
UNIT 7 SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE AND WORKS

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will give you an account of Shakespeare's life and works. It introduces you to Shakespeare's achievement as a writer and gives you a glimpse of his major plays.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit will briefly introduce you to William Shakespeare as a man and a playwright. Regarded as one of the greatest dramatists of the world, none of his contemporaries could equal him in the universality of his appeal. *Julius Caesar* is one of his major plays, a political tragedy. It depicts the conflict between monarchists and Republicans. The play *Julius Caesar* is among the greatest in English language and in Western Literature. His plays are divided into three genres of tragedy, history and comedy. Among his most famous and critically acclaimed plays are *King Lear*, *A Mid Summer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry IV (Part I)*, *Henry IV (Part II)*, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*.

7.2 SHAKESPEARE'S LIFE AND WORKS

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was also known as the 'Bard of Avon'. He wrote the famous 154 sonnets and numerous highly successful dramatic works. Shakespeare earned praise in the areas of literature, art and theatre. Over the centuries there has been much speculation about the various aspects of Shakespeare's life, authorship and the chronology of his plays and sonnets.

26th April 1564 is claimed to be the date of birth of Shakespeare as births and deaths were not properly recorded in Shakespeare's time. Shakespeare was born in Stratford -On -Avon and baptized in his parish church Holy Trinity. He was the first of the four sons of John Shakespeare (1530-1601) and Mary Arden (1540-1608) who also had four daughters. John Shakespeare was a businessman at Stratford and was also involved in municipal affairs until late 1570s when there was decline in his fortune and he fell into debt. His mother was the daughter of a prosperous farmer. Both his parents were illiterate.

There are no records of Shakespeare's education. He probably began his education at the age of six at the Stratford Grammar school where he learnt what Ben Jonson calls, "Small Latin and Less Greek." Scholars believe that Shakespeare was

removed from school around the age of thirteen because of his father's financial and social difficulties and continued his studies in spite of his removal from Stratford Grammar school.

Shakespeare perhaps worked as an apprentice with his father, but there is speculation also of his being a school teacher or lawyer. This period between 1577 and 1585 known as the lost years also gives us vital information about his marriage. In 1582 at the age of eighteen he married Anne Hathaway (1556-1623) the daughter of a peasant family in the village of Temple Grafton. Anne was eight years older than Shakespeare. In 1583 their first daughter Susanna was born who later married noted physician John Hall.

It is probable that sometime between 1585 and 1592 Shakespeare could have been recruited by Leicester or Queen's men. He became an established actor in London by the end of 1592. He wrote poems and plays and was involved with theatre troupes and acting. Records say that several of his plays were popular by this time including *Henry VI*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Titus Andronicus*. The popular company Pembroke's Men that performed regularly at the court of Queen Elizabeth staged most of his early plays, sponsored by the Earl of Pembroke, Henry Herbert. Before 1592 Shakespeare spent his time both as a writer and actor for Pembroke's Men.

In 1593 'the Plague' broke out in London and forced people to flee the city. Shakespeare probably spent these days travelling between London, Stratford and the provinces, which gave him time to write many more plays and sonnets. By the end of 1593 Shakespeare's hard work got noticed by the Earl of Southampton. Southampton became Shakespeare's patron and his Ovidian narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* was published in April 18, 1593. Among the first of his known published works was the Ovidian narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. This was followed by the *Rape of Lucrece* also dedicated to Southampton in 1594, *The Passionate Pilgrim* in 1599 and *The Phoenix and the Turtle* in 1601.

At the time when he became a prolific writer he also began his association with the Lord Chamberlain's men. These men became the king's men with the accession of James I who bought and performed most of Shakespeare's plays. His friend and actor was also in the troupe. They performed frequently at court and in the theatres that were co-owned by Shakespeare including Blackfriars, The Theatre and The Globe in London till it burnt down during a performance of King Henry VIII.

Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic career developed with the growth and experience of his life and mind. Shakespeare's early plays appeared around 1590-1594 while he was still learning his craft.

