

The Cry of the Children by Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1843)

“Φηῦ, φηῦ, τί προσδέρκεσθέ μ’ ὄμμασιν, τέκνα;”—*Medea*^[1].
[*Alas, alas, why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children?*]

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.

5 The young lambs are bleating in the meadows;
The young birds are chirping in the nest,
The young fawns are playing with the shadow,
The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children, O my brothers,

10 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?

15 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,

20 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?

25 They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their looks are sad to see,
For the man’s hoary anguish draws and presses
Down the cheeks of infancy;
“Your old earth,” they say, “is very dreary,

30 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 aged why they weep, and not the children,
For the outside earth is cold,

35 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

40 Like a snowball, in the rime.”^[2]

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.'

45 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

50 The shroud, by the kirk-chime!^[3]
"It is good when it happens," say the children,
"That we die before our time."
Alas, alas, the children! they are seeking
Death in life, as best to have!

55 They are binding up their hearts away from breaking,
With a cerement^[4] 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,

60 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!

65 "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,

70 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;

75 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,

80 And the walls turn in their places:
Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,
Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling;
All are turning, all the day, and we with all.

85 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
90 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:
95 Let them prove their living souls against the notion
That they live in you, or under you, O wheels!
Still, all day, the iron wheels go onward,
Grinding life down from its mark;
And the children’s souls, which God is calling sunward,
100 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.
105 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)
110 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,
115 ‘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,
120 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.’
125 “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,
130 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?
 135 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
 140 Which is brighter than the sun:
 They know the grief of man, without its wisdom;
 They sink in man's despair, without its calm;
 Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom,
 Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm:
 145 Are worn, as if with age, yet unretrievingly
 The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
 Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly:
 Let them weep! let them weep!
 They look up, with their pale and sunken faces,
 150 And their look is dread to see,
 For they mind you of their angels in high places,
 With eyes turned on Deity.
 "How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
 Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart, —
 155 Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
 And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
 Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
 And your purple^[5] shows your path!
 But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper
 160 Than the strong man in his wrath!"

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1. The title and first line are taken from the Chorus in response to the murders being committed in Euripedes' tragedy, *Medea*. Browning wrote the poem in response to *The Report of the Children's Employment Commission* (1843) by her friend, the poet Richard Henry Horne, who exposed the abuses against children employed in British mines and factories.
 2. Frost.
 3. Church bell.
 4. Shroud.
 5. cf. Donne, invoking Herod's slaughter of the children in Matthew 2: 16: "...hast thou since/Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?", "The Flea."

Guidelines

- Look at the date the poem was written . What social and political context prompted the author to write on this topic? Who is its audience?
- What is the poem's stanza form and rhythm? Are there variations? Do you think this is a good stanza form and choice of rhythm for the author's purposes?
- In particular, are there ways in which the rhythms reinforce the theme of noisy, dirty and unpleasant factory conditions?
- Who are the poem's speakers? Are there shifts in the emphasis given to each voice? What may have been the advantages of Barrett-Browning's use of more than one point of view?
- Why do you think the poem is addressed to "Oh my brothers"? What may be implied by notions of "brotherhood"? Should she have appealed to "Oh my sisters"?
- What metaphors or recurrent themes does the author use to make her points? (nature; death; youth and age; whirring of machinery)
- In what ways is the children's viewpoint different from that of adults? What is their view of death, and how does this reinforce the poem's themes? How do they respond to the death of little Alice?
- What view of religion does the author seem to espouse? Who is responsible for the fact that the children are unable to conceive of a beneficent divine being?
- How do you think Barrett Browning's Victorian audience would have responded to these charges?
- What final metaphors or references conclude the poem, and does this provide a change in tone? Why have the children been sacrificed?
- Do you think the final appeal is effective? (eviscerated child's heart splashes on steps of progress; condemnation of greed; children assume the voice of authority)