"The Cry of the Children": An Appeal to Pity and a Curse on Society

The "Time of Troubles," as the early Victorian period has been aptly termed, earns its title from the social conflicts and economic strife associated with England’s pioneering into the Industrial Revolution. This time of revolution, however, was not limited to industry, for the ensuing effects of such immense changes in England’s way of life ignited a flame of indignation among writers of this new age in literary history and resulted in new forms of expression. The Victorian writers were more concerned with the present social issues, unlike the previous Romantics’ reflection on the past.

One of the most renowned Victorian poets, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, exemplifies the ability to integrate both an appeal to pity and a cry of protest into one period-appropriate poem. After being exposed to the atrocious working conditions recorded in the Report of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Mines and Manufactories, Browning began her campaign of awareness through the written word (David 176). In “The Cry of the Children,” Browning for the first time reveals her feelings of indignation and outrage at the conditions child laborers were forced to endure in the mines and factories, under the justification of economic progress. Further, Browning was a female writer attempting to subtly unveil her strong opinions in the context of her poetry during the stifling Victorian age, making her contributions all the more important. With
“The Cry of the Children,” Browning creates a poem that can be read as both an emotional plea and a vehement curse of social injustice, for both children and women.

In the opening lines of the first stanza, Browning asks “Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers, / Ere the sorrow comes with years?” (1-2). Essayist Marjorie Stone believes that Browning repeatedly poses this question to the male factory owners that uphold such appalling conditions under the protection of the pursuit of economic progress (189). By addressing these males, Browning is making a significant point that the male-dominated society does not consider the effects of industrialization on the young and innocent. In addition, Browning portrays the sad truth that children’s attempts to seek comfort from their powerless mothers are futile when she writes, “They are leaning their young heads against their mothers--- / And that cannot stop their tears” (3-4). The strength of the mother-child relationship cannot endure under such a male-dominated industrial society, challenging the age-old belief in a mother’s omnipotent power over her child’s life (Cooper 124). This reinforces Browning’s personal belief that women, especially women writers, needed to take up social causes and become both “artists and thinkers” (127).

For the remainder of this stanza, Browning depicts a poignant image of the youthful innocence of nature living and playing freely, while the harsh reality of life as a laborer only makes the children weep. The repetition of “young” reinforces the focus on how innocence is lost so early, which appeals to the reader’s sense of pity. Browning ends the stanza on a sarcastic note, highlighting England’s ideological claim to be a “country of the free” (12), while its children are unjustly being stripped of the rights of childhood.

The premature aging of child laborers’ minds, bodies, and souls is masterfully detailed in the following stanzas. As an integral technique to incite empathy, Browning often
writes in the voice of the exploited children. This personal connection pulls readers into the factories and mines with the young laborers, while simultaneously giving Browning an outlet for her controversial views. The reoccurrence of “old” as a descriptive term alludes to the obvious wretchedness of the weary, aging children. Browning goes on to depict the paradox of youth yearning for the peaceful slumber of death, yet still finding no reprieve because the desired graves are reserved only for the old in both body and age. The elderly have supposedly earned their rest after a long hard life, and the tired children are confused as to why their days are both long and hard, yet “the graves are for the old” (36). The children are also cognizant of the inevitability of an early death, and their innocent minds are conditioned to believe “It is good when it happens…/ … "That we die before our time” (51-2). The young children are envious of little Alice’s fate, for she is smiling in her small grave, no longer subject to a life of labor. Browning attempts to awaken the children from the monotony of their miserable existence when she writes, “Go out, children, from the mine and from the city--- / Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do---” (57-8). However, the harsh reality remains that the children have no appreciation for and gain no pleasure from the amenities of nature. They cry: “... 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” (61-4). The brutal environment of mines and factories cause such a hardening of young hearts that optimism is an alien feeling.

