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Cry of the Children (Elizabeth Barrett Browning)



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Keywords

Elizabeth Barrett Browning · Child labor ·
Political poetry · Protest poems · Affect ·
Poetry

Definition

First published in August 1843 “The Cry of the Children” is one of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s best known protest poems. It is a rhetorically complex and unashamedly affective appeal to the British nation to heed the iniquities of child labor in the country’s mines and factories. Written in response to one of the most important documents of industrial Britain, the *Report of the Children’s Employment Commission* (1842), the poem rapidly became an influential text in mid-Victorian industrial reform literature. Anticipated by Caroline Norton’s *A Voice from the Factories* (1836) and William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), the poem presents a dystopic vision of industrialized space in contrast to an idealized world of meadows, sunshine, young animals, flowers and play, as though

nature, in the Wordsworthian vein, were capable of healing the emotional, physical and spiritual violence inflicted upon young bodies and minds by the Victorian industrial complex. Barrett Browning draws upon the affective power of Psalmic Christianity, classical literature, and the grammar of rights discourse, and refashions the figures of the cry and the curse to expose the cruel socio-economic system that profits from the misery of others.

Introduction

First published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (August 1843) and collected in *Poems* (1844–56), the “Cry of the Children” (WEBB 1: 439–445) had its genesis in Barrett Browning’s (hereafter EBB) discussions with R.H. Horne about his fieldwork for the Astley Commission’s enquiry into the conditions under which children were laboring in factories and mines. *The First Report of Commissioners for Inquiring into the Employment and Condition of Children Working in Mines and Manufactories* (1842) with its thousands of pages of oral testimony (sometimes from children as young as five), statistical tables and graphic images, shocked the nation and led to the Labour in Factories Act of 1844 and the “Ten Hours Act” of 1867. Speaking in her own voice and through the voices of children EBB assumes the mantle of “political poetess” (Lootens 2017) to curse England as a blood-stained nation

prepared to “move the world, on a child’s heart” (l. 154). The poem’s critique is gendered: the speaker addresses the “brothers” (ll.11,9,21) and “gold-heaper(s)” (l.157) in the industrial, governmental and religious institutions of “our happy Fatherland” (l.24) who profit from turning vulnerable children into a pool of surplus, disposable labor.

Impact and Readings

Literary scholars have discussed the poem’s historical impact (Donaldson 2010; Stone 2019), echoing of contemporary reports on child labor (Donaldson 2010; Henry 2011; Sanders Pollock 2019), sentimental and affective dimensions (Leighton 1992; Henry 2011), industrial metrics (Tucker 1997; Levine 2011), eco-critical, anti-pastoral aesthetic (Sanders Pollock 2019), and its significance in EBB’s *oeuvre* and in relation to contemporary factory and protest poems (Stone 2019; Avery and Stott 2003). “The Cry of the Children” consists of a series of shrieks, sobs, cries and curses (Stone 1986; Dillon 2001). The title echoes Christ’s cry of despair from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me” (invoking the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, and Psalm 22). The Greek epigraph alludes to Euripides’s *Medea* (431 BC), who contemplates her children before murdering them and cries out, “Alas, alas, my children, why do you look at me” (l.1040). The final stanza invokes divine vengeance to curse a “cruel nation” (l.153) through the silent sobbing of exploited children: “But the child’s sob in the silence curses deeper/Than the strong man in his wrath” (ll. 159–60).

In a revisioning of William Blake’s dichotomous construction of England as a land of “pleasant pastures” and “dark satanic mills” (Preface to *Milton: a Poem in Two Books*) “Cry of the Children” pitches an environmentally degraded, Gothicized industrial space of dangerous machinery, deafening noise, darkness and weeds, against an idealized world of meadows, sunshine, animals (birds, fawns, lambs), flowers and child’s play. It is as though *nature* were capable of healing the

emotional, physical and spiritual violence inflicted upon young bodies and minds by an industrial system hell bent on mechanizing the “human”. In this respect the poem struggles to find “a rhetorical balance between representing the fragmentation of community attendant on modernity and the contrary impulse to romanticize nature” (Sanders Pollock 2019 46). Critics praise the physiological aesthetics of stanza VII which reworks the trope of turning wheels common to factory poems in a syncopated, trochaic structure that perfectly matches sound and sense (Tucker 1997). The rhythmic repetition of present participles, punctuated by dashes –“droning”, “turning”, “reeling” and “burning” – and the repetition of “turn” in its different grammatical forms reinforces the idea that child workers experience the “blind mechanic motion” (l.97) of the steam-driven factory machinery as continuous and disorientating sensory overload (ll.77–88). Stanza IV introduces the case of the young factory slave, Alice, whose untimely death expresses the collective longing of children trapped in oppressive cycles of exploitation to “die before our time” (l. 52) rather than enduring an unnatural “[D]eath in life” (l.54) existence.

Conclusion

The “Cry of the Children” was an influential text in the industrial reform literature of the mid-Victorian period, and remains one of EBB’s most widely-read poems. It was translated into French, German and Russian before the end of the Nineteenth-century, while an early “silent era” film, *The Cry of the Children* directed by Edwin Thanhouser (1912) repurposes the tragic story of Alice controversially deploying documentary footage of children laboring in a factory.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Aurora Leigh](#)
- ▶ [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#)
- ▶ [Factory Acts](#)
- ▶ [Gothic](#)

- ▶ [Industrialization](#)
- ▶ [Norton, Caroline](#)
- ▶ [Periodical Poetry](#)
- ▶ [Working Class Women's Poetry](#)

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