William Shakespeare
1564-1616

Major works
Oh, where to begin: the plays, of course, the sonnet “sequence,” and narrative and lyric poems including Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece.

Religion
This is a major controversy: During his childhood, England was Catholic and so was the John Shakespeare family. During Henry VIII’s reign, England became Protestant and so did the Shakespeares. Any recusant Catholic sentiments would have been suppressed publicly.

Date of composition
Sonnets: composed in mid-1590s; published in 1609 (some in 1599)
Plays: published in folio posthumously in 1623

Importance
The central and most stable writer within the Western canon
Vivid portrayals of character
Complex and profound insights on human nature

Concepts
Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet
sonnet sequence or sonnet cycle
iambic pentameter
the Petrarchan tradition
blazon

Historical context
Humanism
the Renaissance
the early modern period
the reign of Elizabeth I
the Reformation
Rise of the “middling sort”

Controversies
Do the sonnets create a narrative sequence?
Why do scholars make more biological connections between Shakespeare and the sonnets than the plays?

Study questions
Characterize the narrator of the sonnet’s relationship with the young man.
Characterize the narrator of the sonnet’s relationship with the dark lady.
Why is her darkness important?

Know the three meanings of “will.”

Identify four main themes of the sonnet sequence that you can explain with a paragraph each.

Read them all but know one sonnet of your choice very well.