**ENGH SEM 2: Paper HCC – T-4: Spenser: Amoretti LXXV**

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**A prose rendering of the poem**: One day I wrote her name upon the seashore, but the waves came and washed the name away. I wrote it a second time, and the same happened as the wave came again. Seeing this she remonstrated me, calling me vain in trying to immortalize something that is destined to die. She said she would herself be wiped out like the name written on sand, and after her death her name and memory shall also be erased from the world. I protested saying that inferior things in this world may be subject to such death and oblivion, but she shall live eternally in her beauteous glory. I will capture her beauty and virtues forever in my verse, and the versified virtues shall rise above the earthly laws of decay and death and assure a place for her in the heavens. She will remain untouched there forever in her glory – even till doomsday when death shall conquer all life on earth. Our love shall survive doomsday and start life anew, when the world is freshly made again.

**The structure of the poem**: The poem is a sonnet – a poem of fourteen lines with fourteen syllables in each line. It belongs to a series (it is the 75th) of love sonnets Spenser wrote to Elizabeth Boyle, his would-be wife. The metrical pattern of the poem is like this: it is written in iambic pentameter, the usual form of sonnet-writing, with the following variations – (a) the fourth and last foot of the second line is anapaest (b) the first foot of the fifth line is a spondee (c) the third foot of the sixth line is a trochee (d) the first foot of the ninth line is a trochee. The rhyme scheme followed in the poem is abab bcbc cdcd ee – organizing the fourteen lines into three quartets (a stanza of four lines) and a concluding couplet. The linking sounds (‘b’ from quartet 1 to 2, ‘c’ from quartet 2 to 3) carry a sense of continuity and flow, binding the verses together. The themes of the poem are arranged into a neat pattern of logical argument, called a syllogism, where the three quartets and the couplet have definite functions: quartet 1 is the thesis, quartet 2 the antithesis, quartet 3 the synthesis, and the couplet the conclusion that assimilates all and rises to a new, higher idea. It is interesting to note that the metrical pattern, especially the variations, reflects the turns of argument: the spondee at the opening of the second quartet marks the emphatic reversal at the beginning of the antithesis, the trochee at the opening of the third quartet again signifies a turn of argument, but softer this time because the poet-lover takes over. Thereafter the verse moves in smooth iambic feet, indicating the resolving power of poetry. The syllogistic pattern in which the themes are arranged also provides a dramatic character to the poem –with conflict of themes and forces ending in a solution that overcomes the tensions in a unique way.

**Themes:** The poem essentially dramatizes the conflict of two opposing forces – love and time. The site of the conflict is the body – an organic creation that takes birth and dies, obeying the law of time. Love is earthly and organic, generated from the desires of body and mind, and longs to cling to objects of desire and perpetuate them. Time is abstract, an unseen force that relentlessly drives all life to its end, and seated in man’s consciousness as the destroyer of love. The conflict is thus eternal, and has occupied art since at least the pastoral poetry of ancient Greece, and come down to Elizabethan poets through the Renaissance Italian poets who integrated the timeless conflict to the courtly and Christian traditions within which they wrote. In Greek art the conflict was often symbolically represented as the opposition between Eros (the god of love) and Thanatos (the god of death). The Greek pastoral poets found a poetic solution in the transcending powers of art, just as Spenser finds here, that could create a world of permanence beyond the mundane world ruled by time. It was a heaven where the tyranny of time became ineffective, as earthly beings passed through a purification of consciousness, a transmutation from sensual experience and feeling to supra-sensual appreciation of essentialized virtues. This belief in the immortalizing power of art was very popular among Elizabethan poets – we find variant uses of the concept from Drayton to Shakespeare and Donne. Platonic philosophy also supported the idea in a way when it declared that the spirit or essence was one and indestructible, and the only truth in a world of false bodies that live and die. Art was the way from sense to essence, from the ephemeral to the permanent, from the body to the soul. Plato had also distinguished between earthly, sensual love (that he called amor corpus) and divine spiritual love (freed of the perishable body, called amor dei); the transition from the lower to the higher through the medium of art was given effect in much of Renaissance love poetry. The struggle between love that wants to hold back and time that wants to snatch away happens on the earthly level of amor corpus, and is resolved by the magical power of art to transport beauty to a deathless realm where the spirit/essence is self-sufficient.

**Analyzing the poem: Quartet 1**: The poet, aiming to show the greatness and genuineness of his love and appreciation of the virtuous beauty of his lady, attempts to mark her name on the face of earth – making her immortal like the stones and seas. It is an expression of his urge to see her young and beautiful forever, as well as his fear that he will one day lose her. The attempt is motivated by his sensual desire for her, and therefore is passionate and carnal in nature. The sea waves come in their natural course and wash the name away. The sea here is the agent of time – its ebb and flow on the shore is a phenomenon symbolic of the constant play of life and death. The wiping out proves the ineffectuality of human love before the devouring force of time, and should forbid the poet, but he repeats the action and receives the same results. This repetition is typical of animal sensual desire – it blindly goes on repeating itself without any heed to consequence or implication. All the animism and anxiety of bodily love is involved in the attempt – and that is what renders the human lover insensitive of the failure or ridiculous impossibility of what he does. It is also a typically male struggle – a dogged effort of brutish, sensual man against the superhuman machinations of time. It is not particular to the poet-lover alone; it is a universal desire sprung from the basic stage of love – amor corpus -and composes the opening thesis of the syllogism.

