

# Free essay on the exposition of edmund spensers amalgam of discourses within faer...

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Question: Carol Kaske states that Book I of Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* 'presents a mutually enriching amalgam of discourses'. Explain what these discourses are and critically explore the manner in which they relate to one another.

.. if [a poet] wished to be counted respectable, and to separate himself from the crowd of foolish or licentious rimers, he must intend distinctly, not merely to interest, but to instruct, by his new and deep conceits. It was under the influence of this persuasion that Spenser laid down the plan of *Faerie Queene*. It was, so he proposed to himself, to be a work on moral, and if time were given him, political philosophy, composed with as serious a didactic aim, as any treatise or sermon in prose. --R. W. Church, *English Men of Letters: Spenser*, p. 86

Book One, *The Legend of Holiness*, presents a mutually enriching amalgam of discourses because its religious allegory is abstract and often complex and debatable, whereas its story appeals to the emotions, including some of the simplest and most basic ones.--Carol V. Kaske in the *Introduction of Faerie Queene Book 1*, p. x

Edmund Spenser's ability to intricately weave multiple layers of meanings within his literary masterpiece, *Faerie Queene Book 1*, allowed him to earn a prominent place within the canons of literature. Kaske's and Church's quotes indicate Spenser's ability to add the required depth and meaning to his writings which allowed him to appeal to different readers with different levels of understanding, and from different backgrounds, even while remaining true to the occurrences of his time period. However, it should be noted that although an in-depth reading of *Faerie Queene Book 1* reveals that it

contains enough materials and references which a reader can glean multiple interpretations from, such as its allusions to the legend of Arthur and classical mythology (Creel 9-18; Rupp 6-17; Wharton 66-112), there are three main discourses or allegories found within Faerie Queene Book 1, with the main one being of a religious or spiritual nature, in addition to the inclusion of moral and political allegories or discourses, which appear to be all interrelated to each other (Wauchope 10-12).

One of the most important allegories or discourses found within the epic, Faerie Queene Book 1, has a religious and spiritual significance to it. Robert Huntington Fletcher mentions in his book, *A History of English Literature*, that Edmund Spenser was a devout Protestant who was sympathized with the repression of Irish Catholicism (2). Spenser who wrote the Faerie Queene during the period of the English Reformation which took place during Queen Elizabeth I's reign intended his epic to be a didactic one which would depict the importance of espousing Christian principles which were akin to Protestantism, as implied by Spenser's letter to Sir Walter Raleigh (which is generally located in the preface of most editions of the epic) where he stated that Faerie Queene was written to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in [virtuous] and gentle discipline" (15). Spenser added further that the first book of the Faerie Queene was to expound on the theme of holiness, which, of course, is an important Christian virtue (16). Red Crosse, who is the hero of the epic, is the "personification of the Protestant England" who is decidedly militant against the false doctrines Roman Catholicism (Wauchope 11). Red Crosse is also depicted as a Christ figure when he kills the dragon, which represents the devil, thereby setting Una's father and mother free,

who are the monarchs of a foreign country (canto xi. ll. 473-486).

Additionally, the hero, Red Crosse, represents the individual Christian who must fight various battles while on his Christian journey, one of which is the fight against error, which is illustrated when Red Crosse has to fight and kill the dragon called Error and her young (canto i. ll. 114-234). This battle implies the importance of a Christian being aware of erroneous doctrines or teachings which might threaten him to be taken away by truth, which is represented by the character Una, whose name means truth. Additionally, the battle between Red Crosse and Error, the dragon, Wauchope argues, is an illustration of the intentions of the Roman Church along with the Spanish King, Phillip II, to "undermine the religious and political freedom of the English people" (159). However, England was able to defeat Catholicism by adhering to the doctrines of the Reformed church (Wauchope 159).

Moreover, there are various symbols scattered throughout the epic which alludes to Christianity. For instance, when Red Crosse fights the dragon which holds Una's parents captive, he falls into the Well of Life after being badly hurt by the dragon (canto xi. ll. 253-261). The waters of which healed his badly wounded body (canto xi. ll. 298-306). After being badly hurt by the dragon again, Red Crosse fell on a "goodly tree" called the "tree of life" and was restored back to health again (canto xi. ll. 406-468). The Well of Life one would associate with the Christian ritual of baptism and the Tree of Life could be linked to the all important Christian symbol of the cross. It should be noted that each time the hero fell upon these sacred objects, he was able to resurrect from death as it were, thus underscoring the point that Red Crosse is a Christ figure within the epic.