In conjunction with the message against child exploitation, Browning again purposefully uses her writing to include insight into her feminine perspectives concerning the society under which she lived and wrote. The use of “Fatherland” (24) to describe England suggests that only a male driven industrial society would stand for such brutal
treatment of children. Further, in the essay “Working Into the Light,” Helen Cooper comments on the significance of “Little Alice’s” role when she writes, “That it is a girl who dies from such work in a society that draped its middle-class women with prudery, passivity, and sentimentality should not go unnoticed” (124). Browning’s belief that women should denounce their stereotypical roles and take on a more active part in dealing with societal and reform issues is evident in the tragedy of little Alice. The intended lesson for readers is that if women do not break the sex barrier and immerse themselves in societal issues, they will be victimized by the male-powered steamroller of industrialization.

The tumultuous, turning wheels of industrialization described in the next stanzas are interpreted by essayist Marjorie Stone as the main cause of the children’s crying (188). The endless “droning, turning” (53) of the wheels of progress dejects the children’s minds and bodies. Historical documents support this claim, such as Dr. P. Gaskell’s 1833 book The Manufacturing Population of England. Gaskell writes, “Factory labor is a species of work, in some respects, singularly unfitted for children. Cooped up in a heated atmosphere, denied the necessary exercise... it cannot be wondered at that its effects are injurious to the physical growth of a child” (Weber 374). The effects of mine labor are also depicted in evidence presented in the 1842 Parliamentary Papers. Twelve-year-old Isabella Read testified to the heavy lifting and constant trudging, sometimes in knee-deep water, she would endure in the mines in order to support her siblings (Weber 376). Browning gives voice to children such as Isabella and incites her readers to act in proving to these young sufferers that life is not run by the turn of an iron wheel.

In the next stanzas, the relationship between God and child, rather than machine and child, is the focus of analysis. Browning commands that the children be steered to God, but...
the children bitterly reply: "’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!’” (105-08). This disbelief in the existence of a supreme protectorate stems from a lack of exposure to anything divine or holy in an existence comprised of mostly hard labor and restless sleep. The only prayer words the children can recite are an empty “Our Father.” This phrase, while symbolic of the children’s nonexistent spiritual support, also supports Browning’s insistence that the predominantly male leaders and proprietors falsely represent the ultimate authority to their young laborers (Stone 189).

Even more disturbing to the children is when they are told “…of His image is the master / Who commands us to work on” (127). How, they wonder, can a benevolent God’s likeness be reflected in the men forcing them to work arduous, seventeen-hour days? The answer reveals itself in the children’s outbursts of utter denial, of both God and man’s love. Browning writes that the young laborers “Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly: Let them weep! Let them weep!” (147-48). In essence, both man and God have failed the children, causing their cries of bitterness and curse of life.

This accursed existence fuels the children’s cries as they finally, in the concluding stanza of the poem, are given hope of retribution. Browning’s use of angelic voices rather than those of children is effective in this stanza, for they are giving a final warning to the “cruel nation” (153) that has so oppressed the innocents. This rhetorical method allows Browning the freedom to express her disdain for child employers and their supporters without articulating the negativity herself or through the already tormented children (Stone 189). The angels who defend the children demand: “’... 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’’ (153-55). This call to action is appropriately directed at the greedy, production-driven leaders of industrialization. To end the poem with a resounding impact, Browning writes, “But the child’s sob in the silence curses deeper / Than the strong man in his wrath” (159-60). Dire words, Browning hopes, will provide the impetus necessary to provoke social reform.

Provocation is indeed one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s main motivations in writing “The Cry of the Children” for an audience of Victorian constituents. While the Industrial Revolution was dually seen as both beneficial and detrimental, writers such as Browning poised their pens in an effort to thwart social injustice through poetry. The problems of child labor in the early to mid 1800’s, as well as the issue of sex stereotyping, were Browning’s choices for literary pursuits. By figuratively “tugging at the heartstrings” of readers with depictions of innocent children living in misery while simultaneously expressing unacceptable feminist views, Browning succeeds in making “The Cry of the Children” both an appeal for empathy and a condemnation of male-centered societal values.
Works Cited


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