

# Enumerating the Eco-consciousness in Edmund Spenser's *Prothalamion*

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**Abstract:** The tendency to care for nature is not a novel idea. It has been prevalent from the olden days where some writers unveiled it in their literary texts. Edmund Spenser is one such writer who has depicted their concern towards nature. It is also a kind of portending the present scenario. Percy Bysshe Shelley says, "Away, away, from men and towns, / To the wild wood and the downs, -". Even though *Prothalamion* is a wedding song, there are lot of underlying ideas on eco-consciousness in the lines of the poem. Rather than a mere poem of celebration, it is also a poem on awareness to protect and adore nature. By dissecting the events of the poem in to two parts such as the preparation for the wedding amidst nature and the event of wedding, the drastic change in the human attitude can be explored. This proposed paper titled, "Enumerating the Eco-consciousness in Edmund Spenser's *Prothalamion*" explores the nuances of preserving the nature seen in this poem and also highlights the loss of such tendency in the domination of humans over nature.

## **Index Terms – Awareness, Eco-consciousness, Nature, Pollution, Warning**

There are various writers who have portrayed the beauty of nature and also voice out the depleting state of nature in their works. One among them was Edmund Spenser. In his "*Prothalamion*", he has picturised the beauty of nature and also pointed out the depleting state of it as humans started to occupy the land of nature. "*Prothalamion*" is also known as A Spousal Verse in Honour of the Double Marriage of Ladie Elizabeth and Ladie Katherine Somerset. This poem is wedding song for the twin marriage of the daughters of Earl of Worcester, Elizabeth Somerset and Katherine Somerset to Henry Guildford and William Petre respectively. The wedding song indicates that it is a mode of celebration. In order to add beauty to that celebration, nature is added to it. The entire poem takes place near a river. All the elements and the beauty of nature is picturised in this poem. These factors give a hint of eco-consciousness which is hidden in the poem.

This poem can be divided in to two sections. The first section of the poem is a beautiful portrayal of nature whereas the second section contains the effects of humans upon nature. The poem begins with the line, "CALM was the day, and through the trembling air". Even though it is a day time, the place remains calm which reveals that it is a place filled surrounded by nature where one can find peace. In order to forget about the worries in his personal life, he walks along River Thames and in typical Renaissance style, he addresses the Muses and alluded to Titan, Jove, and Venus. It is mentioned that the cool breeze covers the heat of the sun and the 'silver streaming Thames' has been 'painted' with variable flowers. The word 'painted' is an irony which denotes the depleting state of nature.

Mythological figure is introduced in the poem. Nymphs, which are supernatural maidens known for their purity, are described. The beauty of the flowers is mentioned where they prepare bouquets of flowers with primroses, white lilies, red roses, tulips, violets and daisies. The lines, "And with fine fingers cropt full featously / The tender stalks on high" reveal that it must be carefully examined and the extra growth must be cut off. This shows that the poet has noticed the trivial things which contributes to the growth of nature.

Various phrases like 'two swans', 'two fairer birds', 'Two of those nymphs', 'Hercules' two pillars', 'twins of Jove', and 'two fair birds' are mentioned in this poem. The word 'two' is often repeated and it carries importance. The number two represents separation, division, and disunity. It symbolises the separation of humans from nature. This is a kind of foreshadowing the future. It depicts the human activities which lead to the division between humans and nature. Rather than becoming a part of nature, humans made nature to be a part of them. The mentioning of the word 'snow' indicates that there is a winter season. It is said that the beauty of the river is increased when the flowers are thrown by Nymphs in excitement. The indication of swans fulfils the picturisation of a river. River Lee is also mentioned which is flowing with happiness from its headquarters at Kent.

