

**Lecture Series on**  
**Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene***  
**Book I Canto I: Lecture 10**

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- **Introduction**

*The Faerie Queene* is an English epic poem by Edmund Spenser. Books I–III were first published in 1590, then republished in 1596 together with books IV–VI. It has over 36,000 lines and over 4,000 stanzas, and it is one of the longest poems in the English language; It is written in Spenserian stanza, a stanza containing of nine lines with the rhyme scheme of ababbcbcc. The first book focuses on the adventures of the Redcrosse knight. The knight represents holiness. He is ordered by the faerie queene, Gloriana to undertake a journey. Spenser took his inspiration for Gloriana from Queen Elizabeth I.

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- **Overview**

In the journey, the knight is accompanied by a royal princess, a noble lady named Una, and a dwarf. Canto 1 begins with the description of the knight. The knight is very brave, he has participated in a number of battles, and he bears many scars from fighting. He wears a blue cross on his armour. The knight is dedicated to Gloriana, who has sent the knight on a mission to kill a dragon. Una accompanies the knight as the dragon had ravaged her kingdom, and she wants to help take revenge. Consisting of fifty-five stanzas, the first Canto depicts the first part of the journey.

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As the three went along, there appeared a “hideous storme of raine.” The three took shelter in a glade, a shady grove consisting of various kinds of trees, including Cedar, Pine, Poplar, Oak, and many more. Once the trio left the grove, they lost their way in the woods, and happened to come to a cave: the den of an evil monster named Error.

The monster was half snake and half woman, and looked ugly and repulsive. She was “Most lothsom, filthie, foule, and full of vile disdaine.” When the knight entered the den, the monster got agitated and wrapped itself around the knight. The monster then vomited out filth and poison, along with lumps of flesh, books and papers. The poet compares the monster to river Nile which when overflows the Egyptian banks, leaves behind murky creatures in its wake.

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The knight was overwhelmed by the foul smell that the monster gave away. And small black serpents crept all around and attached themselves to the knight's legs. However, these serpents were just as incapable of causing any harm to the knight, just as tiny mosquitoes that hover around a shepherd going back home in the evening. The knight made a mighty effort to kill the monster, and cut off its head. The little serpents now started to feed on its body, and the monster was soon dead.

The knight, the lady, and the dwarf then left that place and proceeded on their journey. They met an old man who looked very "sober," and "sagely sad." The old man lived in a hermitage attached to a chapel, and he asked the three travellers to spend the night in his hermitage. The three agreed.

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They spent the evening listening to holy stories from the old man. However, when the three went off to sleep, the old man turned out to be an evil magician by the name of Archimago. He called upon two spirits of dark night. The first spirit he sent to the abode of Morpheus, the God of sleep, and the second spirit he kept to himself, giving it the shape and form of Una.

The spirit sent to Morpheus, got with him a false dream, which was then put in the eyes of the knight. The knight dreamt that the chaste and pure Una was trying to seduce him, and when he opened his eyes, he saw the false Una (the second spirit in guise of Una) lying next to him. The knight was horrified and confused, and his belief was shaken.

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- **Analysis**

*Faerie Queene* has been written in the fashion of an epic poem. According to M H Abrams, an epic poem is “a long verse narrative on a serious subject, told in formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasidivine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, nation, or the human race.” *Faerie Queene* includes heroic figures, supernatural elements, and even gods and goddesses, such as Morpheus, the God of sleep, and Hecate, the goddess of magic and witchcraft.

Written in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the text adheres to gender dichotomies. For example, the knight has been described as fit for “fierce encounters,” while Una has been described as “pure,” and “innocent.”

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The text also makes liberal use of similes and metaphors. For example, the small black serpents crowding around the knight have been compared to mosquitos. There is also liberal use of imagery, especially when describing the Error's cave, and Morpheus' chamber. There is also much use of alliteration in phrases such as, "drowned deepe in drowsie fit," and "filthie, foule, and full . . ." Many abstract ideas such as care and sleep have been personified. The text has been written in archaic English, and accordingly the spellings of words like "sonne," and "carelesse" to name a few, are different from their current spellings. Spenser has deliberately used the archaic style in the epic.

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## **Conclusion**

*Faerie Queene* is a classic epic, a text belonging to the English Renaissance, its six books celebrating the Elizabethan ideals of Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy, respectively. Spenser had especially invented the Spenserian Stanza to write this epic. According Nasrullah Mambrol, “By an eclectic mingling of old traditions, Edmund Spenser created new poetry—new in verse forms, in language, and in genre.” *Faerie Queene* is indeed a masterpiece. It is this epic which made Charles Lamb call Spenser “a poets’ poet.”