Secondly, a moral allegory or discourse is used in a didactic manner, so as to teach readers how to morally conduct their lives based on Christian principles. As indicated previously by the quote from R. W. Church, Spenser intended the epic, *Faerie Queene*, which would instruct and guide persons to morally conduct their lives, thereby following in the traditions of classical poets such as Homer, Virgil, and Ariosto (86-87). Spenser's attempt at morally instructing the reader is revealed in his characterization of Archimago, which Wauchope suggests is a representation of hypocrisy in Spenser's moral discourse within the text (12). After Red Crosse defeats the dragon, Error and her young, Archimago disguises himself as a hermit who provides lodging for both Red Crosse and Una, and who later rids himself of the disguise and uses sprites to deceive Red Crosse and cause the two lovers to be separated from each other ( canto i. ll. 253-495). This incident involving Archimago illustrates how hypocrisy can lead someone, whether Christian or non-Christian, from the truth and be deceived by mere appearances. Red Crosse is not only a Christ figure and represents the individual Christian, but he also represents holiness or wholeness. Therefore, the moral lesson which is implied by Spenser is that the pursuit of wholeness or holiness without the illumination of truth will almost always lead to deception caused by hypocrisy.

Additionally, a political allegory is employed by Spenser to illustrate and validate the head of the English monarchy (who was Queen Elizabeth during Spenser's time) as a divinely chosen and morally directed leader, who was divinely justified in opposing the Roman Catholic Church, and what it represented. As indicated previously, the book was written during the English

Reformation which promoted a "spirit of nationality" (Wauchope 3). There are several instances within the text which suggests that the various allegories or discourses found within *Faerie Queene* Book 1 were used by the author to hide his intentions of promoting a political agenda which supported Queen Elizabeth and her opposition to Roman Catholicism. For instance, after Red Crosse kills Error, the dragon, the narrator explains that "her vomit" was "full of bookes and papers" (canto i. l. 177). Wauchope explains that these words allude to the historical fact which indicates that during the period 1570 to 1590, "great numbers of scurrilous pamphlets attacking the Queen and the Reformed Church had been disseminated by Jesuit refugees" (161). Therefore, one can assume that Spenser wanted to use the first book of *Faerie Queene* to expose the attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to undermine Queen Elizabeth's leadership. In addition, Spenser allows Gloriana's request to be the major influence or driving force which propels Red Crosse to the fulfillment of his destiny, which requires that he kill the dragon which held Una's parents captive (canto i. ll. 19-27). In this sense, Red Crosse mirrors the author, Spenser, who is driven by a goal to ensure that Queen Elizabeth's glory is maintained and not tarnished by the Roman Catholic's and its supporter's attempts to sabotage her. Additional evidence to support this point is seen where Spenser allows the protagonist, Red Crosse to shift the focus of the defeat of Catholicism by the Reformed Church after the knight defeats the dragon and frees Una's parents, and he is to be engaged to Una, he tells Una's parents that he needs to return to that "great *Faerie Queene*" so that he serve her "six yeares in warlike wize" (canto xii. ll. 159, 160). In so doing, the author shifts his focus from the spiritual and

religious and re-focuses it on his political discourse which he alluded to in the beginning of the first canto. This circularity alludes to the point that the religious and moral discourses or allegories are influenced by the political climate of Spenser's day, which inadvertently or advertently initiated his need to write an epic such as *Faerie Queene* and demonstrates his commitment to continue to support Queen Elizabeth. The circularity also implies the interconnectedness of the three main discourses of the epic poem, which are driven by a political agenda supported by Spenser who desires to glorify Queen Elizabeth and her reign. Evidence which supports this point is revealed within the first canto reveal that hypocrisy has the ability to deceive an individual Christian who is on his journey of holiness or wholeness, and separate him from the truth. However, Wauchope reveals that these allegories are connected to the political allegory which suggests the attempts of the Roman Catholic Church and the Phillip I to use the "machinations of Spanish diplomacy" to deceive the English nation so that they can return to Catholicism (159).

In summary, *Faerie Queene* Book 1 represents Spenser's attempt at fusing multiple discourses which are of a religious, moral, and political nature, which appears to be driven by Spenser's desire to support Queen Elizabeth as she champions Protestantism and defeats the influence of Catholicism in England. Spenser's clever intermixing of religious, moral, and political discourses not only provides depth of meaning to his epic poem, but it also cleverly disguises the political intentions which motivate its creation.

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