

## Edmund Spenser 1594



Edmund Spenser was born in 1552 or 1553. No documentation exists to establish his exact date of birth, but the year is known in part due to Spenser's own poetry. In *Amoretti* Sonnet 60, Spenser writes that he is forty-one years old. We know this poem was published in 1594 (and written only shortly prior to its publication), so the year of his birth can be closely guessed.

Spenser matriculated at the University of Cambridge on May 20, 1569. Ten years later he published his first publicly-released poetic work, *The Shepherds' Calendar*, to positive reviews. He then began work on his magnum opus, *The Faerie Queene*, publishing the first three of the projected twelve books in 1590.

Spenser was an English subject during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, to whose court he aspired. He offered Elizabeth *The Faerie Queene* in an attempt to gain her favor. Unfortunately, Spenser held to political views and associated with individuals that did not meet the approval of Elizabeth's principal secretary, Lord Burghley. Through Burghley's influence, Spenser was given only a small pension in recognition for his grand poetic work.

Sent to Ireland to hold English property on the oft-rebellious island, Spenser there met and wooed Elizabeth Boyle, a young woman from an important English family, who was probably half his age. His year-long suit to win her hand in marriage is recorded (with a deal of poetic license) in Spenser's *Amoretti*. Spenser also dedicated a marriage song, *Epithalamion*, to his young bride. As was the custom, both seemingly personal works of poetry were published for mass consumption in 1594 and helped Spenser's literary career to improve. In the meantime, Spenser completed the fourth through sixth books of *The Faerie Queene* and published them, along with revised versions of the first three books, in 1596.

Spenser is best known for his immense epic poem *The Faerie Queene*. Dedicated to Queen Elizabeth (herself represented by the title character) the work was envisioned by Spenser as encompassing twelve books, each one detailing a quest by some knight of King Arthur's court on behalf of Gloriana, the Faerie Queene. Spenser was only able to finish the first six books (and begin a draft of the seventh) before his death in 1599.

***Amoretti: Sonnet 75***

By  
**Edmund Spenser**

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,  
But came the waves and washed it away:  
Again I write 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, (quod 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,  
Our love shall live, and later life renew.

**POETIC / LITERARY DEVICES**

**1. Imagery**

- *"One day I wrote her name upon the strand,  
But came the waves and washed it away:"*

**2. Alliteration**

- *"die in dust," "verse your virtue," "love shall live," "later life,"*

**3. Repetitive**

- *"decay," "die," "death,"*

**4. Symbolism**

- The sea alludes to the distance that is between the lover and his beloved which is causing pain to the lover.
- The writing on the sand refers to the lover's insistence on making a worldly impact on his beloved.
- The waves are a constant reminder of the cruelty of love, haunting again and again. By washing away the name of the beloved, the waves act as torrents of torture. The waves also signify time. The erasing of the name by water signifies the transient nature of human life.
- The sea-side or beach also symbolizes a peaceful, comfortable place where the lover unreservedly expresses himself.
- The lover's writing on the sand can be a reference to man's inherent desire to eternalize his being to be remembered forever.

**5. Personification**

- But came the waves and "washed" it away
- But came the tide, and my "pains" his prey

## **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/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.)

### **STANZA BY STANZA ANALYSIS**

**STANZA 1:** The first quatrain describes the poet writing his lover’s name on the sand. Yet, the very next moment, the waves swallow them up and the letters vanish away. In the verse “Again I wrote it with a second hand”(line 4), we can see how the poet strives once more to leave his writing upon the beach, only to see it quickly disappear. We can understand the poet’s endless, but futile effort to immortalize something that is mortal. At the same time the writing of the lady's name, which is the central image of the poem, is transferred from earth to heaven. Here we learn that time is the destroyer of all things but even so, the poet perseveres with determination to engrave his love on the walls of time itself.

**STANZA 2:** In this quatrain, the poem states that the poet's lover did not have the confidence in his efforts of trying to immortalize his love towards her. She argued it is a mere waste of time and effort as love is a mortal thing as the phrase "A mortal thing so to immortalize". She will be “washed away” just like her name was washed away by the tide. The lover tell the poet that he needs to stop what he is doing and is vain for his efforts as everyone in the world will eventually have to die as time and tide waits for no man. She wanted him to know that his actions were only futile and that there is nothing he could do to control the immortality of their love because immortality itself does not exist. The lover only meant for her partner to accept the cruel and harsh realities of life that nothing can last forever.

