Understanding Spenser’s Faerie Queene & the Significance of Allegory

Edmund Spenser earned the epithet of “the prince of poets.” He wrote at a time when “real men wrote poetry” and poetry was considered the apex of writing skill.

Spenser is remembered for his great work *The Faerie Queene*, the longest narrative poem in the English language. The work was planned to fill 12 books; he finished six and left the seventh *Mutability* incomplete. Appreciation of his work depends on understanding his use of allegory.

As an allegory, the characters, places, objects, and actions carry meaning on a variety of levels. Some say that Spenser designed seven levels of meaning into *The Faerie Queene*. Meaning is certainly found on religious, moral, philosophical, political, social, and literal levels.

Each book of the series is divided into cantos (chapters); each features a hero who stands for a chivalrous virtue. Those virtues are Holiness, Temperance (self-control in temptation), Chastity, Friendship, Justice, and Courtesy. As each hero follows through on his quest, they come to embody the virtue being described.

In Book I -- which is often studied on its own and is considered the best of the six books -- the Redcrosse Knight represents Holiness. Lady Una symbolizes the Christian faith and the Church of England. She is the lady whom the Redcrosse Knight serves. The Redcrosse Knight and Lady Una search for her parents, who are trapped by an evil dragon. The knight kills the dragon and wins the lady’s hand.

On the spiritual level, this is the story of a Christian’s temptation by the seven deadly sins, his falling away and coming back to faith, and his final salvation. Errours, the half-serpent monster they meet, stands for original sin. The other creatures, demons and sinister humans that fill the poem represent other evils, vices, and sins.

Spenser demonstrates his knowledge by including many allusions to classical writers, especially Homer, Ovid, and Virgil. Readers need a knowledge of Greek and Roman mythology to understand the deeper sections of *Faerie Queene*.

**BIG IDEA QUESTIONS**

1. What is the significance of being the “red cross” knight?

2. Who is Gloriana? Who is the “lovely lady” riding next to the knight?

3. What trouble do the pair run into on pp. 105-106? What does the lady warn the knight about in the last stanza on p. 106?

4. What do you think the “dwarf” symbolizes?

5. Describe the monster the knight encounters in stanzas 13-15.

6. How does the lady help the knight defeat the monster? (st 19)

7. What happens in stanzas 20-21?