

Lecture 8
Edmond Spenser (1552 – 1599)

Edmund Spenser's "Sonnet 75" was published in 1595 as part of the larger work, *Amoretti* and *Epithalamion*. *Amoretti* are small love poems, in this case, sonnets, and an *epithalamion* is a wedding song. The work as a whole was written by Spenser to his second wife, Elizabeth Boyle, whom he married in 1594.

In "Sonnet 75," the speaker is a poetic version of Spenser and the Lover to and about whom he is writing is Elizabeth. The subject of "Sonnet 75" is the immortality of love. In this sonnet, the speaker recounts his effort to immortalize Elizabeth and his love for her. Despite his lover's doubts about his ability to do this, Spenser assures his lover (and the reader) that through his poetry, her name will be remembered, and after their deaths their love will continue in a new life. In this sonnet, Spenser reveals his faith not only in the enduring nature of his love for Elizabeth but also in his faith in the power of written language and his spiritual confidence in eternal life.

The Sonnet Text :

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 doest in vain assay
A mortal thing so to immortalize,
For I myself shall like to this decay,
And eek my name be wiped out likewise.
Not so (quoth I), let baser things devise
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,
And in the heavens write your glorious name.
Where whenas Death shall all the world subdue,
Out love shall live, and later life renew.

POEM SUMMARY :

Lines 1–4

In Spenser's "Sonnet 75," the poet expresses in a straightforward manner his conviction regarding the immortal nature of his affection for his lover. With the first two lines the speaker establishes the framework for the poem. He relates how he wrote the name of his lover in the sand on the beach, only to have it washed away by the waves. In the next two lines (lines 3 and 4), he reveals that he attempted to write her name again, only to have the ocean tide once more erase his efforts. Through these lines, the speaker's diligence (persistence) is revealed. Despite the fact that the waves wash away his lover's name, he repeats what is clearly a futile effort.

Lines 5–8

The next four lines of the poem (lines 5–8) reveal that the poem is not simply the speaker's expression of his feelings, but a recollection of a dialogue with his lover. He explains in these lines what his lover stated when she witnessed his actions. The lover's response to the speaker's endeavors to inscribe her name in so impermanent (not lasting) a medium as wet sand is gently chastising in tone. Apparently a practical woman, she tells the speaker that he exerts himself to no end. The lover goes on to compare her name written in the sand, and its being washed away by the tide, to her own existence, and its inevitable end one day by death. Her tone and her words (reprimand and reproach) the speaker for attempting such a prideful display. She accuses him both of being vain for making such an effort and acting in vain, for his desire to affix their love to a specific time and place is ultimately, and obviously, a fruitless one.

Lines 9–12

In lines 9–12, the speaker responds to his lover's protests. Here his idealism and the fullness of his love is revealed. He tells her that only lower, less worthy creatures will die and be reduced to dust. She, rather, will certainly live on through the fame he will create for her with his poetic verses. His poetry, he assures her, will record forever her singular virtues, thereby immortalizing her name.

Lines 13–14

In the last two lines of the poem, the speaker makes plain that not only will his lover live on forever through his poetry, but also that when death conquers the world, their love will remain and be renewed in the next life. The last lines suggest the speaker's belief in some form of life after death, although whether he describes a bodily or spiritual existence remains unclear. In a sense, the speaker's intention to immortalize his lover through his poetry validates his lover's accusation that he is vain. His boasts about his ability to create such lasting fame for her reveals his grand opinion of his skill as a poet. Despite this vanity, however, the final lines of the poem make clear the depth of his love and his belief that the feelings they share will live on after death.

Spenserian Sonnet :

Spenser, through the poems in Amoretti and Epithalamion, developed a style of sonnet that incorporated the use of an interlocking rhyme scheme; this became known as the Spenserian sonnet. In such a rhyme scheme, the rhyming words at the end of each line (or end rhymes) form a pattern in which each section of the poem is linked with the following section through the repetition of the rhyming words. When discussing rhyme schemes, lines are assigned a letter in order to show the repetition of the rhyme. The Spenserian sonnet rhyme scheme is: abab bcbc cdcd ee. (All lines with an "a" designation rhyme with one another, all lines with a "b" designation rhyme with one another and feature an end rhyme different from the "a" lines, and so on.)



The effect of this rhyme scheme is a structuring of the poem into three quatrains (a section of a poem consisting of four lines of verse) and a couplet (a section consisting of two lines of verse). This physical Structure relates to the poem's meaning. The first quatrain describes the speaker's actions on the beach, the second quatrain reveals the presence of the lover and her objections, the third quatrain contains The speaker's response, and the final couplet sums up the speaker's argument.

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