

## 'Song of the Ugly Maiden' by Eliza Cook

*with paraphrase and commentary by Alan Steinle*

Eliza Cook (1817-1889) was a British poet of the Victorian Era. She was self-educated and she made a name for herself by writing astutely about everyday situations for working-class readers.

The following poem was published in *Victorian Women Poets: An Anthology* (edited by Angela Leighton and Margaret Reynolds; published by Blackwell in 1995).

After each stanza (in bold), I have added my paraphrase and notes (in square brackets [ ]). You can skip the paraphrases if you understand the poem. After the entire poem, I have included my commentary on the poem.

### **Song of the Ugly Maiden**

1.

**Oh! the world gives little of love or light,  
Though my spirit pants for much;  
For I have no beauty for the sight,  
No riches for the touch.  
I hear men sing o'er the flowing cup  
Of woman's magic spell;  
And vows of zeal they offer up,  
And eloquent tales they tell.  
They bravely swear to guard the fair  
With strong, protecting arms;  
But will they worship woman's worth  
Unblent with woman's charms?  
No! ah, no! 'tis little they prize  
Crookbacked forms and rayless eyes.**

[I yearn for love and light, but the world gives little of these to a maiden who doesn't have a beautiful face or shapely body. I hear men sing about how alluring and attractive women are. These men swear to be faithful to such women, and they may talk eloquently about their experiences with them. They promise to protect the beautiful women, but would they worship a woman—would she have any worth to them—if she was not beautiful? No! They do not care for women with bent backs (hunchbacks) and dull eyes.]

2.

**Oh! 'tis a saddening thing to be  
A poor and Ugly one:  
In the sand Time puts in his glass for me,  
Few sparkling atoms run.  
For my drawn lids bear no shadowing fringe,  
My locks are thin and dry;  
My teeth wear not the rich pearl tinge,  
Nor my lips the henna dye.  
I know full well I have nought of grace  
That maketh woman 'divine;'**

**The wooer's praise and doting gaze  
Have never yet been mine.  
Where'er I go all eyes will shun  
The loveless mien of the Ugly one.**

[It is sad to be poor and ugly. I have had few times of excitement in my life. My eyelashes are short. My hair is thin and doesn't shine. My teeth are not white. My lips are not red. I have no beauty or grace to make me seem like a "goddess." No one praises my beauty or looks at me. No one wants to look at a maiden with a loveless and ugly appearance.]

**3.**

**I join the crowd where merry feet  
Keep pace with the merry strain;  
I note the earnest words that greet  
The fair ones in the train,  
The stripling youth has passed me by  
He leads another out!  
She has a light and laughing eye,  
Like sunshine playing about.  
The wise man scanneth calmly round,  
But his gaze stops not with me;  
It hath fixed on a head whose curls, unbound,  
Are bright as curls can be;  
And he watches her through the winding dance  
With smiling care and tender glance.**

[I join the crowd that is happily moving with the music, and I notice that the pretty ones are greeted, and asked to dance, by the young men, but I am not asked to dance. The wise man looks around, but his eyes do not rest on me. Instead, he looks at one with pretty hair, and he smiles and watches her dance.]

**4.**

**The gay cavalier has thrust me aside;  
Whom does he hurry to seek?  
One with a curving lip of pride,  
And a forehead white and sleek.  
The grey-haired veteran, young with wine,  
Would head the dance once more;  
He looks for a hand, but passes mine,  
As all have passed before.  
The pale, scarred face may sit alone,  
The unsightly brow may mope;  
There cometh no tongue with winning tone  
To flatter Affection's hope.  
Oh, Ugliness! thy desolate pain  
Had served to set the stamp on Cain.**

[The happy gentleman has rejected me. He is quick to pursue a proud one with full lips and a smooth white forehead. The old man feels young after drinking wine and wants to dance again. He looks for someone to lead to the dance, but he overlooks me, as all have done before. The ones with acned faces

can only sit alone and feel sad. No one comes to talk to them and give them hope. The lonely, desolate pain of ugliness is like the mark of Cain. (This reference to Cain is an allusion to Genesis, chapter 4. Perhaps the maiden feels her appearance was rejected by men similar to the way Cain's offering was rejected by the Lord. The maiden may also feel jealous of the pretty young women in the same way that Cain felt jealous of his brother, Abel, whose offering was accepted by the Lord. She, like Cain, may feel like a wanderer, with nowhere to fit in. She might also identify with Cain when he said, "My punishment is too great to bear!")]

