

Spenserian Sonnets



Lecture by

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Edmund Spenser



It was named for Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), a 16th century English Poet.

The Spenserian Sonnet inherited the tradition of the declamatory couplet of Wyatt / Surrey although Spenser used Sicilian quatrains to develop a metaphor.

English poet whose long allegorical poem *The Faerie Queene* is one of the greatest in the English language. It was written in what came to be called the Spenserian stanza.

His own immediate family was not wealthy. He was entered as a “poor boy” in the Merchant Taylors’ grammar school, where he would have studied mainly Latin, with some Hebrew, Greek, and music.

From May 1569 Spenser was a student in Pembroke Hall (now Pembroke College) of the University of Cambridge.

out of financial necessity, performed various menial or semi-menial duties. He received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1573. Because of an epidemic, Spenser left Cambridge in 1574, but he received the Master of Arts degree in 1576.

Literary Works:

The Shepheardes Calender can be called the first work of the English literary Renaissance. The Calender consists of 12 eclogues, one named after each month of the year.

In 1580 to have been serving the fascinating, highly placed, and unscrupulous Robert Dudley, earl of Leicester and to have become a member of the literary circle led by Sir Philip Sidney

By 1580 Spenser had also started work on *The Faerie Queene*

The first three books of The Faerie Queene were duly published in 1590

Faerie Queene consists of six books and a fragment (known as the “Mutabilitie Cantos”). In fact, it was to contain 12 books, each telling the adventure of one of Gloriana’s knights. As a setting Spenser invented the land of Faerie and its queen, Gloriana.

To express himself he invented a nine-line stanza, the first eight of five stresses and the last of six, whose rhyme pattern is ababbcbcc.

Spenser was considered in his day to be the greatest of English poets, who had glorified England and its language by his long allegorical poem The Faerie Queene, just as Virgil had glorified Rome and the Latin tongue by his epic poem the Aeneid.

His early death may have been precipitated by the penetration into Munster of the Irish uprising of 1598.

He was buried with ceremony in Westminster Abbey close by the grave of Geoffrey Chaucer.

Beyond the prerequisite for all sonnets, the elements of the Spenserian Sonnet are:

A quatrain made up of 3 Sicilian quatrains (4 lines alternating rhyme) and ending in a rhyming couplet metric, primarily iambic pentameter.

Rhyme scheme **ababbcbc cdcdee**.

Composed with a volta (a non physical gap) or pivot (a shifting or tilting of the main line of thought) sometime after the 2nd quatrain. The epiphany is arrived at logically.

Written with each quatrain developing a metaphor, conflict, idea or question, and the end declamatory couplet providing the resolution

(Refer to previous slides for structure)

Similar to the Shakespearean sonnets, Spenser's poems are abundant in metaphors of nature.

He maintains metaphors of nature by writing about phenomena such as the oceans and the stars.

The interlocking rhyme scheme of the Spenserian sonnet provides a more distinct connectivity between the quatrains compared to the English sonnet.

In Amoretti typically tie together the contents of the first twelve lines in a reflective manner and remind the reader of the overall theme of the poem.

The vast majority of Amoretti, Spenser is not speaking directly to the female counterpart; he usually refers to her in third person. It is not until the end of the sequence that Spenser addresses Elizabeth in first person.

MAJOR THEMES

Spenser's sonnets deal largely with the idea of love. The sonnets focus on the frustration of unreturned romantic desires and celebrates the happiness of love as well as celebrating divine love.

Spenser focuses on courtship and the power dynamic in successful relationships.

In particular, he portrays that women want to have the authority in a romantic relationship.

He also discusses true beauty and the ways in which writing poetry can immortalize things that otherwise cannot be immortalized, such as people.

Finally, Spenser's poetry often references God and religion, celebrating the theme of divine love in the second half of the sequence.