The plays from this period are:

Titus Andronicus

Henry VI (three parts)

Love's Labour's Lost

Comedy of Errors

Two Gentlemen of Verona

Richard III

Richard II

Romeo and Juliet

Other works belonging to this period are

Venus and Adonis

The Rape of Lucrece.

In the next five years from 1595-1601 his plays show a rapid growth of his poetic genius. There is a change in style with further increase in maturity.

The works of this period include

King John

The Merchant of Venice

Henry IV (Part I and Part II)

Henry V

The Taming of the Shrew

The Merry Wives of Windsor

Much Ado About Nothing

As you Like It

Twelfth Night

Shakespeare's great tragedies appeared from 1600 to 1608. These plays portray the darker side of human life and experience with a tone of evil and the themes are based on the sins and weaknesses of human beings. The plays had over-whelming passion and great maturity. These works include:

Julius Caesar

Hamlet

All's Well that Ends Well

Measure for Measure

Troilus and Cressida

Othello

King Lear

Macbeth

Antony and Cleopatra

Coriolanus

Timon of Athens

The plays in the last period from 1608 to 1616 are known as 'Last plays' or 'Dramatic Romances'. They are completely different from his earlier plays and reflect a peaceful mind.

The plays of this period include:

Percles

Cymbeline

Winter's Tale

The Tempest

7.3 SHAKESPEARE THE PLAYWRIGHT

Shakespeare's plays are distinguished by immense variety and he is counted among the very few dramatists to have excelled in both tragedy and comedy. He uses different patterns in his tragedies *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* with each having a unique dramatic movement.

Shakespeare's earlier plays had characters that were natural and spontaneous and were effortlessly formed. His later plays had characters that were bold and complex. His characters Rosalind, Portia, Juliet, Cleopatra, Caesar, Brutus, Orlando, Shylock, Falstaff, Touchstone, etc. are strikingly realistic and have unfailing humanity.

Shakespeare was a genius in the use of words and powers of expression. The aptness of words and phrases, the striking similes and metaphors, richness of verse brought astonishing difference to the beauty of his plays. The easy flow of words and the variety of images is visible in his plays. Another achievement of Shakespeare was successful blending of words, metaphors and lyrical passion in his blank verse.

7.4 SHAKESPEARE'S MAJOR PLAYS

Let us look at some of Shakespeare's major plays in detail:

Henry IV (Part I) features Sir John Falstaff, an opportunist. The play is a continuation of the story of Bolingbrook family and Plentagenet monarchy that begins with Henry IV seizing power in the play Richard II. The plot shifts back and forth between the chaotic and disturbed Kingdom of Henry IV and the tavern where Sir John Falstaff is joined by Prince Henry or Hal who is as much fun-loving as himself. Falstaff is also accompanied by his group of rascals. The plot includes rebellion and struggle for power. Prince Hal and Falstaff fight against the rebel Hotspur where Hotspur is killed. The play ends with King Henry and Hal departing for Wales to fight the rebels while Prince John of Lancaster, Hal's younger brother leaves for York to fight with the rebel led by the Earl of Northumberland, Hotspur's father.

Henry IV (Part II) picks up where the earlier play Henry IV ends. The fighting gets over with a lot of confusion but the rebels are defeated and peace is restored. Hal becomes King Henry V. Hal realizes that he must change his boisterous behaviour and become a sober person. Falstaff is banished from Hal's court and lectured to change his rough nature.

Richard II is another history play of Shakespeare in which Richard II is an intelligent but weak king. John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster is the King's uncle and father of the king's rival, Henry Bolingbroke. The king takes away the property of John of Gaunt who dies rich. Bolingbroke with the other nobles rebel against the king and force Richard to give up his throne. Henry Bolingbroke crowns himself as Henry IV. A plot is hatched against Bolingbroke by the Duke of Aumerle, the Bishop of Carlisle and the Abbot of Westminster but fails again. The task for the king now is to tackle his enemies and finally consolidate his authority, the country being in a State of disarray.