**5.**

**My quick brain hears the thoughtless jeers  
That are whispered with laughing grin;  
As though I had fashioned my own dull orbs,  
And chosen my own seared skin.  
Who shall dream of the withering pang,  
As I find myself forlorn—  
Sitting apart, with lonely heart,  
'Mid cold neglect and scorn?  
I could be glad as others are,  
For my soul is young and warm;  
And kind it had been to darken and mar  
My feelings with my form;  
For fondly and strong as my spirit may yearn  
It gains no sweet love in return.**

[I hear the voices that make fun of me, as if I myself had created my own dull eyes and chosen my pockmarked skin. Who can imagine the distress I am feeling as I find myself lonely and sad while others neglect and make fun of me? I could be happy like others, for I am young and full of passion. But I would be better off if my passion were as dull as my looks, for although I yearn for a partner, no one will return my love and affection.]

**6.**

**Man, just Man! I know thine eye  
Delighteth to dwell on those  
Whose tresses shade, with curl or braid,  
Cheeks soft and round as the rose.  
I know thou wilt ever gladly turn  
To the beautiful and bright;  
But is it well that thou shouldst spurn  
The one God chose to blight?  
Oh! why shouldst thou trace my shrinking face  
With coarse, deriding jest?  
Oh! why forget that a charmless brow  
May abide with a gentle breast?  
Oh! why forget that gold is found  
Hidden beneath the roughest ground?**

[I know men love to look at those with pretty hair and faces, but should you reject me, whom God made ugly? Why should you make fun of me? Why have you forgotten that an ugly face can coexist with a kind heart? Why have you forgotten that great treasures can be found beneath rugged appearances?]

7.

**Would that I had passed away  
Ere I knew that I was born;  
For I stand in the blessed light of day  
Like a weed among the corn,—  
The black rock in the wide, blue sea—  
The snake in the jungle green,  
Oh! who will stay in the fearful way  
Where such ugly things are seen?  
Yet mine is the fate of lonelier state  
Than that of the snake or rock;  
For those who behold me in their path  
Not only shun, but mock.  
Oh, Ugliness! thy desolate pain  
Had served to set the stamp on Cain.**

[I wish that I had died before I was born, for I am like a weed among the desirable plants. ("A weed among the corn" may be an allusion to Jesus' parable of the weeds and the wheat in Matthew 13:24-30. The maiden may feel she has been rejected as the weeds were rejected by Jesus.) People try to avoid dangerous ocean rocks and jungle snakes, yet men do more than avoid me—they make fun of me. (See note on Cain after stanza 4.)]

### **Commentary**

According to the famous quotation, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" (Margaret Wolfe Hungerford, 1878). This means that external beauty and ugliness are subjective characteristics that depend on the perspective and mentality of the viewer. One viewer might see someone as beautiful or ugly, while another viewer might see the opposite.

However, for the sake of argument, let's assume that the maiden is objectively, outwardly ugly. What is the cause of her ugliness? There are, as I see it, at least three possibilities. Her ugliness could have been a chance combination of genetic and environmental factors. Her ugliness could have been ordained by God. Or she could have chosen to be ugly before she was born. These three causes could also have acted together in some way to make her ugly.

Regardless of the cause of her ugliness, what can the maiden do now that she is ugly? She can cover up her ugliness with makeup, a wig, and a back support. However, what would her partner think of her when she has to remove those things? Would he still love her? Alternatively, she could go out in public as she is, and face the neglect and ridicule of those around her. She might learn to have a thick skin and learn to live without the affection of a partner. What else can she do? She could become bitter because she feels she has missed out on what others have and the so-called normal life.

Or she could choose to look at things in another way. She could choose to try to understand how other marginalized and neglected people feel. She could work at an orphanage or at a support group. And as her compassion for others expands, she might be able to let go of her self-pity and sadness and be able to develop an inner beauty that few people have. And, in the end, which is more important: inner or outer beauty? Outer beauty can deceive and fade with time, while inner beauty is based on truth and compassion, and this type of beauty might keep increasing and last forever.