

“Elian Gray” from Mary Howitt, *Ballads and Other Poems*. By Mary Howitt (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1847). Originally published in *The Iris: A Religious and Literary Offering*, Ed. Thomas Dale (London: Sampson Low, 1831).

This poem represents Native Americans as alternately cruel and deeply compassionate. In discussing the poem's marriage of an English woman into a Native community, Kate Flint describes this “overall message...of Indian kindness...[with] no hint of unease at cross-racial marriage” as a literary trope contrasting sharply with actual English fears of miscegenation (68). Also interesting in this poem is the destitution of the woman and her husband in the heartless American cities, an idea that contrasting sharply with the idealized vision of an America where “worthy and industrious people never came to want, and [where] such as were in absolute poverty were the really lazy and dissolute” (158).

“Oh! Elian Gray, rise up, rise up!”
His neighbours cried. “Still dost thou sleep?
The bloody Indians are come down,
Flames rise from the near English town;
And hark!—the war-whoop, wild and deep!”

“I sleep not,” said the ancient man.
“Fly you; but tarry not for me!
I dare not quit this lonely ground,
Though the wild Indians camp around,
For God commands me not to flee.

“I know not what may be his will;
But, when I rose up to depart,—
‘Fly not, thou hast no cause to fear,
Thy place of duty still is here,’—
Like lightning-words passed through my heart.

“Therefore I dare not quit this place:
But you, whom no commands delay,
Haste and secure by timely flight
Your wives and little ones this night;
Fly, fly, my children! while you may.”

They fled like wild deer through the woods;
And saw, from each commanding height,
Afar, and all around, aspire
The red flames of consuming fire,
Marking the Indians' course that night.

Alone, alone sat Elian Gray,
With unbarred door, beside his fire,
Thoughtful, yet cheerfully resigned,
Awaiting with submissive mind
What the Great Master might require.

Seven days went on, and where is he?
A captive travel-worn, and spent
With weary marchings, night and day,
Through the far wilderness, away
To a wild Indian settlement.

And now the old man's strength had failed;
And, powerless as a child new-born,
Stretched in that lonely forest-place,
Among a fierce and savage race
He lay, as if of God forlorn!

Forlorn! And yet he prayed to live,
With a wild feverish agony;
And fearful, doubting, grew his mind;
And for a moment he repined
That God had brought him there to die.

When, lowly murmured by the door
Of the rude wigwam where he lay,
He heard, as if in dreams he heard,
Mournfully many an English word
Cast to the desert winds away.

He looked: it was an Indian woman
 Singing, as if to soothe some woe
 Which at her very heart was strong,
 The sad words of an English song
 That he remembered long ago,—

The ballad of a broken heart;
 But how could her soul understand
 The sadness of that story old?
 How could an Indian tongue unfold
 The language of another land?

Ere long the mystery was revealed;
 And then the old man, Elian Gray,
 Saw the great work of mercy clear,
 And this was the poor stricken deer
 For whom his path through peril lay.

“No, I am not of Indian birth!”
 Said she: “I have an English name,
 Though now none give it unto me;
 Mahontis, ‘child of misery,’
 They gave me for my Indian name,
 And 't is the only one I claim.

“And yet I love the English tongue;
 And let us two our converse hold
 In that dear unforgotten speech,
 For it hath words my griefs to reach,—
 The Indian tongue is harsh and cold.

“No, I am not of Indian blood,
 My native home is far from here,
 Nor is there on the face of earth
 A fairer spot than gave me birth,
 The English vale of Windermere.

“Oh, pleasant vale of Windermere!
 There was my birthplace; there I grew,
 Without a care my youth to dim,
 A mountain maiden strong of limb,
 And free as the wild winds that blew.

“

My step was firm, my heart was bold,
 I crossed the lake, I clomb the rock;
 Clad in that simple country's dress,
 I was a mountain shepherdess,
 And there I kept my father's flock.

“I grew, and I became a wife;
 And he who was my chosen mate,
 Though midst our lonely mountains bred,
 Much knowledge had, and much had read,
 Too much for one of his estate.

“He knew all lands, all histories old;
 He understood whate'er he saw;
 His words poured out like waters free;
 His was that native dignity
 Which could respect from all men draw.

“Wise as he was, he could not toil,
 And all went wrong about our place:
 The years were wet; we had nought to reap;
 Amid the snows we lost our sheep,
 And misery stared us in the face.

