

The Cry of the Children

BY ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

"Pheu pheu, ti prosderkesthe m ommasin, tekna;"
[[*Alas, alas, why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children.*]]—
Medea.

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years ?
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers, —
And that cannot stop their tears.
The young lambs are bleating in the meadows ;
The young birds are chirping in the nest ;
The young fawns are playing with the shadows ;
The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
They are weeping bitterly !
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

Do you question the young children in the sorrow,
Why their tears are falling so ?
The old man may weep for his to-morrow
Which is lost in Long Ago —
The old tree is leafless in the forest —
The old year is ending in the frost —
The old wound, if stricken, is the sorest —
The old hope is hardest to be lost :
But the young, young children, O my brothers,
Do you ask them why they stand
Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers,
In our happy Fatherland ?

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their looks are sad to see,
For the man's grief abhorrent, draws and presses
Down the cheeks of infancy —
"Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary;"
"Our young feet," they say, "are very weak !"
Few paces have we taken, yet are weary—

Our grave-rest is very far to seek !
Ask the old why they weep, and not the children,
For the outside earth is cold —
And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering,
And the graves are for the old !"

"True," say the children, "it may happen
That we die before our time !
Little Alice died last year her grave is shapen
Like a snowball, in the rime.
We looked into the pit prepared to take her —
Was no room for any work in the close clay :
From the sleep wherein she lieth none will wake her,
Crying, 'Get up, little Alice ! it is day.'
If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower,
With your ear down, little Alice never cries ;
Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her,
For the smile has time for growing in her eyes ,—
And merry go her moments, lulled and stilled in
The shroud, by the kirk-chime !
It is good when it happens," say the children,
"That we die before our time !"

Alas, the wretched children ! they are seeking
Death in life, as best to have !
They are binding up their hearts away from breaking,
With a cerement from the grave.
Go out, children, from the mine and from the city —
Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do —
Pluck you handfuls of the meadow-cowslips pretty
Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through !
But they answer, " Are your cowslips of the meadows
Like our weeds anear the mine ?
Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,
From your pleasures fair and fine!

"For oh," say the children, "we are weary,
And we cannot run or leap —
If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
To drop down in them and sleep.

Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping —
We fall upon our faces, trying to go ;
And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
For, all day, we drag our burden tiring,
Through the coal-dark, underground —
Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
In the factories, round and round.

"For all day, the wheels are droning, turning, —
Their wind comes in our faces, —
Till our hearts turn, — our heads, with pulses burning,
And the walls turn in their places
Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling —
Turns the long light that droppeth down the wall, —
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling —
All are turning, all the day, and we with all ! —
And all day, the iron wheels are droning ;
And sometimes we could pray,
'O ye wheels,' (breaking out in a mad moaning)
'Stop ! be silent for to-day ! ' "

Ay ! be silent ! Let them hear each other breathing
For a moment, mouth to mouth —
Let them touch each other's hands, in a fresh wreathing
Of their tender human youth !
Let them feel that this cold metallic motion
Is not all the life God fashions or reveals —
Let them prove their inward souls against the notion
That they live in you, or under you, O wheels ! —
Still, all day, the iron wheels go onward,
As if Fate in each were stark ;
And the children's souls, which God is calling sunward,
Spin on blindly in the dark.

Now tell the poor young children, O my brothers,
To look up to Him and pray —
So the blessed One, who blesseth all the others,
Will bless them another day.
They answer, " Who is God that He should hear us,

While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred ?
When we sob aloud, the human creatures near us
Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word !
And we hear not (for the wheels in their resounding)
Strangers speaking at the door :
Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him,
Hears our weeping any more ?

" Two words, indeed, of praying we remember ;
And at midnight's hour of harm, —
'Our Father,' looking upward in the chamber,
We say softly for a charm.
We know no other words, except 'Our Father,'
And we think that, in some pause of angels' song,
God may pluck them with the silence sweet to gather,
And hold both within His right hand which is strong.
'Our Father !' If He heard us, He would surely
(For they call Him good and mild)
Answer, smiling down the steep world very purely,
'Come and rest with me, my child.'

"But, no !" say the children, weeping faster,
" He is speechless as a stone ;
And they tell us, of His image is the master
Who commands us to work on.
Go to ! " say the children,— "up in Heaven,
Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find !
Do not mock us ; grief has made us unbelieving —
We look up for God, but tears have made us blind."
Do ye hear the children weeping and disproving,
O my brothers, what ye preach ?
For God's possible is taught by His world's loving —
And the children doubt of each.

And well may the children weep before you ;
They are weary ere they run ;
They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory
Which is brighter than the sun :
They know the grief of man, without its wisdom ;
They sink in the despair, without its calm —

Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom, —
Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm, —
Are worn, as if with age, yet unretrievingly
No dear remembrance keep,—
Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly :
Let them weep ! let them weep !

