord
Cobham? Hudson?
was Falstaff? was John was Shallow?
Oldcastle?
was Will Kempe? belonged to the
Oldcastle family?

Chapters 7–9
Before reading
14 Discuss: Focus on the students’ prior knowledge. Get them to talk about what they know about the plays Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, Twelfth Night and Antony and Cleopatra. Get them to discuss the plot, characters and setting. Keep a record of their ideas on the blackboard.

While reading
15 Write: Ask students to keep a record of the information they find while reading on the plays mentioned in point 15 so that they can confirm or reject the information suggested in point 15.

16 Discuss: Have students to have a class discussion on the following:
If you had tickets to see any of the following plays, which one would you go to? Why?
Measure for Measure, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra or Twelfth Night.
Hamlet, Ophelia, Macbeth, Viola. Which of these characters from Shakespearian plays do you sympathise with? Why?

Chapters 10–12
Before reading
17 Group work: Ask students to discuss the following questions in groups:
What kind of plays has Shakespeare written so far?
Has he become famous? Why do you say so?
Why do you think he might have wanted to return to Stratford at this point?

While reading
18 Pair work: Have students to read pages 53–55 and ask them to answer the following in pairs:
Why is Shakespeare still so popular nearly 400 years after his death? Which of these reasons does the writer give in this chapter?

a Because his plays are funny.
b Because his views on politics and religion are the same as ours.
c Because his writing helps people to understand life better.
d Because he was an actor and wrote plays that make good theatre.
e Because he understood that ordinary people suffer in the same way as kings and queens.
f Because he set his plays among ordinary people in small towns.

After reading
19 Answer: Get students to answer these questions:

a What is the title of the last play that Shakespeare wrote by himself?
b What is a tempest?
c What has Prospero learned from his books?
d How does Prospero bring his enemies to his island?
e Who do many writers think that Prospero is meant to be?
f What happened to the Globe theatre in 1613?
g Why did Shakespeare leave his ‘second-best bed’ to his wife in his will?

Vocabulary activities
For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.