

Module – 17

Edmund Spenser: The Faerie Queene

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General Introduction

This module will discuss a brief life story of Edmund Spenser, his works, the sources and influences on Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, *The Faerie Queene* as an epic, medievalism, a detailed discourse on allegory (Religious allegory, Moral allegory, Historical allegory, and allegory of Justice) and pictorial descriptions given by Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*.



AGE OF SPENSER

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Module 17

Edmund Spenser, the son of John Spenser and Elizabeth Spenser was born in 1552 in London. He had various epithets to his credit like “the poet’s poet”, “The Prince of Poets”, “Mulla’s Bard”, “The Sunrise of English Poetry”, and “The Rubens of English Poetry”. His father was a dress maker. He lived in the East Smithfield, near the Tower of London. He had one brother and one sister named John and Elizabeth respectively. His father was not very rich. His brother and his sister could not get education in a big institution. But he was a bright pupil of Mulcaster, a keen scholar. He received his degree of M.A. in 1576 from Cambridge University. Gabriel Harvey, a scholar of eminence became his friend at Cambridge.

After his life at Cambridge he fell in love with a lady of higher social pretensions. He did not receive his love back from this lady. He kept on doing efforts to win the heart of this lady. He portrayed her as Rosalind in his various future works. It is also said that she belonged to a good family and appreciated greatly the imagination and calibre of the man who had fallen in love with her, but she got married to another person.

On Gabriel Harvey’s advice he left Shire and went to London, where he met the Earl of Leicester, and Sir Philip Sidney. These two people were prominent figures of the Queen’s court. With the help of Sir Philip Sidney he was appointed Secretary to Lord Grey De Wilton. He went to Ireland with Lord Grey and lived there for rest of his life. In Ireland his talent was soon rewarded with the Kilcolman Castle with three hundred and two acres of land surrounding it. He got married with

Elizabeth Boyle in 1594. Amoretti is a sonnet – sequence that celebrates Spenser’s love for Elizabeth Boyle. During the period of revolt in Ireland his house was burnt. He escaped with his wife and children. It is believed that in this fire he lost his one child and some unfinished parts of *The Faerie Queene*. On December 24, 1598 he reached London. After sometime he died on 16th January 1599. His body got buried in the Westminster Abbey, near Chaucer’s tomb. As per William J. Long, “From the shock of this frightful experience Spenser never recovered. He returned to England heartbroken, and in the following year (1599) he died in an inn at Westminster. He was buried beside his master Chaucer in Westminster Abbey, the poets of that age thronging to his funeral and, according to Camden, “casting their elegies and the pens that had written them into his tomb.”” (pg. 104)

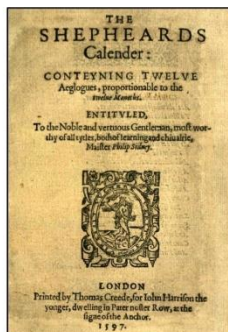
Spenser’s Works

Spenser’s fame rests on his great works. His very first remarkable work was *The Shepherd’s Calender* (1579). It contains twelve pastoral eclogues. Here the shepherd Colin Clout is the portrait of the poet himself. The other shepherd Hobbinol represents his friend Gabriel Harvey. In this work we find five different forms of stanzas in heroic or deca-syllabic lines. Sir Philip Sidney in *An Apologie for poetry* writes: “The Shepherd’s calendar hath much Poetrie in his Aeglogues: indeed worthy of the reading, if I be not deceived.”

The Complaints (1591) is a collection of small poems. The very first poem in this collection is *The Ruins of Time*. The pain of nine Muses is expressed in *The Tears of the Muses*. *Mother Hubbard’s Tale* (1591) satirizes Lord Burghley and the Duke of Anjou, in form of a fable.

Lord Burghley → Fox → becomes Prime Minister
 Duke of Anjou → Ape → becomes king

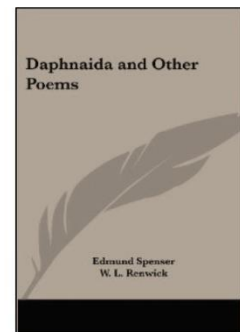
In *Daphnaida* (1591) he invented a new form of stanza. It clearly shows the influence of Geoffrey Chaucer on Spenser. *Colin Clouts Come Home Again* (1595) is a pastoral poem with autobiographical sketch of the poet himself. Here he expresses his dissatisfaction with the life of the Queen Elizabeth’s court. *Astrophel* (1595) is a pastoral poem that presents an allegory of the life and death of Sir Philip Sidney. ‘Astrophel’ was the title that Sidney chose for himself in his own sonnet – sequence *Astrophel and Stella*. *Amoretti and Epithalamion* (1595) is a collection of 88 love sonnets. Here he expressed his love and strong feelings for Elizabeth Boyle whom he loved and married. *Epithalamion* contains 23 sonnets. *Prothalamion* (1596) is written in honour of the wedding of the two daughters of the Earl of Worcester. *The Four Hymns* (1596) he writes in honour of love and beauty.



