

Who was William Shakespeare?

In 1623, Ben Jonson heralded Shakespeare as being "Not of an age but for all time." Several hundred years later, Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) declared that "Shakespeare is crude, immoral, vulgar, and senseless." Who was right? Perhaps, like most things in life, it depends on your point of view and attitude. Shakespeare himself wrote that "Nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so."

Not much is known about Shakespeare's life. As a matter of fact, there are many who believe that we do not even know who the author of the plays really was. Some think he was the son of a glove-maker and was born in Stratford-Upon-Avon in 1564 and died there in 1616.

Still others believe that the plays contain too much detailed knowledge of life in the court to have been written by a commoner, and they offer noblemen such as Sir Francis Bacon and Edward De Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as their candidates for the authorship. Some even suggest that Queen Elizabeth or King James I wrote the plays.

We may never fully resolve the identity of William Shakespeare but one thing that most can certainly agree with is that he was the greatest writer ever produced by Western civilization.

But Shakespeare also has his critics as the following quotations will reveal:

"Shakespeare is a drunken savage with some imagination whose plays can please only in London and Canada."

– Voltaire (1694 – 1778)

"Shakespeare should not be put into the hands of the young without the warning that the foolish things in his plays were written to please the foolish, the filthy for the filthy, and the brutal for the brutal; and that if out of veneration for his genius we were led to admire or even tolerate such things, we may be thereby not conforming ourselves to him, but only degrading ourselves to the level of his audience ..."

– Robert Bridges

"I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me."

– Charles Darwin (1809 – 1882)

Not everyone despises Shakespeare as much as the preceding quotations would indicate. Here are some opinions expressed by those who admire Shakespeare:

"A royal trait that belongs to Shakespeare is his cheerfulness. He delights in the world, in man, in woman, for the lovely light that sparkles from them. Beauty, the spirit of joy and hilarity, he sheds over the Universe. If he should appear in any company of human souls, who would not march in his troop?"

– Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882)

As I declare our Poet, him
Whose insight makes all others dim.
A thousand poets pried at life,
But only one amid the strife
Rose to be Shakespeare.

– Robert Browning (1812 – 1889)

"He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously but luckily: when he describes any thing, you more than see it, you feel it too."

– John Dryden (1631 – 1700)

"The remarkable thing about Shakespeare is that he is really very good — in spite of all the people who say he is very good."

– Robert Graves (1895 – 1985)

"Like a miraculous celestial Light-ship, woven all of sheet-lighting and sunbeams."

– Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1881)

"In Shakespeare the birds sing, the rushes are clothed with green, hearts love, souls suffer, the clouds wander, it is hot, it is cold, night falls, time passes, forests and multitudes speak, the vast eternal dream hovers over all. Sap and blood, all forms of the multiple reality, actions and ideas, man and humanity, the living and the life, solitudes, cities, religions, diamonds and pearls, dunghills and charnel houses, the ebb and flow of beings, the steps of comers and goers, all, all are in Shakespeare. . ."

– Victor Hugo (1802 – 1885)

"Shakespeare is a good raft whereon to float securely down the stream of time; fasten yourself to that and your immortality is safe."

– George Henry Lewes (1817 – 1878)

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- ▶ How do you feel about Shakespeare or about the prospects of studying his works? Explore your initial thoughts and position concerning Shakespeare by writing several paragraphs.
 - ▶ Conduct an opinion poll. Ask a variety of people (teachers, parents, friends, bus drivers, police officers, dentists, etc.) what they think of Shakespeare and record their opinions. Come up with at least three questions to ask these people. Tally the results and form some conclusions. After you have done so, re-evaluate your initial impressions of the Bard.

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