**STANZA 3:** In the third quatrain, the poet claims that he can make their love last forever despite mortality. He says he can do this by using his verse. He goes on to say that when people die, (because people do die because they are mortal) that everyone will still have knowledge of their love because it will be eternal. The line “My verse your virtues rare shall eternize”. Despite the fact of the poet's beloved discouraging him, he never did give up but instead he proved his point by immortalising his love towards his wife through his words and writing elements. And now even though both he and his wife are long gone from the phase of this earth, but the everlasting love the poet had towards his wife will always be known and remembered for more generations to come. Just as he promised, to use his verse as a tool to immortalize her virtue for as long as it will be.

**FINAL COUPLET:** Shows a contrast between their immortal love and other things that will die with the passage of time. The capitalized word “Death” shows how it will brutally destroy all other things except for their love, which will be renewed by the presence of the sonnet. This

couplet embraces the theme of the poem that their love will not fade away like other mortal things on earth.

### **CRITICAL APPRECIATION**

In Sonnet 75 by Edmund Spenser, the speaker tells a brief tale about himself and his mistress, debating about mortality one day at the beach. As we know, love is a mortal thing when one, or both partners depart from this earth, their love will slowly fade from the consciousness of people. Through this poem, the speaker is trying to let the readers know of his efforts to immortalize his beloved. Even as time passes and when they're long gone, their love would still be known throughout the ages. The sonnet is written in the pursuit of a woman whom he loves.

The poet desires to commemorate the beloved by inscription. He tries taking writing off the page to the outdoors, leads to a lover's debate about death & time. Here we know that his lover believes that everything will subdue to the power of nature and everyone will die just like everything else on the earth but the poet believes otherwise. He feels that their love will stay alive forever and she will be famous (you shall live by fame). The poet wants to immortalise their love through his writings and it will be known until the heavens.

Even though death might separate them for the time being, but the poet strongly reaffirmed that they will be together again after death because he believed in life after death and that the love he had for his wife could never tear them apart.

### **READING MATERIAL**

Sonnet 75 is taken from Edmund Spenser's poem Amoretti which was published in 1595. The poem has been fragmented into 89 short sonnets that combined make up the whole of the poem. The name Amoretti itself means "little notes" or "little cupids." This poem is said to have been written on Spenser's love affair and eventual marriage to Elizabeth Boyle, his second wife. Sonnet 75 centres on the immortality of spiritual love and the temporarily of physical love.

Poetic images can be surprisingly persistent over time. Spenser's Sonnet 75 opens with the striking image of a man writing his beloved's name in the sand, only to see the waves wash it away again. Anyone who listened to the radio in the 1950's would have heard a hit song by Pat Boone, called "Love Letters in the Sand.". The lover in his turn is then able to raise the argument to a still higher plane, as he asserts that their love will triumph over death.

When the sonnet begins to deepen, it does so by invoking a variety of issues characteristic of the sixteenth century: the intense awareness of death, a continued sense of pride as a sin (even among protestants), the Petrarchan notion that mortal love can lead upward to divine love, the attempt to define a new kind of sacred married love. The image of writing a name in the sand doesn't have any absolute meaning of its own, certainly not one that transcends time. But like any image it is available to be *used* in a way that serves the needs of a particular moment in history. Sometimes it's just those images which seem to have the shock of familiarity that we need to look at twice. They might give us a way of getting inside an experience that happened 400 years ago, if it happened at all. But they may also show us that when history repeats itself, it does so *differently*.

Overall, *Sonnet 75* is a poem about a man promising eternal love to his beloved one. He eschews his lover's realistic worries about the loss of love due to death with enchanting words. His elaborate and detailed use of language creates a rhythm and deepens the meaning as it goes along with the tone of the verses. Thus, as the poet had anticipated, as long as people read and recite this poem, it will last eternally as a beautiful sonnet.