Shepherd’s Calender
(1579)



The Complaints
(1591)

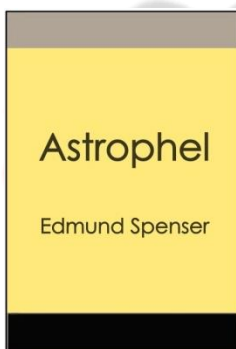


Daphnaida
(1591)

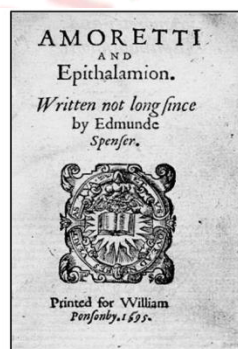
The Faerie Queene (1590, 1596) is Spenser's masterpiece. In words of Emile Legouis; "He worked at it for twenty years, and left it unfinished at his death. It was his own supreme ambition and the supreme pride of England, which confidently pitted his poem, as soon as its first three books appeared, against the most famous epics of ancient and modern times."

The Faerie Queene – Sources and Influences

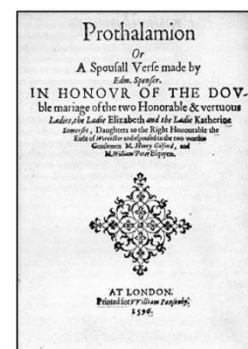
Spenser was greatly influenced by foreign writers like, Ariosto, Tasso, Homer, Virgil, Plato, Cicero, and Lucretius. Spenser's Faerie Queene was modelled on Ariosto's work Orlando Furioso. He was immensely fascinated by Ariosto's romantic epic. John Hughes (1715) very aptly writes: "The Bower of Bliss, in the Second Book of The Faerie Queene, is in like manner a copy from Tasso; but the ornaments of description, which Spenser has transplanted out of the Italian poem, are more proper in his work..." (pg. 27) He further compares Orlando Furioso with Faerie Queene and writes: "In the Orlando Furioso we everywhere meet with an exuberant invention joined with great liveliness and facility of description yet debased by frequent mixtures of the comic genius as well as shocking indecorums.... On the other hand Spenser's fable, though often wild, is, as I have observed always emblematical; ... It is surprising to observe how much the strength of the painting is superior to the design." (pg. 33) William Hazlitt has also tried to compare the works of these two great poets. He writes; "If Ariosto transports us in to the regions of romance, Spenser's poetry is all fairy-land. In Ariosto, we walk upon the ground, in a company, gay, fantastic, and adventurous enough. In Spenser, we wander in another world, among ideal beings.... He paints nature not as we find it, but as we expected to find it.... The worlds of reality and of fiction are poised on the wings of his imagination." (Lectures on the English Poets)



Astrophel
(1595)



Amoretti & Epithalamion
(1595)



Prothalamion
(1596)

As an Epic-

The Faerie Queene belongs to the genre of the epic. Following the epic convention Spenser begins his book with the invocation of the Muse. Before trying his pen on the tales of war, chivalry, fierce battles and epical theme he invokes Clio, the goddess of poetry, Cupid, the son of Jove and Venus, and Venus goddess of beauty.

Lo I the man, whose Muse whylome did maske,

As time her taught, in lowly Shepherds weeds,

Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,

For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;
Whose prayes having slept in silence long,
Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds
To blazon broade emongst her learned throng:
Fierce warres and faithfull loves shall moralize my song.

He also makes use of epic similes or Homeric simile in this book. In Book I, Canto III, he uses Homeric similes drawn from classical mythology.

Much like, as when the beaten marinere,
That long hath wandered in the Ocean wide,
Ofte soust in swelling Tethys saltish teare;
And long time having tand his tawny hide
With blustering breath of Heaven that none can bide,
And scorching flames of fierce Orions hound;
Soone as the port from far he has espied,
His chearfull whistle merily doth sound,
And Nereus crownes with cups; his mates him pledgs around.

