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# Competitive Exams: William Shakespeare as You like It Overview

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The most influential writer in all of English literature, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to a successful middle-class glover in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582 he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590, he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical acclaim quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part-owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558-1603) and James I (ruled 1603-1625), and he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by bestowing upon its members the title of King's Men. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, literary luminaries such as Ben Jonson hailed his works as timeless.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century, his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare's life, but the dearth of biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact and from Shakespeare's modest education that Shakespeare's plays were actually written by someone else. Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates but the support for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars.

In the absence of credible evidence to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture ever after:

As You Like It was most likely written around 1598-1600, during the last years of Elizabeth's reign. The play belongs to the literary tradition known as pastoral: Which has its roots in the literature of ancient Greece, came into its own in Roman antiquity

with Virgil's Eclogues, and continued as a vital literary mode through Shakespeare's time and long after. Typically, a pastoral story involves exiles from urban or court life who flee to the refuge of the countryside, where they often disguise themselves as shepherds in order to converse with other shepherds on a range of established topics, from the relative merits of life at court versus life in the country to the relationship between nature and art. The most fundamental concern of the pastoral mode is comparing the worth of the natural world, represented by relatively untouched countryside, to the world built by humans, which contains the joys of art and the city as well as the injustices of rigid social hierarchies. Pastoral literature, then, has great potential to serve as a forum for social criticism and can even inspire social reform.

In general, Shakespeare's *As You Like It* develops many of the traditional features and concerns of the pastoral genre. This comedy examines the cruelties and corruption of court life and gleefully pokes holes in one of humankind's greatest artifices: The conventions of romantic love. The play's investment in pastoral traditions leads to an indulgence in rather simple rivalries: Court versus country, realism versus romance, reason versus mindlessness, nature versus fortune, young versus old, and those who are born into nobility versus those who acquire their social standing. But rather than settle these scores by coming down on one side or the other, *As You Like It* offers up a world of myriad choices and endless possibilities. In the world of this play, no one thing need cancel out another. In this way, the play manages to offer both social critique and social affirmation. It is a play that at all times stresses the complexity of things, the simultaneous pleasures and pains of being human.

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