**Shakespeare, William** (1564-1616), was an English playwright, poet, and actor. Many people regard him as the world’s greatest dramatist and the finest poet England has ever produced.

Shakespeare wrote at least 38 plays, two major narrative poems, a sequence of sonnets, and several short poems. His works have been translated into a remarkable number of languages, and his plays are performed throughout the world. His plays have been a vital part of the theater in the Western world since they were written about 400 years ago. Through the years, most serious actors and actresses have considered the major roles of Shakespeare to be the supreme test of their art.

Shakespeare’s plays have attracted large audiences in big, sophisticated cities and in small, rural towns. His works have been performed on the frontiers of Australia and New Zealand. They were part of the cultural life of the American Colonies and provided entertainment in the mining camps of the Old West. Today, there are theaters in many nations dedicated to staging Shakespeare’s works.

Shakespeare used language of startling originality to portray many-sided characters and tell fascinating stories. Critics and readers celebrate him as a great student of human nature. A remarkable group of vivid characters populate his plays. They include rogues and aristocrats, housewives and stuffy teachers, soldiers and generals, shepherds and philosophers. The most successful of these characters create an impression of psychological depth never before seen in English literature.

Shakespeare has had enormous influence on culture throughout the world. His works have helped shape the literature of all English-speaking countries. His work has also had an important effect on the literary cultures of such countries as Germany and Russia. In addition, his widespread presence in popular culture extends to motion pictures, television, cartoons, and even songs.

Shakespeare's characters, language, and stories are a source of inspiration, quotation, and imitation. Many words and phrases that first appeared in his plays and poems have become part of our everyday speech. Examples include such common words as *assassination*, *bump*, *eventful*, *go-between*, *gloomy*, and*lonely*, as well as such familiar phrases as *fair play*, *a forgone conclusion*, and*salad days.*

Shakespeare has so saturated modern culture that many people who have never read a line of his work or seen one of his plays performed can identify lines and passages as his. Examples include “To be, or not to be,” “Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears,” “Parting is such sweet sorrow,” “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” and “A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!”

Shakespeare’s poetry is full of vivid metaphors and brilliant images. His verbal skill also reveals itself in a tendency for word play and puns. Critics and readers acknowledge his superb way with words even when the richness of his language blurs the sense of what his text means.

Besides influencing language and literature, Shakespeare has affected other aspects of our culture. His plays and poems have long been a required part of a liberal education. Generations of people have absorbed his ideas concerning heroism, romantic love, loyalty, and the nature of tragedy as well as his portraits of particular historical characters. To this day, most people imagine Julius Caesar, Mark Antony, Cleopatra, and Richard III as Shakespeare portrayed them.

Shakespeare’s plays appeal to readers as well as to theatergoers. His plays—and his poems—have been reprinted and translated countless times. Indeed, a publishing industry flourishes around Shakespeare, as critics and scholars examine every aspect of the man, his writings, and his influence. Each year, hundreds of books and articles appear on Shakespearean subjects. Thousands of scholars from all over the world gather in dozens of meetings annually to discuss topics related to Shakespeare. Special libraries and library collections focus upon Shakespeare. Numerous motion pictures have been made of his plays. Composers have written operas, musical comedies, and instrumental works based on his stories and characters.

The world has admired and respected many great writers. But only Shakespeare has generated such varied and continuing interest—and such constant affection. The extent and durability of Shakespeare’s reputation is without equal.

Lander, Jesse M. "Shakespeare, William." *World Book Student*. World Book, 2016. Web. 26 Sept. 2016.