“We left the land that gave us birth;
 And I, who was become a mother,
 Within my inmost heart kept deep
 My burning tears, I did not weep;
 'Tis hard our bitterest griefs to smother!

“My parents' graves among the hills,
 We left them in their silence lying!
 My husband's hopes were high and strong,
 And with light heart he went along,
 Good omens in each thing descrying.

“My heart was heavy as a stone,
 And the poor children's weary cry
 Fevered me till my brain grew wild;
 And then I wept ev'n as a child,
 And tears relieved my misery.

"We came into this foreign land.
 Oh! weary is the stranger's fate!
 He comes where none his feelings share,
 Where he may die and no one care!
 This, this is to be desolate!

"He died—ay, in the city street,—
 God knows why such great grief was sent!
 He died—and as the brute might die—
 The careless people passed us by;
 They were so used to misery,
 Their meanest sympathies were spent!

"Ah me! I by his body sate,
 Stupid, as if I could not break
 The bonds of that affliction's thrall;
 Nor had I roused my soul at all,
 But for my little children's sake.

"Want, total want of daily bread
 Came next. My native pride was strong;
 And yet I begged from day to day,
 And made my miserable way
 Throughout the city's busy throng.

"I felt that I was one debased,
 And what I was I dared not think;
 Ev'n from myself I strove to hide
 My very name; an honest pride
 Made me from common beggary shrink.

"Oh misery! My homeless heart
 Grew sick of life. I wandered out
 With my two children, far away
 Into the solitudes that lay
 The populous city round about.

"The mother in my soul was strong,
 And I was ravenous as the beast;
 Man's heart was hard, I stole them bread,
 And while I pined the children fed,
 And yet each day our wants increased.

"I saw them waste, and waste away,
 I strove to think it was not so:
 At length one died—of want he died;
 My very brain seemed petrified;
 I wept not in that bitter woe!

"I took the other in my arms,
 And day by day, like one amazed
 By an unutterable grief,
 I wandered on: I found relief
 In travel, but my brain was crazed.

"How we were fed I cannot tell;
 I pulled the berry from the tree,
 And we lived on: I knew no pain,
 Save a dull stupor in my brain,
 And I forgot my misery.

"I joyed to see the little stars;
 I joyed to see the midnight moon;
 I felt at times a wild delight,
 I saw my child before my sight
 As gamesome as the young racoon.

"T was a strange season; and how long
 It lasted, whether days or years,
 I know not: it too soon went by;
 I woke again to agony,
 But ne'er again to human tears.

"The Indian found me in the wood,
 He took me to his forest-home;
 They laid my child beneath the tree,
 They buried it, unknown to me,
 In a wild lonesome place of gloom.

"The Indian women on me gazed
 With eyes of tenderness, and then
 Slowly came back each 'wildered sense;
 Their low tones of benevolence
 Gave me my human soul again.

“And I have lived with them for years;
 And I have been an Indian wife;
 And, save at times when thoughts will flow
 Back through those dreadful times of woe
 To my youth's sunshine long ago,
 I almost like the Indian life.

“But one cloud darkeneth still my soul,
 I have forgot my fathers' God!
 I cannot pray; and yet I turn
 Toward Him, and my weak soul doth yearn
 Once more for holy spiritual food.

“Oh that I had an inward peace!
 Oh that I had a hope to bless!
 A faith to strengthen, and sustain
 My spirit through its mortal pain,
 To comfort my long wretchedness!

“But I am feeble as a child,
 I pine as one that wanteth bread;
 And idly I repeat each word
 Of holy import I have heard,
 Or that in early creeds I said.

“But oh! my comfort cometh not!
 And, whether God is veiled in wrath
 And will not heed my misery,
 Or whether He regardeth me,
 I know not; gloomy is my path!”

With this arose old Elian Gray:
 “My daughter, God hath left thee not!
 He hath regarded thy complaint,
 Hath seen thy spirit bruised and faint,
 Thou art not of His love forgot!

“‘Tis by His arm I hither came;
 Surely for this I heard a voice
 Which bade me in my place ‘be still;’
 I came by His almighty will,
 And greatly doth my soul rejoice!”

He gave her comfort, gave her peace;
 And that lone daughter of despair
 For very joy of heart shed tears;
 And the dark agony of years
 Passed by, like a wild dream of care.

Thus was the old man's mission done;
 And she, who 'mong that forest race
 Was wife and mother, won his life
 From torture, from the scalping-knife,
 And sped him to his former place.