In stanza 20-21 of Book I Canto I, the numerous progeny of the monster is compared to ten thousand kinds of creatures that breed in the mud left behind by retreating flood water in Nile River. Here the monster is indubitably mythical but the image of river Nile and retreating flood waters is very much realistic.

As when old father Nilus gins to swell
With timely pride above the Aegyptian vale,
His fattie waves doe fertile slime outwell,
And overflow each plaine and lowly dale:
But, when his later spring gins to avale,
Huge heapes of mudd he leaves, wherein there breed
Ten thousand kindes of creatures, partly male
And partly female, of this fruitful seed;
Such ugly monstrous shapes elsewhere may no man reed.

He uses frequent long speeches in elevated tone. He also uses the epithets frequently and renames them (particularly characters) by stock phrases. The Red – Cross Knight has been referred as “the valiant Elfe”, “the Elfin Knight” and “the Champion”, and Una is referred as “faithful Dame” and “that Lady milde”. It also focuses on the adventures of the hero. The hero faces various problems in his quest and is rewarded finally. In case of the Faerie Queene Book I Red – Cross Knight is the hero, who goes on a quest with fair and faithful Una, and his Dwarf servant. This hero is embodiment of goodness and virtues. Finally he successfully kills the dragon makes the parents of Una free from the terror. As per Thomas Denys; “A third epic convention concerning is the vast setting of the story, and, related to this, the journey to the underworld (e.g. the descent into hell by Aeneas, in The Aeneid by Virgil). The setting covers great geographical distances and often, the story takes place in an other world, a fictional place, which is no different in the Faerie Queene: the story is set in Faerie Land and great distances are bridged like Duessa’s journey into hell with Knight to retrieve Sansjoy”.

The armour of the Red – Cross Knight and Arthur has been described in the Faerie Queene. It is a long poem having as many as 12 Cantos. Forty to sixty stanzas are found in each Canto. These stanzas follow a regular pattern popularly known as Spenserian stanza. It is a moral and didactic poem. Each book contains a message in itself. Various situations and events carry lofty moral values and ethical messages.

Medievalism-

In Faerie Queene the characters are drawn from the Middle Ages. They are not ordinary people but the valiant knights and ladies, magicians, witches, hydra – headed monsters like foul Error and the giants like Orgoglio. Spenser’s use of magic, black arts, and witchcraft represents medieval superstition. A long chain of noble knights and ladies presents a vast picture of Middle Ages. They represent various virtues such as King Arthur represents Magnificence and Red – Cross Knight represents Holiness.

He also makes use of Allegory. It was the favourite device of Medieval times that made the abstract comprehensible and believable. He writes about Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, Courtesy and Constancy in Faerie Queene.

Allegory-

He was greatly influenced by Plato. Plato interpreted Homer allegorically. Plato’s perspective inspired him to use this device of allegory in his Faerie Queene. He used symbols to explain abstract ideas and themes. There are four kinds of allegory in The Faerie Queene.

1. Religious Allegory
2. Moral Allegory
3. Historical Allegory
4. Allegory of Justice

Reformation was the major religious movement of Elizabethan age. Although the religious allegory that represents reformed church, Papacy, Catholicism and Paganism is under cover. The Reformed Church of England is represented by the Red – Cross Knight, who raises his sword against corruption and evils. Pope of Rome is represented by the foul Dragon who arrested Humanity in form of the parents of Una. Monster Error swallows the papers and books that represent ‘false teachings of

Catholic Church'. Philip II of Spain is represented by Orgoglio. Philip II and Pope did their best to harm England. Just like the struggle of the Red – Cross Knight and the parents of lady Una, innocent people of England also faced various problems in order to restore the piece and piety of the Church of England.

The most explicit type of allegory in Faerie Queene is the Moral Allegory.

| | | |
|---------------------|--------|---------------------|
| Good Characters | —————→ | Virtues |
| Bad Characters | —————→ | Vices |
| Red – Cross Knight | —————→ | Holiness |
| Lady Una | —————→ | Truth |
| Parents of Lady Una | —————→ | Humanity |
| Dragon | —————→ | Evil |
| Duessa | —————→ | Falsehood |
| Archimago | —————→ | Hypocrisy |
| Sans Loy | —————→ | Lawlessness |
| Corceca | —————→ | Blind Faith |
| Kirkrapine | —————→ | Carnal passions |
| Lucifera | —————→ | Pride |
| Orgoglio | —————→ | Pride / Papal power |
| Arthur | —————→ | Magnificence |

In Faerie Queene good characters represent various virtues and bad characters represent various vices. Spenser teaches that the righteous man faces various threats and dangers in the course of his daily life and that he is guarded and protected by the grace of heaven and by his own unwavering belief in truth. Righteous man also gains a lot from mercy, hope, faith and patience.