They look up, with their pale and sunken faces,
And their look is dread to see,
For they think you see their angels in their places,
With eyes meant for Deity ;—
"How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart, —
Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart ?
Our blood splashes upward, O our tyrants,
And your purple shews your path ;
But the child's sob curseth deeper in the silence
Than the strong man in his wrath !"

Analysis

The Cry of the Children is representative not only of Barrett Browning's political poetry but also of her work in general. It contains themes and images that can be found throughout her work. The use of language, meter, and rhyme in the poem demonstrates her innovative poetics and singular style.

It is problematic that Barrett Browning actually heard the cry of the children whom she so eloquently laments in her poem. She wrote *The Cry of the Children* after reading a report on the employment of children in mines and manufactories. A master of language, she evokes its emotional power to engender a response of outrage in her readers. The poem is intentionally didactic, political in purpose as well as subject matter. It is an expression of her own alienation and abhorrence of industrial society seen through the eyes and feelings of factory children, represented as innocence betrayed and used by political and economic interests for selfish purposes.

Throughout the poem, demonic images of a Factory Hell are contrasted with the Heaven of the English countryside, the inferno of industrialism with the bliss of a land-based society. The children are implored to leave the mine and city for the serenity of meadow and country. The grinding, droning mechanism of industrial society destroys the promise and hope of human life. Barrett Browning was concerned with the fate of a society that exploited human life for profit, and she ends her poem with an indictment of industrial society.

The reader is made to experience the dreariness of the factory inferno by Barrett Browning's use of language, as she describes the harrowing reality of the "droning, turning" factory wheels, relentlessly grinding the children's spirit and life as it molds its goods. The factory is depicted as a perversion of nature, a literal Hell seen as the absence and corruption of the natural world. Instead of the world revolving around the sun, the sky turns—as the wheels, similarly, turn. Barrett Browning's use of words ending in "ing" and containing long vowel sounds—"moaning," "droning," "turning," "burning"—invokes the monotony and despair of this awful abyss of industry.

In "The Cry of the Children," Elizabeth Barrett Browning sheds light on the cruelty of child labor that stained the hands of Britain during the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. As children were forced to work exhausting hours in unsafe and miserable conditions, conversations were occurring in Britain about child labor at the Parliament level. Barrett Browning inserted herself into the dialogue by using her medium to bring awareness of the social injustice to a broader audience, causing the atrocities suffered by child laborers to be felt on a deeply personal level. Barrett Browning strategically uses forceful speech, sentimentality, and religious critique to gain the attention of readers, and her stylistic techniques are carefully constructed to provoke the desired emotions in readers to raise awareness and to get results. By bringing the plight of the child laborers into the sphere of the arts, Barrett Browning makes her readers feel the cruelties on a more personal level, thus amplifying the ongoing discussion.

Parliamentary reports exposed the children's working conditions and though they were not completely dispassionate, the facts necessitated an artistic interpretation that could emphasize the personal and emotional aspect of child labor. One such document is *The Condition and Treatment of the Children Employed in the Mines and Colliers of the United Kingdom*. The result of a three year long investigation, "the report's findings shocked society and swiftly led to legislation to secure minimum

safety standards in mines and factories, as well as general controls on the employment of children”. “The Cry of the Children” begins with a quotation from *Medea*, a Greek tragedy written by Euripides over 2,000 years earlier, which says, “Pheu pheu, ti prosderkesthe m ommasin, tekna;’ [Alas, alas, why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children.]” By introducing her poem with Medea’s phrase, Barrett Browning cuts right to the heart of the matter. In the ancient play, Medea utters these words before she murders her two children with a knife, demonstrates the pain and guilt of a mother as she is about to do the unthinkable. Barrett Browning uses the phrase as a parallel to describe what mothers in the nineteenth century were experiencing by sending their own children to what oftentimes ended in their death. Barrett Browning creates a sense of despair that could not be understood by those who were childless, and may not have even been felt by the fathers, but for the mothers, the phrase could be a painful reminder and provoke a familiar emotion. Choosing the quotation from *Medea*, and keeping it in its original Greek, was a clever strategy for Barrett Browning to use because, while bringing out the desired emotions of the mothers of child laborers, it also reminds the reader of her position as an authoritative figure within the literary community. Barrett Browning’s use of Greek also indicates that her target audience, an elite group of governing men, understood the Greek language and she thereby positions herself among this group.

