**Elizabeth Barret Browning "The Cry of the Children"**

"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 !"

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As a matter of fact, the idea of The Cry of the Children had its roots when Elizabeth Barrett Browning heard the cries of children who were made to work in mines and factories under gruesome circumstances.

The singular style used in the poem is a trademark of Elizabeth Barrett Browning which had been effective to portray and pen picture the thoughts and disillusionment-concurring themes that she had been dealing with in her political poems. The poem starts with the speaker asking the children to go and play like what is expected of a child. Surprisingly, they refuse. The poet uses irony here to project the idea of disillusionment which occurs as a recurring motif in the poem. It also forms one of the central ideas of The Cry of the Children and it continues to play and ploy with the minds of the readers especially when discussing issues like that of religion or a fall out.

The theme of The Cry of the Children is also an arousing concern about child labor and hence lingers with the idea whether adults would have liked to see themselves in a similar situation. Having said that, the poem revolves around children who form the idea of The Cry of the Children. The issue receives a flare touch as Elizabeth Barrett Browning touches upon religion as well and couples the same thus running an undercurrent of emotions that is conveyed through the theme of The Cry of the Children.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning reserves her sentiment for the children who are made to work in factories and hence had to part away with their childhood and they are deprived of all those things other children can do. “Let them feel that his cold metallic motion | Is not all the life God fashions or reveals” (lines 93-94). In other words, she strikes a sad chord with her words trying to convey that people shouldn’t have any disillusionment towards religion. The poem goes on to dug deep as it explores past the general issue of child labor and draws up a sharp contrast with the working conditions of the adult and adverse situations that they have to face day after day.

The summary of The Cry of the Children by Elizabeth Barrett Browning speaks of times when government investigations to expose the exploit of the children employed in factories and mines were high in the society. The poem too carries on the theme of disillusionment which has formed the essence of Browning’s earlier works. Line 37 brings out the real feeling of discontent rooted deep in the poem (“‘True,’ say the children, “it may happen that we die before our time ;”). She speaks of the untimely death of the children as because they are forced to work from a very tender age. Then there is a mentioning of “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!” –the very line expresses the agony of the children who are exposed to hazardous work at an age when they should be running in the fields and screaming their hearts out in sheer joy. Even after their death, they are deprived of a proper burial. There are no proper medications when they fall sick and are left to the mercy of time to die and fade away from this wonderful planet. The poetess stresses on the thought that no matter what the ill or the odds are, children are little tender roots that demand attention and care to grow. Parents should never let their children work in the factories or mines even if they are passing through a hard time. The poem also employs a negative imagery that packs in positive images too ( “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,” ). In other words, the death of Alice is a constant remembrance to the pitiful conditions of the mines and factories where these children work and hence death is a good riddance and a pathway to escape from the shackles of slavery (“‘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.”).

The image of dead Alice is a significant turn in the course of the poem as because her spirit shall always be alive. (“Lulled and stilled in the shroud by the kirk-chime,”) The word “Shroud” rings bell depicted as church or of God that is there to protect children and embrace them when they live the boundaries of Earth. These children who die a silent and a tragic death are blessed souls as death is way better than their living conditions. In fact, earth is more like a sanctuary to these little souls who can now rest in peace.

It’s good to know:

• “The Cry of the Children”, published in 1842 in Blackwoods, condemned child labour and helped bring about child labour reforms by raising support for Lord Shaftesbury’s Ten Hours Bill (1844)

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**Analysis**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses a theme of politics along with rich imagery to draw her readers into the plight of the children forced into working in the mines and factories of industrial England. She writes to expose the horrific conditions under which these children are forced to live and die. The poem is a detailed description of the thoughts and wishes of the children paired with an outsider’s pleas with the public to change the lives of the children.

In the first stanza of the poem, the reader is offered an idea of just how awful the conditions these children experience everyday are. The author describes the children as, "weeping," later she says, "they are leaning their young heads against their mothers, and that cannot stop their tears." Personally, I feel as if many times in our lives we turn to our mothers for comfort and reassurance, especially at the worst of times. Mothers instinctively have the ability to "make it all better." Browning illustrates that what these children are put through is so terrible that even their mothers cannot offer them the reassurance that things will improve. This only emphasizes that what they deal with is most awful.

The author goes on in this stanza to plead with her "brothers" to listen to the children’s weeping. She hopes to gain their support in aiding these children and saving them from their present living conditions. The poem describes how while "in the playtime of others," these children are crying. This sentence is meant to point out that the owners of the factories and mines, perhaps even the members of Parliament, are simply living their day to day lives, happy and care free, without regard for these children who are being taken advantage of. The people who have the power to stop the tears of these children from falling continue with their "playtime" without concern for these innocent youngsters.

The author even confronts these influential individuals and asks them if they "question the young children in sorrow why their tears are falling so?" Browning is blatantly calling attention to the neglect the owners of these places of work have displayed to the children they force into employment. She wants them to realize how badly they are exploiting the children and she’s attempting to convince them to change their ways.

In stanza four, Browning impresses the image of a young girl’s death upon the minds of her audience. This picture brings to life the hardships and cruelty which these young child endure in their workplaces. It emphasizes the heartlessness of the employers to be so unconcerned for the well-being of their workers. Even further, it hints to those members of government who have the power to change laws, which they ought to implement some reform to prohibit child labor because of its dangers. I think Browning’s description of the girl smiling now that she is dead is most clever. The poem says that, "Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her, for the smile has time for growing in her eyes." Browning reinforces that with death, this girl has finally found happiness. This little child preferred death to life because life as a child laborer was so harsh.

The conditions in which these children are forced to work and live are so undesirable that they lose every faith in God that they ever had. In stanza nine, the children say, "Who is God that he should hear us,… the human creatures near us- passing by, hearing not." This line only reiterates the ignorance that is going on within the country. The children pray to God and receive no relief. They even cry to those they see every day, and nothing is done. They figure that if those they encounter everyday cannot acknowledge their weeping that why would God be any more likely to do so.

In the next stanza the children describe how when they pray the only words they know to pray are "Our Father." This is meant to show the audience how uneducated these children are as a result of being forced into work. This is a blaring signal for those in government to realize that these children are being deprived of their right to an education.

Stanza eleven returns to the children’s lack of faith in God. They express how "His image is the master Who commands us to work." They have been convinced into believing that is the will of God that they suffer and labor as they do. They would have faith in God, only "grief has made us unbelieving."

In the next stanza Browning writes of how the children work such long hours laboring in the mines and factories of these industrial times. "They have never seen sunshine," because they are up long before the sun and are home after it sets or because they are cooped up in the depths of darkness in the coal mines of the regions. Browning wants to emphasize the long hours these children are forced to work and the lives they are losing doing it too. Although they are only children, their experiences, as dismal and rough as they are, have taught them "the grief of man," with the time spent growing up into manhood.

In closing, Browning addresses the government saying, " ‘How long, O cruel nation, will you stand, to move the world, on a child’s heart?" This sentence in the final paragraph of the poem is the final plea with the country of England to reform the working conditions of their young and save the lives of the underprivileged children.

The reader can hear the children’s cries, feel the dampness of their tears, and see the faces of those who have died. Browning’s images are cemented in the brains of her audience and the children’s weeping ring through their ears. This poem is a cry for the children and of the children. It is one citizen’s devotion to the future of her country and the commitment of protecting the innocent ones who cannot voice a plea for protection themselves.

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