“The Falls of the Passaic”

In a wild, tranquil vale[[1]](#footnote-1), fringed with forests of green,
Where nature had fashioned a soft, sylvan[[2]](#footnote-2) scene,
The retreat of the ring-dove[[3]](#footnote-3), the haunt of the deer,
Passaic in silence rolled gentle and clear.

No grandeur of prospect astonished the sight,
No abruptness sublime mingled awe with delight;
Here the wild floweret[[4]](#footnote-4) blossomed, the elm proudly waved,
And pure was the current the green bank that laved[[5]](#footnote-5).

But the spirit that ruled o'er the thick tangled wood,
And deep in its gloom fixed his murky abode,
Who loved the wild scene that the whirlwinds deform,
And gloried in thunder and lightning and storm;

All flushed from the tumult of battle he came,
Where the red men encountered the children of flame[[6]](#footnote-6),
While the noise of the war-whoop still rang in his ears,
And the fresh bleeding scalp as a trophy he bears:

With a glance of disgust, he the landscape surveyed,
With its fragrant wild-flowers, its wide waving shade;
Where Passaic meanders through margins of green,
So transparent its waters, its surface serene.

He rived[[7]](#footnote-7) the green hills, the wild woods he laid low;
He taught the pure stream in rough channels to flow;
He rent\* the rude rock, the steep precipice gave,
And hurled down the chasm the thundering wave.

Countless moons have since rolled in the long lapse of time,
Cultivation has softened those features sublime;
The axe of the white man has lightened the shade,
And dispelled the deep gloom of the thicketed glade.

But the stranger still gazes, with wondering eye,
On the rocks rudely torn, and grooves mounted on high;
Still loves on the cliff's dizzy borders to roam,
Where the torrent leaps headlong, embosomed in foam.

1. The speaker describes the woods as “wild, tranquil” (1). How can it be both at once?
2. What battle is being fought in the fourth stanza? Whom does the speaker want to win?
3. Who is the “he” referred to through most of the poem?
4. How does the “stranger” view the woods as evidenced in the final stanza?
5. Compare Irving’s vision of nature to the Fireside poets’ view. What is shared, and what is different?
6. How does this poem represent elements of Gothic/Brooding Romantic literature?
1. a valley like in the woods sylvan [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. associated pleasantly with a wooded area ring-dove [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. bird [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. a small flower [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Washed against something [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “Red men” is not meant derogatorily here; “children of flame” is presumably white men with guns [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. split or tear violently apart; same for \* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)