

The Faerie Queen as a Romance or An Epic or Romantic Epic

Edmund Spenser's 'Faerie Queen' is one of the greatest poetic creations in the world of literary Art. Some critics consider it as an epic, others call it a romance and, still, others regard it as a romantic epic. As a matter of fact, these varied opinions are the result of its distinct features. To decide whether it is a romance or an epic, let us consider their distinguishing features.

According to the classical tradition, an epic is a long narrative poem that relates the heroic exploits of a great person of national or international importance. Its theme is exalted in its treatment and didactic in its tone. There are Homeric similes that impart grandeur, variety and vastness to the subject. Some supernatural agency is also used and the poet does not necessarily begin at the beginning. It exhibits the unity of structure. Whereas a romance records the deeds of many persons who may be fictitious characters. The structure is often loose and the unity of action is not necessary. There may be some moral instruction but its primary aim is entertainment. It is more concerned with love than with war. The scene is laid in some fairytale land.

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A thorough study of 'The Faerie Queen' reveals that it is neither a perfect epic nor a perfect romance. Rather, it has the prominent features of the both. The result is that it is not a heroic poem, properly so called, but a hybrid epic, romance and allegory all mixed with the minimum of characterization. There is an air of epic, but the concentration is not on the activities of one man, but on the achievements of many persons. Then it has to be called a romance and not an epic. However, it cannot be overlooked that Spenser has given it a touch of epic by interweaving the various actions of various characters around one character, Prince Arthur.

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Moreover, Prince Arthur is not an imaginary figure ~~of~~ but like that of a romance, but a historical personage.

The Faerie Queen has several books, each having a separate hero. But Arthur eclipses all other knights and proves himself worthy of Gloriana. He is the central hero of the poem. He may not have all the virtues in the same degree in which each knight possesses his own peculiar virtue, but he emerges as an apotheosis of all virtues. Naturally, by uniting the whole circle of virtues in himself, he appears to be superior to all knights. Really, Arthur is the epic hero, though he does not appear as a principal character in each book but as an auxiliary to the knight whom he helps. The cumulative and culminating impressions left on the reader's mind establish him the supreme hero unifying all virtues in himself.

Besides, Spenser has abundantly used the epic similes which give epic colour to the poem. These similes are broad in their comparison and bring the pictures clearly before our eyes. The hypocrisy and duplicity of of Duessa's character have been presented by a notable epic simile: ~~when~~ when the knight is victorious, ~~he~~ ^{she} is welcomed by the queen and attended by the physician, he sleeps on the luxurious bed ~~as~~ like a weary traveller. -

"As when a weary traveller, that strays
By muddy shore of broad seven-mouthed Nile
On meeting of the perillous wandering wayes,
Doth meete a cruel craftie crocodile
Which in false grieffe hiding his charfull guile
Doth weepe full sore, and beddeth tender leaves
The foolish men, that fished all this while
His mournful flight, is swallowed up unware
Forgelful of his owne that mindes and others cares
So wept Duessa untill eventide."

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The introduction of supernatural machinery also makes the poem epical. Archimago sends Spirits to Morpheus to bring a dream. —

"Hither" (quoth he) "me Archimago sent
He that the stubborn Spirits can wisely tame
He bids thee to him send for his intent
A fit false dreame, that can delude the sleepers sent."

The Faerie Queen has also been called an epic of chivalry, for many of the Knights take under take dangerous adventures to gain the favour of their lady. In fact, Spenser does not ignore the medieval institution of chivalry. So, his Knights are all inspired by the noble ideals, goodness or chastity. However, not only their outward form in magic armour or beautiful ladies presiding over horrible giants and dreadful dragons to be conquered, is presented but also the inner essence has clearly been visualised and delineated. The Knight of Red Cross undertakes the adventure to kill the dreaded Dragon, who has imprisoned Que's parents. No doubt, his intention is honest, but his love for his lady is also equally inspiring.

"Upon a great adventure he was bound
That greatest Gloriana to him gave
To winne him worshippe and her grace to have
which of all earthly things he most did crave."

Faerie Queen has also been called an epic of fresh wars. Church remarks 'it might almost be called the epic of English war in Ireland under Elizabeth as much as the English virtue and valour at the same period.' Spenser chooses to write of knight-errantry, his picture of it has gained strength by his practical experience of the life he describes. However, the atmosphere of the poem is calm and easy of a fairyland. The battles have lost their horrors and wounds bring no pain. There is an absence of real fear and hatred.

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Thus, 'The Faerie Queene', has the qualities of an epic. as well as Paul, at the same time, it has also demonstrates some features of a romance. In fact, by combining romance and epic, the Spenser has created a romantic epic. It acquires some of the characteristics of romance, though in design and form it remains epical, so it can be called a romantic epic and not a pure epic in the classical style.