

Victoria (Alexandrina Victoria; 24 May 1819 – 22 January 1901) was Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland from 20 June 1837 until her death. Known as the Victorian era, her reign of 63 years and seven months was longer than that of any of her predecessors. It was a period of industrial, political, scientific, and military change within the United Kingdom, and was marked by a great expansion of the British Empire. In 1876, Parliament voted her the additional title of Empress of India.

Victoria was the daughter of Prince Edward, Duke of Kent and Strathearn (the fourth son of King George III), and Princess Victoria of Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld. After both the Duke and his father died in 1820, she was raised under close supervision by her mother and her comptroller, John Conroy. She inherited the throne aged 18 after her father's three elder brothers died without surviving legitimate issue. Though a constitutional monarch, privately, Victoria attempted to influence government policy and ministerial appointments; publicly, she became a national icon who was identified with strict standards of personal morality.

Victoria married her first cousin Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in 1840. Their children married into royal and noble families across the continent, earning Victoria the sobriquet "the grandmother of Europe" and spreading haemophilia in European royalty. After Albert's death in 1861, Victoria plunged into deep mourning and avoided public appearances. As a result of her seclusion, republicanism in the United Kingdom temporarily gained strength, but in the latter half of her reign, her popularity recovered. Her Golden and Diamond Jubilees were times of public celebration. She died on the Isle of Wight in 1901. The last British monarch of the House of Hanover, she was succeeded by her son Edward VII of the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha.

About: Following the 1857 Rebellion, the East India Company's rule in India came to an end. Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1 November 1858 declared that thereafter India would be governed by and in the name of the British Monarch through a Secretary of State.

- Matthew Arnold
- Emily Brontë
- Charlotte Brontë
- Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- Robert Browning
- Charles Dickens
- George Eliot
- Gerard Manley Hopkins
- Alfred Lord Tennyson
- Oscar Wilde

Victorian literature refers to English literature during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). English writing from this era reflects the major transformation in most aspects of English life, such as significant scientific, economic, and technological advances to changes in class structures and the role of religion in society.^[1] While the Romantic period was a time of abstract expression and inward focus, essayists, poets, and novelists during the Victorian era began to reflect and comment on realities of the day, including criticisms of the dangers of factory work, the plight of the lower class, and the treatment of women and children.^[2] Prominent examples include poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and novelists Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. Barrett's poem entitled "Cry of the Children," published in 1844, focused on the horrific conditions faced by children working in

factories. The popularity of the poem served to shed light on important social and political issues of the day, while also furthering the cause of feminism—cementing her standing as a successful and renowned female poet in a male-dominated world.^[3] Dickens employed humour and an approachable tone while addressing social problems such as wealth disparity. ^[4] Hardy used his novels to question religion and social structures.

- Realism. The Victorian Poetry was quite realistic in nature and quite less idealised as compared to the Romantic Poets who were idealists and believed in Art for the Art Sake. ...
- Focus on Masses. ...
- Pessimism. ...
- Science and Technology. ...
- Questioning to God. ...
- Sense of Responsibility. ...
- Morality. ...
- Interest in Medieval Myths & Folklore.

1. Questioning the Established Rule of Church
2. Interest in myths and mysteries.
3. Scepticism and Doubtfulness.

Pessimism

As already discussed, Victorians were quite realistic and thus were more concerned about the reality rather than the ideal world. Due to the industrial revolution and advancement in science and technology, there was a drastic increase in the city population that gave rise to slums, poverty, unemployment, corruption diseases, deaths etc.

Thus, Victorian Poetry which focused on the pains and sufferings of commoners had a note of pessimism.

Characteristics

Realism

The Victorian Poetry was quite realistic in nature and quite less idealised as compared to the Romantic Poets who were idealists and believed in *Art for the Art Sake*. Nature, that was everything for the Romantics lost that idealised position in the Victorian era and became just a source of leisure and inspiration for the poets.

Focus on Masses

Romantic Poetry mainly focused on rural and rustic life. It is no way related to city life. On the other hand, Victorian poets used language as well as themes common to city life and thus wrote about the masses and for the masses.

Pessimism

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Science and Technology

The advancement in science and inventions was welcomed by the Victorian poets. It made them believe that a man can find all solutions to his problems and sufferings. They made their readers believe that they should use science for their betterment.

Questioning to God

It was an important feature of Victorian poetry. The development of empirical science, rationalism and radicalism led the people to give up religious thoughts and be more sceptic. Moreover, corruption in the Church, defining the morality of Priests, etc also led the people to question the religious institutions.

Sense of Responsibility

The Romantics believed in “return in nature”. A number of the Romantics did not like the city life and instead of giving voice to the victims of industrialisation, they left the city life. On the other hand, Victorian poets took the responsibility of social reform and gave voice to the commoners by living with them.

Morality

Though morality saw a steep decline in the Victorian Era, a number of poets tried to retain it by encouraging the people to be honest and noble.

Interest in Medieval Myths & Folklore

The Victorians showed great favour towards Medieval Literature. They loved mythical and chivalrous anecdotes of Medieval Knights, Courtly Love etc. This interest is on contrary to the of Romantics as the latter loved classical myths and legends.

Use of Sensory Devices & Imagery

The poets of the preceding era used imagery vividly. However, the Victorians also used sensory devices to describe the abstract scenes of chaos between Religion and Science.

Sentimentality

The Victorians wrote about artistic creations thus giving way to deeper imaginations.

Humour

A number of poets wrote humorous and whimsical verses. e.g. *Bad Ballads*.

