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| **English Literature Author:** **William Shakespeare** |
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 | http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/common/shared/images/null_1x1.gif | by Celia MaddoxEducational ConsultantNorwalk, Connecticut |  |
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 | http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/common/shared/images/null_1x1.gif | **William Shakespeare**1564-1616BritishIntroductionIn Shakespeare's lifetime, plays were more important than playwrights, and actors more well known than dramatists. In 1623, seven years after his death, Shakespeare's colleagues Heminges and Condell printed Shakespeare's collected plays in what's now known as the *First Folio*. The 1623*Folio* set in motion two things: a claim that plays could have permanent literary (not to mention commercial) value, and an image of Shakespeare as the "triumph...to whom all scenes of Europe homage owe," as Ben Jonson put it. It would take time and many adjustments for the *Folio*'s claims to merge into what we are likely to think of as "Shakespeare."Today Shakespeare's works are standard in school curricula worldwide; the plays, performed ceaselessly, represent the highest standard of the actor's skill, and more critical attention has been devoted to Shakespeare than to any other writer. But as Graham Holderness has rightly remarked, "For every particular present, Shakespeare is...what is currently being made of him." The plays continued to be performed throughout the seventeenth century, alongside those of other Elizabethan and Jacobean favorites, until the theaters were closed in 1642. The Restoration period and the eighteenth century, however, struggled to reconcile Shakespeare's indecorous puns and low jokes with the ideals of high poetry. He was recognized as a brilliant poet and dramatist, but one of the native English variety -- that is, one whose thorny barbarisms (attributed to his need to please a rude audience) needed pruning. His texts were often "improved" at the hands of early editors, and the plays, more often staged than studied, were occasionally altered in odd ways, such as combining two plays into one to maximize the poetry and squelch the deformities. Nahum Tate's revision of *King Lear* with a happy ending, for example, was the version that occupied the stage between 1681 and 1838. It was the only one that playgoers saw for 157 years. Gradually, Shakespeare's texts were restored to more "authentic" versions, signaling an interest in unearthing the "real" Shakespeare, or more accurately, of constructing one whose Englishness could be folded neatly within the mantle of poetic supremacy. Actor David Garrick's inaugural Shakespeare festival in 1769 is a convenient landmark in the institution of Shakespeare as the "Bard of Avon," England's preeminent poet and a national treasure. As Shakespeare came to personify national culture, many found unthinkable the notion that a nobody from Stratford-upon-Avon wrote the plays. More suitably aristocratic candidates were nominated as the true author; the debates persist today. The impulse to construct an appropriate identity for "Shakespeare" continued into the next century, becoming something of a cult, which George Bernard Shaw would by the 1890s denounce as "bardolatry," a term that he coined. Shaw's mission was, in part, to return Shakespeare to the stage. Despite the blockbuster productions typical of the period, the nineteenth century's reception of Shakespeare had not been primarily theatrical. Moral and psychological preoccupations of the time had relocated Shakespeare from the stage to the study -- or to the fireside. A domesticated Shakespeare became the quintessential family counselor, read, often in abridged versions, for the moral edification he offered. Poets and critics of the period -- from Coleridge to Lamb and from Hazlitt to Emerson -- confirmed Shakespeare as the "myriad-minded bard." Simultaneously, he was "representative man" and romantic genius, the repository of universal truth, able to speak for the highest of civilized aspirations and, at the same time, for the humblest human experience. The works offered cryptic answers to all the great questions. Shakespeare became more philosopher than dramatist, more oracle than playwright. His significance as a symbol of high culture exceeded even his place in literature. If the nineteenth century celebrated the universality of Shakespeare's mind, the twentieth divided the field -- Shakespeare studies became more than ever the province of scholarly specialists. Antiquarian studies usefully chronicled the personnel, props, and finances of Shakespeare's theater. Character study persisted, but characters were seen more as archetypes than as portraits. The plays were read more analytically, with close attention to patterns of imagery and other poetic devices. In the universities, the close textual study of the New Criticism soon dominated until the plays were most often read as poems complete unto themselves. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the Shakespeare terrain was again reseeded. Cultural analysts scrutinized the phenomenon of the Shakespeare myth. Deconstruction dislodged the idea of the plays as self-contained poems, or even as stable texts. New Historicists see the plays as part of the "unstable text" of the period itself, sometimes confirming cultural beliefs, sometimes subverting them by exposing their contradictions. And popularly, Shakespeare has been returned to the people, capturing multiple screens at the cineplex. In schools, the plays are plays again; the most popular classroom approach to them is through performance. Many scholars, and many directors, interpret the plays through feminist, psychoanalytical, or Marxist perspectives that may seem unhistorical, but often provide a provocative reminder that Shakespeare's plays were themselves performed in response to contemporary ideologies and particular cultural circumstances. For every age, the significance and the meaning of Shakespeare has been recast, recirculated, remodeled. Even so, a Shakespearean tradition is upheld in continued appreciation of the complexities of his structures, the humanity of his characters, and the geniality of the comedies and the terror of the tragedies (or occasionally the reverse). In the sounds, rhythms, and intricacies of his long-gone language, Shakespeare virtually invented poetic drama. Perhaps most persistently, Shakespeare remains new in the breadth of interpretation his rich ambiguities permit.  |  |
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After reading this article, what are some things that you will look for as you read the tragedies?