The difference between Spenserian and Shakespearean Sonnet:

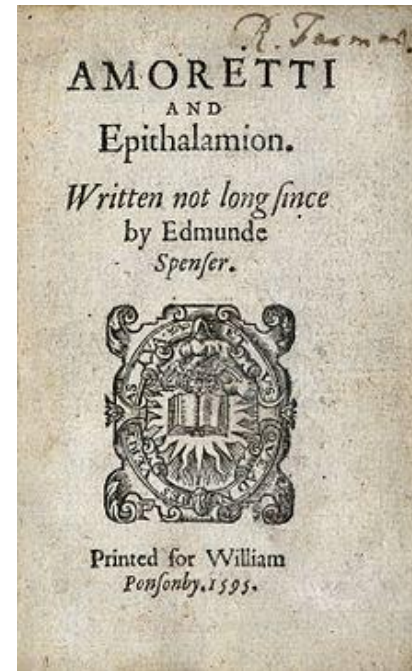
- ❑ Revealed in the rhyme scheme each preferred.
- ❑ Spenser was a poet of elegance following tradition of Chaucer (a grand poetic tradition)
- ❑ Whereas Shakespeare was impishly forward looking, a Dramatist first and a Poet second, who enjoyed turning tradition and expectation from Petrarchan
- ❑ Spenser elegantly wrote within the Petrarchan tradition
- ❑ Even his choice of vocabulary, as with *EEK*, was studiously archaic (even in his own day).
- ❑ Spenser's sonnet lacks the drama of Shakespeare's.

Edmund Spenser's, *Amoretti*, is a series of love sonnets dedicated to Elizabeth Boyle, the lady of his dreams and eventually marries in 1594. The term "amoretti" is literally defined as "little loves" or "little cupids."

Amoretti was first published in 1595 in London by William Ponsonby

The volume included the sequence of 89 sonnets, along with a series of short poems called Anacreontics and Epithalamion, a public poetic celebration of marriage.

Amoretti breaks with conventional love poetry in a number of ways. In most of the Petrarchan tradition, the speaker yearns for a lover who is sexually unavailable. "Spenser's innovation was to dedicate an entire sequence to a woman he could honorably win" and their love affair eventually ended in marriage.



Amoretti 75: One Day I Wrote her Name

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:
Again I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.
"Vain man," said she, "that dost in vain assay,
A mortal thing so to immortalize;
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eke my name be wiped out likewise."
"Not so," (quod I) "let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your vertues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name:
Where when as death shall all the world subdue,
Our love shall live, and later life renew."

Spenser was writing *Amoretti*, and 'One day I wrote her name upon the strand', for Elizabeth Boyle, whom he had courted and married.

The rhyme scheme, by the way, is *ababbcbccdcdee*

Spenser wrote his beloved's name on the beach one day, but the waves came in and washed the name away.

He wrote the name a second time, but again the tide came in and washed it away. Destructed the poets efforts.

Spenser's beloved chastises him for his hubris and arrogance in seeking to immortalize her in this way, when she is but a woman, and only mortal. Her body will itself decay one day, much as her name has disappeared from the sand. Also her memory will also be wiped out in future.

But then there comes the volta or 'turn' which often comes at this point (the beginning of the ninth line):

Spenser argues here that whilst it is truer that less beautiful and fine things are mortal and will perish, someone as beautiful as she is deserves to live forever – not literally, but through lasting fame. Her name will live on thanks to his writing.

In the final four lines, poet maintains that she will be immortalised by his writing, and he will write her name in the heavens; so that in the afterlife together they will have a richer life, because he has praised her name so.

Spenser follows the tradition : The usual conceit in Elizabethan sonnets – the idea of immortalising the woman's name through writing realised here.

Amoretti I: Happy ye leaves when as those Lilly hands

Happy ye leaves when as those lilly hands,
Which hold my life in their dead doing might
Shall handle you and hold in loves soft bands,
Lyke captives trembling at the victors sight.
And happy lines, on which with starry light,
Those laming eyes will deigne sometimes to look
And reade the sorrowes of my dying spright,
Written with teares in harts close bleeding book.
And happy rymes bath'd in the sacred brooke,
Of *Helicon* whence she derived is,
When ye behold that Angels blessed looke,
My soules long lacked foode, my heavens blis.
Leaves, lines, and rymes, seeke her to please alone,
Whom if ye please, I care for other none.

This opening sally addresses the work holistically and introduces the audience to the Lady who is the inspiration.

The "happy leaues" (leaves, e.g., pages) addressed in the first line are successively identified with the poetic work, which will hopefully be read by the Lady in question.

The hands and eyes of the beloved are first addressed—hands to hold the pages and eyes to read its contents.

Thus, recurrent themes are established at the outset, the mutability of life and, by extension, a woman's physical beauty.

There is also a bid for immortality in the written work. Likewise established is the reversal of the usual patriarchal relationship between the lordly man and otherwise submissive woman,

The early lines establish the Lady's control over the fate of the written work, culminating in the assertion that it is written for her.