Barrett Browning’s next approach is to consider the patriarchal society of Victorian Britain, and she addresses the men in power in the first line of the first stanza. The line “Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,” directly, yet respectfully, asks these men to look at the children’s conditions. In a male-dominated culture, Barrett Browning places herself in a role equal to men by calling them her brothers, and she understands that for change to come, those in power must be swayed. By using the quotation from *Medea* to rouse the women, and by aligning herself with her “brothers,” Barrett Browning gains the attention of both women and men; mothers and fathers. For the rest of the poem, Barrett Browning continues with rhetorical techniques and effectively uses emotion to shake her readers.

The poem introduces readers to weeping children filled with sorrow who are unable to find comfort: “They are leaning their young heads against their mothers, - / And that cannot stop their tears” (3,4). Young children, looking to their mothers to soothe them, cannot be soothed. The image of inconsolable youth is contrasted with the youth of nature: lambs, birds, fawns, and flowers which all imply newness of spring. Words like “bleating / chirping / playing,” offer no lively images and, instead, simply remind readers that these children are missing out on the joys of life, and “weeping in the playtime of the others” (5-11). The second stanza

contrasts the old things to the youth of the first stanza, and implies old things have reasons to weep but not the young. Once again, Barrett Browning asks her brothers a question: “Do you ask them why they stand / Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers, / In our happy Fatherland?” (23-4). The poem’s second stanza ends with the ironic image of a “happy” country where young children suffer in misery. Notice how Barrett Browning alters England’s usual term of “Motherland” into a more accurate description of “Fatherland.” This idea reminds us of the patriarchal system ruling England, and it shrewdly places the blame upon that authority.

The image Barrett Browning presents here is not created for the sake of pity. Peaches Henry argues that the poet is able to distinguish “between the poorly executed, banal emotionality often associated with poetry by Victorian women and the deeply compelling passion that she believed could touch readers” (Henry 541). Barrett Browning’s purpose is an important detail to keep in mind as the poem progresses, and as the children—victims of the Industrial Revolution—are given voices. When the children finally speak, they acknowledge their weakness, but they refuse pity and demand to be heard. Henry says, “The politically and socially voiceless children speak for themselves. Far from crying, they are now defiant and assertive in their response”.

In the fourth stanza, the image of children looking for death to relieve them of their misery is heartbreaking, and it is deliberate. The children, speaking of their friend, say, “Little Alice died last year her grave is shapen / Like a snowball, in the rime,” illustrating the obscurity of little Alice’s life (39-40). The reader imagines a snowball in a field of frost—a white lump among total whiteness—and understands that Little Alice’s life had no impact; her time on earth was insignificant. The children understand Little Alice’s demise and they desire one like it: “‘It is good when it happens,’ say the children, / ‘That we die before our time!’ / Alas, the wretched children! they are seeking / Death in life, as best to have!” (51-4). Young children desiring death produces such a tragic image and seems to be such an unnatural approach to life. The strong language and graphic images compel readers to listen.

Barrett Browning alludes to the ignorance of a society that would allow such abuse when, in the poem, an adult encourages the children to get away from the city and go to the meadows where they can pick flowers, laugh, and sing. The children’s response is yet another reminder of their wretchedness: “‘For oh,’ say the children, ‘we are weary / And we cannot

run or leap - / If we cared for any meadows, it were merely / To drop down in them and sleep” (65-8). Through the voices of children, Barret Browning reprimands the individual who assumes that child laborers can simply go and play after their day of exhausting work. Also, her ability to artistically address the gravity of the situation shows a brilliant handling of the subject and a necessary addition to the ongoing discussion of child labor.

In the final stanza, Barrett Browning gives the children the final say, and in their last words, she inserts the voices of all those who fought against the social injustice of child labor: “‘How long,’ they say, ‘how long, O cruel nation, / Will you stand, to move the world, on a child’s heart, -- / Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation, / And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?’” (153-6). In these lines we read a resounding cry for help from not only the children but from Barrett Browning herself, who brings awareness and a sense of responsibility to the injustice of child labor. It is no small thing for a Victorian author to accuse Great Britain of being a cruel nation, but Barret Browning uses the facts found in the commissioner’s reports to speak the truth. By calling attention to Great Britain’s “throne” in the marketplace Browning states the entire purpose behind child labor: money and power. At this point in the poem, the senselessness of child labor is indisputable.

The closing of the poem echoes in the ears and hearts of the readers and Barrett Browning uses the last four lines to take the power from those who are to blame, and give power back to the children. The cruel employers within the industrial system are called “tyrants,” and the crying of the children in silence is described as stronger than the wrath of any man (157-60). The depiction of the power of the children’s sobs acts as a rallying cry intended to convince readers to take action. The image of children crying in the silence intends to motivate those who can do something to actually do something—to let the children know that their voices are heard. At this time in history, Barrett Browning understood the need for poetry within the context of social reform and although, as a woman, she could not participate in the political system, she used her voice to augment the conversation. Amid the political and social discussions, her beautiful words add power and passion that could otherwise lack the ability to effect change.