

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

On the Brink by Alfred Elmore



Title:	On the Brink
Maker:	Alfred Elmore (1815 - 1881)
Medium:	Oil on canvas
Date:	c. 1865
Dimensions:	h.114.3 x w. 83.2 cm
Museum No:	PD. 108 - 1975
Gallery:	2

The Subject

This painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1865. It is an essentially Victorian image. During the age of Dickens, Trollope and the Brontes, the era of the great British story tellers, superb painted narratives were also produced. Stories had been painted for centuries but these Victorian dramas were different; they were not histories, or myths, or Bible stories; they dealt with modern issues, in contemporary settings. Often, as with contemporary published stories, these paintings were made in a series, offering the viewer serial stages of a story line. But in this painting we are given one frozen moment, a dramatic interlude which engages the viewer with a moral dilemma.

The action of the painting takes place in a gaming house. The word, 'Homburg', is written on the back of the canvas, and so the setting is thought to be a popular casino in that German spa town. The painting is full of deliberately constructed contrasts. In the foreground a desperate young woman sits outside, lit by the cool light of the moon. In the background is the bustle and noise of the warmly lit casino. Between these two contrasting scenes is a mysterious dark male figure, leaning through a window which forms a bridge between inside and outside, light and dark, isolation and inclusion. Perhaps he is consoling her, perhaps he is her tempter, we cannot be sure, but whichever is the case she leans away from him; and he seems to cause her great anxiety.

In contrast to the mood of the lead characters, another couple stand directly behind them, facing each other intimately. The man grasps the woman's hands. If an imaginary vertical line is traced directly down the canvas from these grasped hands it firstly cuts through the bandaged left hand of the shadowy male, and then reaches the right hand of the distressed woman in which is held an empty dangling purse. Why is hand bandaged? Why is her purse empty? Is there a connection between the two contrasting couples?

The narrative emphasis on money, passion and violence, stressed by this deliberate vertical link, is also echoed in a second compositional device. A diagonal thrust is present in the painting; starting at the intimate couple, tracking down through the two heads of the main characters, it ends with entwined flowers climbing on the wall. Within these two blooms, a lily symbolising purity and a passion flower, lies the central dilemma of the painting.

The painting depicts a woman at a crossroad, facing a moment of choice, standing poised between virtue and sin. A series of past actions and entanglements have led this unenviable woman from financial downfall to potential seduction, a path which to Victorian moralists could result in her prostitution. The stark contrast of her choice is made evident through every aspect of the painting; the painter's deliberate manipulation of colour, light and composition directs us in our reading of the narrative, and heightens our sympathy with her dilemma.

The Artist

Alfred Elmore was born in 1815. He was the son of a doctor from County Cork in Ireland. He had a precocious talent which spurred his move to London in 1832 and his attendance at the Royal Academy at the age of 17. He first exhibited at the Royal Academy when he was only 19. In 1857 he was elected an RA and was best known for his large history paintings.