The poet's words demonstrate a guise of humility, that the Lady will "deigne to sometimes to look"

Each of the three quatrains also juxtaposes two lines detailing the Lady's lofty act of noticing the poetic lines with responses characterizing their author's humble efforts to create these "captive lines" written with "sorrows" and "teares

Most explications of the Amoretti refer to a conventional love-sonnet progression through the stages of a lover's courtship, focusing either on a calendar of days before the actual wedding on June 11, 1594, which is immortalized in Spenser's Epithalamion

Amoretti 68: Most Glorious Lord of Life

Most glorious Lord of life, that on this day,
Didst make thy triumph over death and sin:
And having harrow'd hell, didst bring away
Captivity thence captive, us to win:
This joyous day, dear Lord, with joy begin,
And grant that we for whom thou diddest die,
Being with thy dear blood clean wash'd from sin,
May live for ever in felicity.
And that thy love we weighing worthily,
May likewise love thee for the same again:
And for thy sake, that all like dear didst buy,
With love may one another entertain.
So let us love, dear love, like as we ought,
Love is the lesson which the Lord us taught.

Sonnet 68 of Edmund Spenser's Amoretti is also known as the Easter Sonnet.

Easter was a more important religious festival in medieval England than Christmas, and this remained the case into the Elizabethan era, when Spenser was writing.

The sonnet is central to autobiographical, numero-logical, religious Spenser links the progress of his courtship with Elizabeth Boyle to the holiness of Christian (specifically Protestant) matrimony. Love within matrimony becomes the way men and women can most closely approach the love of God.

In his Easter poem, Edmund Spenser ruminates on the love that Jesus Christ showed to humanity by sacrificing himself on the Cross for them, and reflects, to his beloved, that they should take their 'lesson' from Christ and practice love towards one another.

The poem is thus a religious sonnet that turns, in the final couplet, into a romantic poem.

In this vein, the tension between mutable human life and love, and between the eternity of the Lord's life and love, is demonstrated in each of the first three lines, which reference resurrection and eternal life alongside the potential for the lover and his Lady to "entertayne" (l. 12) each other

This particular sonnet is thus noted for the clarity with which differentiates eternal from human love, and human capacity from the divine.

Amoretti 81: Fayre is my love, when her fayre golden heares

Fayre is my love, when her fayre golden heares,
With the loose wynd ye waving chance to marke:
Fayre when the rose in her red cheekes appears,
Or in her eyes the fyre of love does sparke.
Fayre when her brest lyke a rich laden barke,
With pretious merchandize she forth doth lay:
Fayre when that cloud of pryde which oft doth dark
Her goodly light with smiles she drives away,
But fayrest she, when so she doth display
The gate with pearles and rubyes richly dight:
Throgh which her words so wise do make their way
To beare the message of her gentle spright.
The rest be works of natures wonderment,
But this the worke of harts astonishment.

This sonnet is an anti-love poem that ironically shows how the fairness of a lady is contingent upon nature's blessings and her external manifestations.

The first eight lines praise her physical features (hair, cheeks, smile), while the last six lines praise her internal features (words, spirit, heart).

This sonnet intentionally hides the speaker's ridicule behind counterfeit love-language,

This traditional love language fills pages of literature and song, and has conventionally been used to praise the attributes of a lover; but this sonnet betrays such language by exhibiting a critique rather than commendation.

This sonnet appears to praise the beauty of a lady but ironically ridicules her by declaring that her "fairness" is contingent upon nature, physical features, and displaying a gentle spirit, which hides her pride.

In the first quatrain, the writer goes about her appearance, she has nice golden hair as it flows in the wind, and that her cheeks are red which bring out her eyes in the way that she looks at her love, and her eyes sparkle.

In the second quatrain, the author describes her breast in comparison to a ship with a lot of cargo on it. She has a lot of jewelry too. The one flaw that she shows that she has is the cloud of pride. It shows that she has a little pride in her flaw.

In the third quatrain, the author talks about her mouth. He is describing her mouth and the way her words come out make a beautiful sound. In spite of her appearance and the beauty that she has, this guy that she likes, likes her more than just her appearance. He likes her for her personality.

In brief...This sonnet mocks this woman by pretending to praise her, all the while proving that her fairness is contingent upon certain external manifestations.