

Literary Lives: William Shakespeare Comprehension Questions - Answers

1. What did John Shakespeare do for a living?

He was a glove-maker and merchant. He also held many other positions of responsibility in the town, including the equivalent of mayor.

2. What evidence is there that Shakespeare was a bit of a tearaway?

There are stories that he stole a deer from the grounds of a local manor house and he probably got Anne Hathaway pregnant before they married.

3. Who was Anne Hathaway?

A 26 year-old woman whom Shakespeare married when he was just 18. Six months later, their first child was born.

4. What clues are there that Shakespeare could have been Catholic?

Scholars have found references to Catholicism in his plays, and a Catholic pamphlet was found hidden in the rafters of his home, meaning that his father may have been Catholic.

5. What happened in London in 1593?

The bubonic plague broke out and theatres were closed until the following year.

6. How are Shakespeare's plays usually categorised?

As either comedies, tragedies or histories.

7. Why was the location of The Globe theatre important?

It was outside the boundaries of the City of London and therefore could not be controlled by officials who disapproved of theatres.

8. Why was acting a difficult profession?

There was a high turnover of plays, so parts had to be learned quickly. Actors did not get a copy of the whole script – just their own words with cue-lines written in. Younger male actors often had to play female parts as women were not allowed to act on stage.

9. What started the fire which made The Globe burn down?

A cannon fired during the play 'Henry VIII' set light to a thatched roof.

10. What evidence is there about the cause of Shakespeare's death?

The local vicar recorded in his diary that Shakespeare had a 'fever' after drinking with playwrights Michael Drayton and Ben Jonson.

Extension:

What evidence is there that Shakespeare was a very successful author? Find examples from throughout the text.

Answers could include:

- His works have been translated into 118 languages.
- There are over 400 feature films of his works.
- He is the best-selling author of all time, with an estimated four billion books sold.
- His theatre company, which performed his works, was granted a royal seal by James I.
- He made enough money from his works during his lifetime to buy a prominent house in his home town.
- There are only 234 copies of the First Folio still in existence, worth £1.1bn, which demonstrates his importance today.

What was the theatre-going experience like in Shakespeare's time? Include evidence from the text in your answer.

Answers could include reference to:

- The fact that The Globe was crowded and busy, with audiences of 3,000 people.
- The open-air nature of the experience (particularly for groundlings); it could have been very wet, very cold or very hot, depending on the weather.
- The wide range of people at the theatre, from 'groundlings' to richer aristocracy sitting on cushions.
- The snacks and refreshments available – a little like today's cinema-going experience.
- The fact that it would have been very noisy – audiences would heckle and interact with the actors.
- How visually impressive it would have been, with lavish costumes and special effects.

What are your impressions of Shakespeare? Have they changed since reading about him? Use evidence from the text to explain your answer.

Answers should give personal opinion, backed up by evidence in the text. They may include references to Shakespeare's success, both contemporaneously and today, his exploits as a young man (stealing deer and his liaison with Anne Hathaway), his full life, the manner of his death, and perhaps some response to the quotations supplied.