

## **B. A. English (Honours) Part-I**

### **Paper-I (History of English Literature)**

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#### **Edmund Spenser: Life & Works- I**

Edmund Spenser was one of the representative poets of an age which found its literary expression most suitably in drama. Very little is known to us about Spenser's early life and parentage except a few facts that he was born in London in 1552 and educated at the Merchant Tailors' school and Cambridge University, where he became a protestant under the influence of the then prevailing spirit. He developed a close friendship with Sir Philip Sidney who was the nephew of the Earl of Leicester. It was Sidney who not only patronized him but introduced him to the Queen Elizabeth and encouraged him to imitate the classical metres. It was at Leicester House that he finished his famous poem *Shepherd's Calendar* which is a record of his melancholy over his lost love, Rosalind. In 1580, he was made through the influence of Leicester and Sidney, secretary to Lord Grey, who was the queen's deputy in Ireland. After that he spent almost eighteen years of his life in Ireland except a few visits to London. He served the English throne in Ireland in more than one capacity. And as a reward of his services he got the grant of Kilcolman Castle, near Limerick. It was an estate of three thousand acres. He visited London in 1589 to publish his three books of *The Faerie Queene*. After his two years' stay at London he again returned to Ireland. In 1594, he married an Irishwoman, Elizabeth in whose honour he wrote Amoretti, a sonnet sequence. For celebrating his marriage he wrote *Epithalamion*, one of the most beautiful hymns in any language. He revisited London in 1595 to publish the next three books of his great work. He again returned to his Kilcolman estate. It was burnt down by one of the rebellions, in which he and his family scarcely escaped. It is said that one of his children was perished in that incident. It appeared that some unfinished part of his *The Faerie Queene* was also burnt in the castle. He then returned to London and after a year died, "for the lack of bread" as per the statement of Ben Jonson.

## **His Minor Poems: -**

Though Spenser is mainly famous for *The Faery Queene*, his minor poetry is also voluminous. And the first of it is *The Shepherds Calender* (1579), a pastoral poem in which the poet expresses his emotions under the guise of shepherds talking and singing. It is divided into twelve parts, one for each month of the year. The poet writes of his unfortunate love for a certain mysterious Rosalind. It also discusses the religious issues of the day from the standpoint of strong Protestantism.

His next monumental work was *Astrophel* (1586), a pastoral elegy on the death of Sir Philip Sidney, to whom he dedicated his *Shepherds Calender*. His *Amoretti*, published in 1595, celebrates the progress of his love for Elizabeth Boyle. It is a collection of eighty eight Petrarchan sonnets. Writing such sonnet sequences was very much in vogue during Elizabethan period under the influence of Italian literature. He married Elizabeth Boyle and the event inspired him to compose Epithalamium, the finest of his minor poems and ‘by common consent, the noblest wedding hymn in the language’.

## **Sources:-**

Edward Albert’s *History of English Literature* (Fifth Edition)

W. H. Hudson’s *An Outline History of English Literature*

W. J. Long’s *English Literature: Its History and its Significance for the Life of the English-Speaking World*