

Research Papers



Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene [Book I]- An Allegory of Christian Faith

Dr Annie John

Asso Prof & Head, Dept of English,
A R Burla College, Solapur.

ABSTRACT

'Faerie Queene' was published in the year 1590 and consists of 12 cantos. The poem is an allegory and what Edmund Spenser aimed at was moral teaching. The poem is built on the principles as stated in the Bible.

The Book of Ephesians (New Testament) Chapter 6: Verses 11 – 18 states:

"Whatever, take up the whole armour of god that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day..... stand therefore having put on the breast plate (armour) of righteousness.... Taking up the shield of faith... the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit which is the word of god"

(The Good News Bible)

The purpose of composing the poem 'Faerie Queene' is clearly stated in a letter by the poet to Sir Walter Raleigh during the year 1589-90. Normally, any literary work fashions the life of a gentleman or a noble personality in virtuous and gentle discipline. Spenser's intention was to give meaning to the poem through the character of Arthur, a person who excelled in name and fame 'through many a literary works. In presenting a good and virtuous hero, the poet declares that he is following the model of Homer and Virgil. He wishes to portray Arthur, 'the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private moral virtues as devised by Aristotle.

The twelve moral virtues as stated by Aristotle are courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, high-mindedness, golden means, gentleness, truthfulness, wittiness, friendship, modesty and justice.

Arthur had seen a vision of the Faerie Queene and ravished by her excellent beauty is determined to find her. The poem begins with the annual festival of the Faerie Queene which lasts for twelve days. Each day, someone in distress is helped for which a knight is chosen. A beautiful lady dressed in mourning, with a veil covering her face rides in on a white ass, followed by a dwarf. The lady asks the Faerie Queene to send one of her knights to rescue her parents from the captivity of a dragon. Only the person who can fit into the armour can go on this mission. The armour fits the man who is called the 'knight of the Red Crosse' and he along with the lady sets out on the adventure.

The following chart will help to comprehend the characters in a better light

Characters	Virtue	Religious Meaning	Historical allusion
Red Crosse Knight	Holiness	Sanctity	Saint George
Una	Unity, Truth True Religion	Protestanism	Queen Elizabeth
Duessa	Duplicity	Roman Catholicism	Queen Mary of Scotland
Archimago	Deceit	Hypocrisy	The Pope
Orgoglio	Spiritual Pride	Deadly Sin	King Philip II of Spain

Please cite this Article as : Dr Annie John , Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene [Book I]- An Allegory of Christian Faith : Indian Streams Research Journal (MAY ; 2012)

In addition to these are various other characters who represent some vice

For eg.	Character	Vice
	Sansfoy	lack of faith
	Sansloy	lawless
	Sansjoy	melancholy
	Fradubio	Doubt
	Fraelissa	Frality

The Red Crosse knight is potentially Holiness and Saint George, but he has to realise these identities through the process of the poem. Una is veiled because man's ability to comprehend truth has declined after the fall (from paradise). Una mourns the fall of man. Her parents are Adam and Eve who have been excluded from the 'Garden of Eden' for their sin and are now in the grip of Satan.

A lot of movement takes place in the forest and the pastoral setting offers man an opportunity for rest and escape from duty. The city allegorically stands for 'the city of man' where as the pastoral setting is 'the city of god'. Both being contrasting in nature, man realizes his moral values only in god's city. There is a paradoxical dichotomy. Although man's values are established in the city, he is driven to nature which is both peaceful and appealing.

The pastoral setting therefore represents an opportunity for relaxation, retreat and also an occasion for discovering one's true essence as a civilized man.

Evil appears through the characters of Archimago and being a creator of false images and sensual sin, attempts to tempt Truth and Righteousness. He is successful when he separates Holiness [Red Crosse Knight] from Truth [Una]. Their separation makes them encounter false religion and falsehood.

The Red Crosse Knight encounters evil in the form of duplicity, deception, hypocrisy, frailty, doubt etc.

There is another incident where a beast (lion), a representative of the natural instinct towards Truth saves the life of Una. They enter the house of a blind woman, Corcecca who lives along with her daughter Abessa. The daughter is deaf and dumb. The term 'Abessa' in Latin means 'absence of'; and true to the term Abessa represents not only a physical handicap but also a spiritual deficiency. It is the lion who tries to save Una from lawlessness (Sansloy) but is not successful. This incident shows that man is more beastly than the beast, where as the beast is endowed with some humane qualities.

