

William Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Theatre



His Life

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564. The third child of John Shakespeare, a glove-maker, and Mary Arden, William went to Stratford Grammar School, where he received a good basic education.

In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway. They had three children.

Shakespeare probably left Stratford around 1586 to join a company of travelling actors and moved to London. He became a very popular writer of plays and of poetry.

William wrote 38 plays - tragedies, comedies, Histories and romances. *Hamlet*, like many of his dramas, was performed at the *Globe Theatre* in London.

When he retired from writing, Shakespeare went back to Stratford and lived in a large, comfortable house called *New Place*. He died on his 52nd birthday in 1616 and was buried in *Holy Trinity Church* in Stratford. If you go to Stratford, you can visit his original birthplace.

The Globe and Pre-Shakespearean Drama

The Globe was very different from a modern theatre: the plays took place in the open air in daylight when the weather was good, also there was no scenery on stage.

In the 16th century theatre became the most popular form of entertainment in England and this strong demand for entertainment started the formation of small companies of actors, maintained by great noblemen. When a play was successful, the actors had the permission to perform it in public.

The picture shows a typical theatre where most of Shakespeare's plays were performed. The action took place mainly on the large platform behind which there was another stage separated by a curtain.

The galleries for the audience surrounded almost completely the stage, and people watched the action from three sides, being part of the performance themselves.

There weren't women in Elizabethan companies and female parts were played by boys who spoke in falsetto voices (this explains why even in the most romantic plays there were no kisses between the lovers!)

Between two and three thousand people, from all classes of society, attended the plays and the audience consisted of very different people: noblemen, merchants, artisans, soldiers and servants: a variegated and strange crowd, often noisy and out of control!

Now answer these questions:

- 1) Where was William Shakespeare born?
- 2) What was his father?
- 3) Why did he leave Stratford in 1586 and what for?
- 4) What kind of education did young William have?
- 5) What was the Globe? Can you describe it briefly?
- 6) What did William do when he retired?
- 7) What kind of literature did Shakespeare write?
- 8) When did the actors have the permission to perform a play in public?
- 9) What kind of people could you meet inside a typical Shakespeare's playhouse?
- 10) William Shakespeare's plays are still very appreciated and loved by people from all over the world: in your opinion, why is that? Explain what makes him a modern writer.