**Quartet 2**: If the poet had represented sensuality in the first quartet, his lady represents intellect in the second. She watches his foolish attempts, uninformed by realization of the eternal laws of inevitable time, and smiles, both to herself and on him. She calls him vain – vain because he repeats a futile effort – ridiculing his foolishness and feeling complacent in her superior knowledge of the world’s ways. But the adjective ‘vain’ also contains a fondness for the lover who does this in a desperate bid to perpetuate her overwhelming beauty. She proceeds to tell him universal truths – a mortal thing cannot be perpetuated, she is mortal being a woman, and with her death her name will also vanish from the world’s memory. These are commonplace things born out of everyday experiences of living, and her voice is that of practical reality. The truths are hard and impersonal, and characterize their speaker as cold. The figure of the ladylove in Renaissance love poetry was a passive, cold one, in contrast to the ardent, urging male. Here she impersonates pragmatic reason, that discourages love and prompts towards admitting failure and impotence. The truths she reminds of, in a tone of slight disdain, mean the death of love and are therefore antihuman. They bring the lover to a stillness that confuses his vital energies and sends him to face deep dark questions of identity and purpose. There is defeatism in her voice which includes self-defeat, and this undertone injects a sad irony in her statement. She seems a loved yet dejected creature, looking with wistful happiness at the vain frantic rush of her man, and waiting unconsciously for him to do something really meaningful. The quartet, serving as antithesis in the syllogistic pattern, completes the opposition of love and time, creates the dramatic tension, and takes the poem to the brink of resolution.

**Quartet 3**: This synthetic quartet begins with an emphatic rejection of the commonplace realism of the second quartet (‘Not so (quod I)). The lover is transformed from ordinary lover to poet, armed with the magical power of his art. His art has raised him to a semi-divine entity able to give immortality to his love in his verse. His stunted egotism in the first quartet is full-blown here, as he has grown superior to time. He separates the lady from ‘baser things’ – creatures that are doomed to death and oblivion, creatures that are fated to move from dust to dust and complete lifecycles on earth alone. There was a popular medieval belief that the elements combined to make up creatures physiologically and spiritually, and that imperfect combinations led to the creation of ‘baser things’. Creatures belonging to higher orders of being were combined perfectly – and that perfection was manifested in their spiritual harmony, which the poet indicates by ‘vertues rare’. Physical beauty was thought to be really an expression of this inner harmony, and inferior to it because it was external and thus subject to decay. The poet makes it clear that ‘you shall live by fame’, not in her earthly body – ‘fame’ is an abstract idea that time cannot wither. The change from sense to supra-sense happens through art, involving the abandonment of the body and adopting the essence that lives on beyond the flux of time. That supra-sensual beauty, apprehensible only through contemplation, is the only truth; and the bodily existence which the lady affirms would perish is a lower form of reality in comparison. The poet is the author of this apotheosis, this elevation to a higher reality – ‘My verse…..shall eternize’. Her ‘glorious name’ will be placed in heaven with celestial creatures. Platonic philosophy said that absolute truth resides in heaven and all that seem to be true on earth are but imitations, and therefore false. The lady’s ‘vertues’, achieving that heavenly condition through art, becomes one with that absolute truth, and the glory derives from there. Once there, her entity merges with that absolute truth (what Plato called the ‘Monad’) and gives her an unassailable authority presiding over earthly creation.

**The Couplet**: In Elizabethan sonnets, the couplet was mostly used to celebrate the conclusion reached by the syllogism, and to bring out of it a truth universal and transcendent, that confirmed art’s victory over time. Here, time is stretched to its imaginable end – the doomsday or apocalypse. When all the world shall come to dust, time’s ravage will be complete. God’s creation will have run full circle. Even then, the lady (her existence as abstract truth) and the poet (by dint of his immortalizing power) shall live, and be mingled into one perfect whole. They will then become the absolute icon to be imitated and multiplied on earth, when post-apocalypse creation begins. There is also a sense here that this ‘later life’ is to be more perfect than this present world since it originates from so perfect a source. The poet assimilates pagan Platonism and Biblical thought to traverse the whole history of human existence and reaches its end, and then looks beyond to a time beyond human conception. His pronouncement of ‘our love shall live, and later life renew’ therefore sounds like an annunciation, or an oracle.

Questions: 2 mark

1. What is the speaker’s action in the first two lines?
2. Why is writing action repeated?
3. What do the waves stand for?
4. Explain – ‘made my pains his prey’.
5. Why does the lady call the poet vain?
6. What does the lady say about decadence?
7. Explain – ‘let baser things devise to die in dust’.
8. Where will her ‘glorious name’ be written, and how?
9. What is meant by ‘later life renew’?
10. “like to this decay” – what is ‘this’? how does it decay?

5 mark

1. What does the lady tell the poet? Why is the telling necessary?
2. How does the poet propose to ‘eternize’ her?
3. How should their love survive when all else is dead?
4. How is the poet’s writing significant in the poem?
5. Comment briefly on the structure of the poem.