From history plays we move on to comedies. An important comic play by Shakespeare is *Twelfth Night*. It was first performed on February 2nd 1602.

In this play, Shakespeare skillfully uses the theme of mistaken identity. The play is set in a place called Illyria where Viola arrives after surviving a shipwreck. She loses contact with her twin brother Sebastian who thinks that his sister is no more alive. Dressed as a man Viola under the name of Cesario enters the service of the Duke of Orsino.

Orsino longs for the love of the bereaved Lady Olivia who is in mourning for her brother's death and uses Viola as the intermediary. Olivia is infatuated by Cesario, while Viola falls in love with the Duke Orsino. Meanwhile Sebastian too survives the shipwreck and comes to Illyria. Olivia asks him to marry her. They are then secretly married by a priest. It is only when the twins Sebastian and Viola appear before Olivia and Orsino do they reveal that they are twins and Viola is a lady. Sir Toby Belch is Olivia's uncle staying with her and is a merry character. The play ends with the declaration of marriage between Duke and Viola and Olivia and Sebastian. Such a pattern of events is repeated in other comedies also.

Shakespeare is particularly famous for tragic plays such as *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Let us first consider *King Lear*, a tragedy of great magnitude.

King Lear, an aging monarch takes the decision to abdicate the throne and divide the kingdom amongst his three daughters: Goneril, Regan and Cordelia. Goneril and Regan are married and they pretend to love him but are essentially self-seeking. On the other hand, Cordelia loves King Lear unselfishly and is loyal to him. King Lear banishes Cordelia but soon realizes his mistake when he observes that Goneril and Regan betrayed him.

The sub-plot of this play includes the Earl of Gloucester whose two sons Edgar and Edmund are at Loggerheads. Edgar is loyal to him and is his heir while Edmund is Gloucester's evil bastard son. Edmund forces his half-brother into exile by concocting false stories against him leading to his lunacy. Gloucester is blinded.

Edgar disguised as Tom O' Bedlam helps Gloucester out of the storm. Lear appears in Dover talking wildly to mice. Gloucester attempts to throw him from the cliff to be saved by Edgar. Edgar reveals his true identity to his father but Gloucester dies. Later, Cordelia dies and Lear who is a broken man also dies falling upon Cordelia.

Throughout the play we find betrayal, lust for power greed and cruelty. The play ends with death everywhere.

Macbeth is considered one of Shakespeare's most powerful tragedies. The play opens in the middle of a thunderstorm where three witches conclude a meeting deciding to confront the great Scottish General Macbeth on his victorious return from a war between Scotland and Norway.

In the next scene the soldier reports to King Duncan of Scotland that his generals Macbeth and Banquo have defeated the army led by the rebel Macdonwald. The three witches greet Macbeth and Banquo with prophecies as they wander on to the heath. Witches predict that Macbeth will become king one day while Banquo will beget a line of kings. Macbeth begins to harbour ambitions of becoming King and decides to murder Duncan. His wife Lady Macbeth agrees to his plan and hatches a conspiracy to murder him. Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle with his entourage and decides to stay at Macbeth's castle. Macbeth murders Duncan while his wife assists him to smear the blood of Duncan on the daggers of the sleeping guards.

Macbeth remembers the prophecy made by the witches about Banquo. He hires two men to murder Banquo, his sons Donalbain and Fleance. Fleance is the only one who escapes. At the banquet, the ghost of Banquo appears to Macbeth making him act and speak strangely. The guests are sent away by his wife.

Disturbed, Macbeth visits the witches again and they tell him to 'beware Macduff' and 'none of woman born shall harm Macbeth' and he will 'never vanquish'd be until great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him.'

Macbeth murders everyone in Macduff's castle including Macduff's wife and children while Macduff is in exile. Lady Macbeth is guilty of the crime committed by her husband and herself and imagines her hands to be covered with blood. She commits suicide.

