**Biography** – Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) was born to a working-class family. He worked his way through a college education at Cambridge University, where he published his first set of poems. Spenser was unique for poets of his time, because he did not write simply to entertain himself and his friends, he relied on the funds he received to publish his work.

Spenser’s most widely recognized work is *The Faerie Queene*, a lengthy adventure of several knights. Each knight in the story represented a virtue that was valued by society at the time. He purposely wrote the poem using an archaic style (Remember, Renaissance=rebirth. Part of this “rebirth” was looking at literature of the past as inspiration for reading and writing.). Spenser dedicated *The Faerie Queene* to Queen Elizabeth I, who appeared as the Faerie Queene character in the poem.

As a poet, Spenser was recognized as an innovator. He experimented and developed a new style of sonnet, the Spenserian Sonnet. Spenser’s sonnets follow an *abab bcbc cdcd ee* **rhyme scheme**. His sonnets, like those of William Shakespeare, made use of three 4-line **quartets** and one 2-line c**ouplet** as the basis of his stanza structure. The **turn**, or shift in focus or thought, typically occurred between lines 12 and 13, with the sestet resolving or answering

Spenser’s **sonnet sequence** was published during his lifetime under the title *Amoretti*, which means “little love poems.” Each poem in the sequence focuses on his own wife, Elizabeth. This was a departure from what other sonnet writers were doing at the time. Instead, they were usually focusing on an inaccessible, idealized super beauty. Also, as a historical note, most other sonnet writers at the time relied on classical names (from ancient Greek and Roman literature) for the subjects of their sonnets. Spenser used his wife’s real name. (Her name is not mentioned in the three poems here).

**Sonnet 1**

**Helicon** – As part of the Renaissance’s “rebirth” or renewal of interest in classical literature (think ancient Greece and Rome), Renaissance poetry was often heavy on **allusions,** or references to ancient literature/mythology.

The boxes are intentional, to help you focus on the meaning.

Happy ye *leaves* when as those lily hands, A

Which hold my life in their dead doing1 might, B

Shall handle you and hold in love’s soft bands, A

Like captives trembling at the victor’s sight B

And happy *lines*, on which with starry light, B

Those lamping2 eyes will deign3 sometimes to look C

And read the sorrows of my dying spright4, B

Written with tears in heart’s close5 bleeding book. C

And happy *rhymes* bathed in the sacred brook C

Of Helicon6 whence she derived is, D

When ye behold that angel’s blessed look, C

My soul’s long lacked food, my heaven’s bliss, D

*Leaves*, *lines*, and *rhymes*, seek her to please alone, E

Whom if ye please, I care for other none. E

1 **doing** - killing

2 **lamping** - flashing

3 **deign** *v.* condescend, lower oneself

4 **spright** - spirit

5 **close** - secret

6 **Helicon** – In Greek mythology, the mountain home of the Muses, goddesses of the arts.

**Sonnet 1:**

1. What are the three things the speaker addresses in this sonnet?
2. What does the speaker hope their combined effect will be on the lady?

**Sonnet 35**

Renaissance poetry is not as difficult as you think. While the words are sometimes antiquated, they are all still important. Remember, a poem does not waste words. A poet is working to meet the demands of rhyme, rhythm, etc. Every word is meticulously chosen for its effect. Also, many times, you can simply replace with a modern word to help it make sense. For example, “seemeth” (l.13). Replace with “seems.”

My hungry eyes through greedy covetize,1 A

Still2 to behold the object of their pain, B

With no contentment can themselves suffice: A

But having pine3 and having not complain. B

For lacking it they cannot life sustain, B

And having it they gaze on it the more: C

In their amazement like Narcissus4 vain B

Whose eyes him starved: so plenty makes me poor. C

Yet are mine eyes so filled with the store C

Of that fair sight, that nothing else they brook, D

But loathe the things which they did like before, C

And can no more endure on them to look. D

All this world’s glory seemeth vain to me, E

And all their shows but shadows, saving she. E

1 **covetize** *v*. desire excessively

2 **Still** *adv*. always

3 **pine** *v*. yearn

4 **Narcissus** in Greek mythology, a youth who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool, wasted away with yearning, and was changed after his death into the narcissus flower.

**Sonnet 35:**

1. What do the speaker’s eyes desire?
2. Describe the state that desire produces in him.

**Sonnet 75**

This one is always one of my favorites. He is trying so hard to make her immortal. She, on the other hand, is super realistic, and kind of ruins his whole romantic gesture. Don’t worry – he is able to resolve that after the **turn**, in his final couplet.

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,1 A

But came the waves and washed it away: B

Again I wrote it with a second hand, A

But came the tide, and made my pains his prey. B

“Vain man,” said she, “that dost in vain assay,2 B

A mortal thing so to immortalize, C

For I myself shall like to this decay, B

And eek3 my name be wiped out likewise,” C

“Not so,” quod4 I, “let baser things devise5 C

To die in dust, but you shall live by fame: D

My verse your virtues rare shall eternize, C

And in the heavens write your glorious name. D

Where whenas death shall all the world subdue, E

Our love shall live, and later life renew.” E

1 **strand** - beach

2 **assay** *v*. try

3 **eek** - also

4 **quod** - said

5 **devise** *v*. work out or create; plan

**Sonnet 75:**

1. Why does the lady say the speaker’s efforts are futile?
2. Summarize the speaker’s response:
3. What connection does the poem make between immortality and poetry?