Graham Hough very aptly writes that: “The Red – Cross Knight is Holiness, fighting against the temptations and errors that must universally beset such a virtue. But he is also more intermittently and imprecisely, English religion (Why else should he bear St. George’s Cross?) struggling against the conspiracies and misdirection of the time, as Spenser saw them. But he is not Holiness as an achieved state: he is often the universal *miles Christianus*, the militant Christian who must struggle and learn and seek to perfect himself in his journey through the world.” (An extract from A Preface to ‘The Faerie Queene’ London, 1962.).

In Canto X of book I, there is a house locked from outside that has a message that the holy church has to guard itself against its enemies. The door – keeper of this house is Humilta (i.e.

humanity), which is one of the Christian virtues. Fidelia keeps a cup filled with wine and water. This cup is symbol of holy sacrament. The serpent that is found at the bottom of this cup represents the healing power of religious faith.

She was araied all in lilly white,
And in her right hand bore a cup of gold,
With wine and water fild up to the hight,
In which a serpent did himself enfold,
That horroure made to all, that did behold;
But she no whit did change her constant mood:
And in her other hand she fast did hold
A hooke, that was both signd and seald with blood,
Wherein darke things were writ, hard to be understood.

(Canto X)

Historical allegory is also present in *Faerie Queene*. Historical allegory implies the representation of certain historical figures or historical events through the portrayal of characters and design of events in the plot. Frank Kermode very rightly remarks that: “The First Book of *The Faerie Queene* is well known to be apocalyptic, in the sense that it presents a version of world history founded rather closely upon the English Protestant interpretation of the book Revelation.... In its more political aspect, Book I is a celebration of the part of Elizabeth Tudor, the Protestant Empress, in the workings of providence.” (‘The Element of Historical Allegory’ pg.202). Miss Frances Yates also writes that Duessa and Una ‘symbolize the story of impure papal religion and impure imperial religion’. Duessa also represents antichristian, anti – imperialist and anti – Universalist religion. In Canto VII of book I, there is a snake – like beast which Duessa rides allegorizes the Inquisition which represented Papal tyranny. This beast has the scales of brass on its back that represents the insensitiveness of the Pope and Bishops. The Earl of Leicester has been represented by Prince Arthur in this Canto.

Frank Kermode also writes that: ‘The subjection of Red - Cross to Orgoglio is the popish captivity of England from Gregory VII to Wycliff (about 300 years, the three months of 8, 38). The *miles Christi*, disarmed, drinks of the enervating fountain of corrupt gospel and submits to Rome. He is rescued by Arthur, doing duty for Elizabeth as Emperor of the Last Days, saviour of the English Church.’ (pg.209)

Allegory of Justice is present in two parts of Book V. In Canto 12 Artegall, the symbol of justice, finally dispenses the Justice. Artegall is accompanied by Talus and Britomart in his mission. The need of justice for Love is represented by Britomart. There is a giant who represents egalitarianism. Egalitarianism pretends to be justice. “The allegory of Book V focuses on the last period in this decline stressing the corruption and injustice of England’s enemies in Spenser’s own day.... The Main quest of the book is Artegall’s attempt to rescue Irena from the tyrant Grantorto, which represents the English attempt to free Ireland from Catholic domination in the 1580’s and 1590’s. The incident in which Artegall encounters the Amazons and Queen Radigund is an account of

the actions of Mary, Queen of Scots, beginning in 1558 and ending in 1571, when Elizabeth imprisoned her in England". (<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/edmundspenser>) Duessa's killing in Canto IX represents execution of Mary, Queen of Scots. Prince Arthur and Artegall's victory over Souldan represents the defeat of Spanish Armada.

Critics believe that Spenser used allegory as a device only to follow the vogue of the day because a work without this device was considered below standard or mean. He portrayed the figure of Gloriana that represents Queen Elizabeth. He glorifies her as an embodiment of ideal virtue and beauty. Spenser's intention behind such glorification was to win some personal benefits and advantages from the Queene. Religious and political allegories seem to merge with each other.