Wedding, a grand occasion, happens near a river. The silence in the nature is thus affected and the nature is spoiled. The calmness in the nature is lost. Birds in that area need to migrate to some other places. Even though it is a beautiful occasion, it is a symbol of representing the fact that humans have started to occupy the land of nature. This idea is seen in the following lines of this poem:

That even the gentle stream, the which them bare,  
Seemed foul to them, and bade his billows spare  
To wet their silken feathers, lest they might  
Soil their fair plumes with water not so fair,  
And mar their beauties bright,

The poet explains that the water is foul. This gives a hint of pollution in this poem and thereby he creates awareness about it. As the river is polluted, he asks the river not to dirt the sacred wings of the swan. This is a kind of foreshadow of the present scenario.

The River Thames is once considered to be the cleanest river in the world. But, in 1957, the Natural History Museum declared that the River Thames was so polluted and was biologically dead. From 1830 to 1860, thousands of people died of cholera as a result of pollution in the river. The pleasure steamship *Princess Alice* sunk in a river collision in the year 1878. More than 600 passengers died in that collision. They did not die due to drowning but because of the pollution in River Thames. Charles Dickens often describes River Thames as 'a dank, stinking sludge, the scene of murders and crime' in his novels. In 1959, the *Guardian*, called as the *Manchester Guardian* then, reports, "The tidal reaches of the Thames constitute a badly managed open sewer . . . No oxygen is to be found in it for several miles above and below London Bridge." In the year 2013, a public health warning has been issued about the dangers of swimming in the River Thames after more than 300 competitors in a race became ill. An investigation by Public Health England says that there is a risk of gastrointestinal illness such as nausea, diarrhoea, stomach cramps and vomiting as the River Thames is polluted. The study by Royal Holloway in 2015 finds that up to 70% of flounder in the Thames has bits of plastics in their guts.

When down along by pleasant Tempe's shore,  
Scattered with flowers, through Thessaly they stream,  
That they appear through lilies' plenteous store,  
Like a bride's chamber floor.

In this poem, Nymphs throw flowers over the river and it looks like Peneus, the river of ancient fame and also like a bride's chamber. Thus, in the first section of the poem the poet admires the beauty of nature and also points out the harmful effects of nature due to man-made activities. In the second section of the poem, he shifts from the admiration towards nature to humans. Once he starts to focus on human beings in that place, he forgets to notice the beauty of nature. He begins to recollect his encounter at the mansion and the building where the wedding occurs. He started to praise Earl of Sussex and Queen Elizabeth and describes the wedding celebration. The drastic change in the human attitude is that they fail to notice the beauty of nature when they are surrounded by the people. They understand and praise nature only in their solitude. The idea of 'eco-consciousness' is also seen only when they become one with nature.

Humans are not affected by nature. It is the human activities which provokes the nature to harm humans. But nature through its beauty kindles the human mind and make them to fall for such beauty. When humans started to get attract towards nature, they visit such places and polluted it. In this poem, as the river is beautiful and filled with nature around it, the wedding celebration happens. This becomes one of the reasons for the pollution in the river.

Even though it is a wedding song, nature plays an important role. Even in the description of each character, rather than focusing on the characters, the poet has also focused on the aspects of nature surrounded by that character. In order to forget the pain, man seeks nature. In the beginning of the poem, it is revealed that the poet starts to walk near the river to forget all his pains in the personal life. Till he is in the company of nature, he is not distressed by his pain. This shows that a man who is surrounded by nature will forget his pains and start to admire the nature around him.

If the element of nature was removed from the poem, then setting of the wedding would be in a different place. No floral decorations would be there in this wedding. Comparisons with such mythical characters would not be a part of this poem as the celebration was in the absence of nature. Also, the poet would not have been relieved from his pain as he had tried to seek solace through nature. Either this "Prothalamion" would not have existed or it would be an ordinary nuptial song without any speciality. Leo Tolstoy says, "One of the first conditions of happiness is that the link between man and nature shall not be broken". Thus, "Prothalamion" is not just an ordinary nuptial song which explains the joyous celebration of wedding. Rather, it is the poem of creating awareness on protecting the nature and it also anticipates the present degrading state of nature. Time spent among trees is never time wasted!

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