A battle ensues with Macduff, Malcolm and the Englishman Siward invading Dunsinane Castle. While camping in Birnam forest the soldiers cut down three branches to hide their numbers. Macduff kills Macbeth, proving that witches had made a correct prediction. In the end of the play Malcolm takes over as the rightful king of Scotland restoring peace to the kingdom.

Hamlet is arguably the best known tragedy written by Shakespeare.

The play deals with the revenge of Hamlet whose father the King of Denmark suddenly dies while Hamlet is away from Home at Wittenberg University. Before the play opens the King's brother Claudius has been made king. Soon after King's

death, Claudius married Hamlet's mother Gertrude so that his claim to the throne does not fall into controversy.

The play opens on the battlements of Elsinore castle, seat of Danish monarchy. The soldiers camping here are visited by the ghost of King Hamlet. Hamlet's friend Horatio also sees the ghost with them.

Hamlet is present with Horatio on the battlement in the night when the ghost appears again. The ghost of his father reveals to him that he was murdered by poisoning through the ear by Claudius. The ghost asks Hamlet to avenge his death. Hamlet makes Horatio and the soldiers swear an oath not to reveal about the night's event to anyone.

Hamlet is unsure that the ghost is really his father. He therefore wants to test Claudius's conscience by pretending to be insane. Polonius, the king's councillor is convinced of Hamlet's madness and believes it to be the result of the unrequited love for his daughter Ophelia. He suggests arranging a meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia while he and Claudius would spy on them. Fearing Hamlet's deceitful ways Claudius also asks Hamlet's school mates Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be present. Hamlet suspects his school mate's sudden visit and becomes cautious. Hamlet arranges for a play *The Murder of Gonzago* to be staged by traveling performers. The play is modified by him to re-enact the circumstances of his father's murder. Claudius becomes uneasy when the play begins and rises calling for lights. Horatio notices his strange behaviour while Hamlet is also convinced of his guilt. Claudius hatches a plan to kill Hamlet and deports him to the Danish territories of England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern where he would be killed on his arrival.

Hamlet discloses to his mother about her husband's murder. Meanwhile Polonius hides behind the tapestry listening to their conversation. Hamlet stabs him as soon as he sees him eavesdropping. Claudius sends Hamlet to England with his school mates ordering Hamlet's death. On the way Hamlet's ship is attacked by pirates who take him as prisoner but return him to Denmark. During Hamlet's absence Ophelia becomes insane disturbed by Hamlet's rejection and her father's death. Meanwhile Laertes hears of her sister's lunacy and his father's death and determines to take revenge.

Claudius fixes a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet where Laertes will be using a poisoned foil and Hamlet will also be served poisoned wine as toast. The contest begins and Hamlet wins the first two rounds. Gertrude drinks some wine to toast unaware that it is poisoned. In the third round Hamlet is hit with the sword and fatally poisoned. While the fight continues Hamlet swaps blades with Laertes and hits him with the poisoned sword. Gertrude dies after drinking the poisoned wine. Before dying she warns Hamlet that the wine is poisoned. While Laertes is dying he confesses the whole plot to Hamlet. Enraged Hamlet kills Claudius with the poisoned sword and also forces him to drink the poisoned wine. Horatio seizes the poisoned wine to drink it to join his friend in death but Hamlet snatches the cup from him. He orders Horatio to tell his story to the world in order to restore his good name. Hamlet recommends to Norwegian prince Fortinbras to be the successor to the Danish throne.

We see that Shakespeare wrote these plays to share with the audience the deep sense of crisis he witnesses in post-Elizabethan England. Uncertainty and moral laxity being the order of the day, it was only appropriate that the bard of Stratford-Upon-Avon would construct tales of death and destruction.

7.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have looked at Shakespeare's life, career and discussed his major works paying special attention to his outstanding comedies, tragedies and history-plays.

7.6 EXERCISE

1. Name the tragedies of Shakespeare.
2. Name the comedies of Shakespeare.
3. Where was Shakespeare born?

7.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. MacCallum, Mungo William Sir, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and their Background*. Russell and Russell, New York. 1967.
2. Charlton, H.B. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Cambridge University Press, England. 1949.