Pictorial Descriptions:

Faerie Queene is rich in concrete details and words pictures. Just like a skilled painter he portrays the pictures dextrously through words. Emile Legouis very aptly writes: "many stanzas of The Faerie Queene are descriptions of tapestries and pictures, and the line colour of words competes in them with that on the canvases of the masters. When Spenser purports to draw a person or a scene from nature, he is still inspired by the painter's method. He is unendingly enthralled by the human body, especially woman's body; on one of its details wears his patience or escapes his observation. His grotesque and monstrous descriptions are not inferior to those in which he aims absolute beauty. The grotesque is but the reverse of the beautiful; the horrible Dragon who is slain by the Red – Cross Knight is as much a masterpiece of painting as the nymph Belpheobe."

In Book I, Canto I, Stanza 14 he gives a pictorial descriptions of a monster in following words.

...his glistering armour made
A little glooming light, much like a shade,
By which he saw the ugly monster plaine,
Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide,
But the other halfe did woman's shape retain,
Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.

(Book I, Canto I, 14)

The description of Prince Arthur is also one of the great pictures designed by Spenser:

Upon the top of all his lofty crest,
A bunch of heares discoloured diversely,
With sprinded pearle, and gold full richly drest,
Did shake, and seemed to dance for jollity,
Like to an almond tree ymounted hye
On top greene selinis all alone,

With blossoms brave bedecke dintily;
Whose tender locks do tremble every one
At everie little breath that under heaven is
blowne.

(Book I, VII; 32)

Stanza 10 of Book I, Canto III is indubitably a fine piece of nature painting, where he describes the beautiful place in following words:

Till that at length are found the trodden grass,
In which the tract of people footing was,
Under the steepe foot of a mountaine here;
The same she follows, till at last she has
A damsel spyde, slow footing her before,
That on her shoulders sad a pot of water bore.

(Book I, III. 10)

In Book I, Canto IV he paints a picture of majestic palace built of square bricks, walls covered with a sheet of gold, decorated with delightful bowers and windows.

A stately palace built of squared bricke,
Which cunningly was without mortar laid,
Whose wals were high, but nothing strong nor thick,
And golden foile all over them displaid,
That purest skye with brightnesse they dismaid:
High lifted up were many loftie towers,
And goodly galleries far above laid,
Full of faerie windows and delightful bowres:
And on the top a Diall told the timely howres.

(Book I, IV. 04)

The Faerie Queene glimmers with beauty. The word pictures made by Spenser are rich, real and elevating in its realisation. Colour sense of Spenser is also astonishing. His depiction of Red, White, Black, Green and gold colour is really apt and appropriate. Tanning of face with scorching sunny ray, depiction of white ass more white than snow but the lady whiter than the ass, milk white lamb, coal black blood rushing from monsters body, and Aurora, the purple goddess of dawn are some

examples from Faerie Queene that clearly show Spenser's love for colours. He also presents a number of vignettes in this book. For instance if we take only Book I, we find Archimago, disguised as an aged sire, with a prayer book hanging from his belt, then there is vignette of Duessa, who is described as a "good lady clad in scarlet red", having a Persian crown. Description of Queen Lucifera is amazing who is wonderfully fair and a victim of narcissistic love. Six counsellors of Lucifera have also been portrayed vividly.

Conclusion:

Aristotle enumerated twelve moral virtues. Spenser was greatly influenced by Aristotle so he intended to write twelve books of The Faerie Queene. Each book was proposed to represent one virtue. Unfortunately he could write only six books and a part of seventh during his lifetime. His dream remained incomplete. Queene represents the Queen Elizabeth and word 'fairy' denotes the fairy land that he uses for England. It contains almost all the major features of an epic. Various characters and events are used allegorically in this book. Being a dextrous word painter he painted marvellous word pictures without the help of any brush or paint. The landscapes and portraits in The Faerie Queene are very much life – like. The Faerie Queene possesses intense aesthetic or artistic appeal and moral perspective.

Questions:

1. Write a brief life – history of Edmund Spenser.
2. Write an essay on the works of Edmund Spenser.
3. Discuss the Faerie Queene as an epic.
4. Write an essay on the sources and influences on Spenser's The Faerie Queene.
5. Discuss The Faerie Queene as an allegory.
6. Edmund Spenser was a skilled word painter. Discuss this statement with special reference to The Faerie Queene.
7. Write a note on 'Religious Allegory' in The Faerie Queene.
8. Write a brief note on Moral Allegory in The Faerie Queene.
9. Write a note on the element of medievalism in Spenser's The Faerie Queene.
10. Write a brief essay on historical allegory in The Faerie Queene.