There is another reference to the seven deadly sins and the nature of sins. Duessa (Duplicity) brings the Red Crosse Knight to the 'House of Pride'. This beautiful and stately palace is built on a sandy hill. Lucifera, a maiden queen rules the place with tyranny. Here we are introduced to the other six sins in the form of six beasts. Lucifera rides in a coach drawn by six beasts. The ass (idleness), goat (lechery), camel (avarice), wolf (envy), swine (gluttony) and lion (wrath) along with Lucifera (pride) throw light on the seven deadly sins. This coach is driven by Satan with a whip in his hand. The very fact that the 'House of Pride' is built on the sandy hill clearly indicates that pride and all the other sins are only momentary and will soon collapse. The beautiful structure of the palace indicates the evil hidden inside. Similarly Sansjoy (melancholy / sorrow) can destroy goodness because the Christian principle says that man should happily serve god.

The duel between the knight and Sansjoy begins, which is in reality a fight between Holiness and sorrow. Spenser tries to pin point the fact that evil forces are as strong as goodness. Melancholy is a recurrent threat but cannot be killed.

Una, who is carried away by Sansloy into the wild forest, is saved by a group of satyrs (half man and half goat) which are rude, misshapen monstrous creatures. The satyrs wonderstruck by Una's beauty actually begin to worship her. Una on the other hand begins to teach them the importance of faith and discipline.

Twice we see that Una has been saved by beastly or savage forces. They seem to recognise the wrong being done and happen to be agents sent by god to fight evil. The satyrs have probably retreated to the pastoral setting in an attempt to escape from responsibilities, but their natural virtues recognize and appreciate the genuine nature of Truth.

The reference to the 'Cave of Despair' holds a great significance. Desperate men finding no alternative to their problems contemplate suicide as a means of escape. According to Christian ideology

Please cite this Article as : Dr Annie John , Edmund Spenser's Faerie Queene [Book I]- An Allegory of Christian Faith : Indian Streams Research Journal (MAY ; 2012)

committing suicide is a sin as we have no right to end what god has begun for us. Even the Red crosse knight attempts suicide but is saved by Una. Realizing that the Red crosse knight is in the grip of evil, Una decides to take him to the Hill of Contemplation to actually purge him from all evil forces. The knight undergoes a process of catharsis and is trained into virtues such as humility, charity, selflessness, truthfulness, repentance etc. Finally taken up to the hill, the knight is shown a glimpse of the city known as 'The New Jerusalem'. Only those people who are pure in thought, word and deed can possess this land. Having undergone a process of rigorous penance and repentance, the Red Cross Knight continues on with his task. Now he has Una by his side and is sure to win because once again Holiness is accompanied by Truth.

Finally, the Red Cross Knight fights the Dragon which symbolizes the conflict between the good and the evil. This fight lasts for 3 days which again symbolizes the 3 days that Jesus Christ was physically dead before being resurrected. The Red Crosse Knight liberates Una's parents from the dragon's clutches; thereby liberating them from the bondage of sin and Satan.

A peaceful end is expected as the Red Crosse Knight gets married to Una. The union of Holiness with Truth alone leads to the path of salvation. After enjoying the fruits of marital bliss for a few days, the knight once again returns to Queen Gloriana to report to her the task completed and once again begin with the new task assigned to him. This incident throws light on the fact that one can retreat, repose or relax but only momentarily. The task assigned to every person has to be completed before the final sleep.

The entire poem is built on the ideologies found in the Bible and is also packed with different patterns of allegories which are largely historical / political, moral / spiritual and religious.

On the other hand, there is a whole concept of fairy land which abounds in virtues that goes beyond time and space. This is entirely based on the platonic conception. The poem also abounds in rich symbolism. Every character / event symbolizes some virtue of some greater truths. Most significant of all is the 'Red Cross' that the Knight bears. The Cross is an emblem of Christian faith and the blood on it signifies the blood Jesus Christ shed to save humanity from the bondage of sins.

In short, 'The Faerie Queene' is a beautiful fusion of allegory and romance, a true synthesis of the epic and the romantic.

The fall of man from Eden, the loss of original purity and innocence, the subtle persuasions of Satan, Christ's encounter with Satan the defeat of Satan and the eventual deliverance through the blood of Christ are brought out very subtly and skillfully. The dramatic and literary colouring adds substance to the poem.

Spenser, one of the supreme pictorial artists is also known as a painter poet. Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that 'The Faerie Queene' stands as a literary monument of pictorial beauty.

References :

1. Spenser, Edmund. 'Faerie Queene' (Book I)
2. The GoodNews Bible.