Dramatic Monologue

Presentation

Characteristics of Robert Browning's poetry.

- Multiple Perspectives on Single Events. The dramatic monologue verse form allowed Browning to explore and probe the minds of specific characters in specific places struggling with specific sets of circumstances. ...
- The Purposes of Art. ...
- The Relationship Between Art and Morality.
 - Robert Browning is better known as a major Victorian poet and, in particular, as one who perfected the influential verse form called dramatic monologue. His achievement in poetry, for which he forsook the theater altogether in 1846, was unquestionably much greater than what he accomplished as a writer of stage plays, yet it is difficult and unwise to distinguish the subject matter and techniques of Browning's “failed” dramas from those of his successful poems. Although he was by nature and

inclination a dramatic writer, it became apparent that his peculiar interests and talent in that line were more suited to the finer medium of poetry than to the practical exigencies of stagecraft. The verse confirms his acknowledged preoccupation with interior drama (“Action in character, not character in action”). Browning’s verse masterpieces in this mode include “Porphyria’s Lover,” “My Last Duchess,” “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed’s Church,” “Andrea del Sarto,” “Love Among the Ruins,” “The Last Ride Together,” and *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869). A dramatic monologue by Browning typically features an incandescent moment of crisis or of self-realization in the mental life of some unusual, often morally or psychologically flawed, character. Rather like a soliloquy except in being addressed to a present but silent listener, this type of poem enabled Browning to let his speakers’ personalities, motives, obsessions, and delusions be revealed—inadvertently or otherwise—in speech and implied gesture. This preoccupation with inward, psychological drama—with the springs of action rather than with action itself—is the origin of Browning’s greatness as a poet and of his limitations as a stage worthy playwright.

- Characteristics:
- 1. Multiple Perspectives on Single Events
- The dramatic monologue verse form allowed Browning to explore and probe the minds of specific characters in specific places struggling with specific sets of circumstances. In *The Ring and the Book*, Browning tells a suspenseful story of murder using multiple voices, which give multiple perspectives and multiple versions of the same story. Dramatic monologues allow readers to enter into the minds of various characters and to see an event from that character’s perspective. Understanding the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of a character not only gives readers a sense of sympathy for the characters but also helps readers understand the multiplicity of perspectives that make up the truth. In effect, Browning’s work reminds readers that the nature of truth or reality fluctuates, depending on one’s perspective or view of the situation. Multiple perspectives illustrate the idea that no one sensibility or perspective sees the whole story and no two people see the same events in the same way. Browning further illustrated this idea by writing poems that work together as companion pieces, such as “Fra Lippo Lippi” and “Andrea del Sarto.” Poems such as these show how people with different characters respond differently to similar situations, as well as depict how a time, place, and scenario can cause people with similar personalities to develop or change quite dramatically.
- 2. The Purposes of Art
- Browning wrote many poems about artists and poets, including such dramatic monologues as “Pictor Ignotus” (1855) and “Fra Lippo Lippi.” Frequently, Browning would begin by thinking about an artist, an artwork, or a type of art that he admired or disliked. Then he would speculate on the character or artistic philosophy that would lead to such a success or failure. His dramatic monologues about artists attempt to capture some of this philosophizing because his characters speculate on the purposes of art. For instance, the speaker of “Fra Lippo Lippi” proposes that art heightens our powers of observation and helps us notice things about our own lives. According to some of these characters and poems, painting idealizes the beauty found in the real world, such as the radiance of a beloved’s smile. Sculpture and architecture can memorialize famous or important people, as in “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” (1845) and “The Statue and the Bust” (1855). But art also helps its creators to make a living, and it thus has a purpose as pecuniary as creative, an idea explored in “Andrea del Sarto.”

- 3. The Relationship Between Art and Morality
- Throughout his work, Browning tried to answer questions about an artist's responsibilities and to describe the relationship between art and morality. He questioned whether artists had an obligation to be moral and whether artists should pass judgment on their characters and creations. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Browning populated his poems with evil people, who commit crimes and sins ranging from hatred to murder. The dramatic monologue format allowed Browning to maintain a great distance between himself and his creations: by channeling the voice of a character, Browning could explore evil without actually being evil himself. His characters served as personae that let him adopt different traits and tell stories about horrible situations. In "My Last Duchess," the speaker gets away with his wife's murder since neither his audience (in the poem) nor his creator judges or criticizes him. Instead, the responsibility of judging the character's morality is left to readers, who find the duke of Ferrara a vicious, repugnant person even as he takes us on a tour of his art gallery.
- Conclusion
Overall, what one can take from Browning's work is that the poet himself lived according to one of his more prevalent themes: the quest. A mercurial and intellectually adventurous man who sought to document his ever-changing attitudes and beliefs into art, Robert Browning saw the human struggle as a noble quest towards an impossible goal of perfection, and luckily thought to immortalize that struggle as best he could

Abt Vogler

BY ROBERT BROWNING

Would that the structure brave, the manifold music I build,
 Bidding my organ obey, calling its keys to their work,
 Claiming each slave of the sound, at a touch, as when Solomon willed
 Armies of angels that soar, legions of demons that lurk,
 Man, brute, reptile, fly,—alien of end and of aim,
 Adverse, each from the other heaven-high, hell-deep removed,—
 Should rush into sight at once as he named the ineffable Name,
 And pile him a palace straight, to pleasure the princess he loved!

Would it might tarry like his, the beautiful building of mine,
 This which my keys in a crowd pressed and importuned to raise!
 Ah, one and all, how they helped, would dispart now and now combine,
 Zealous to hasten the work, heighten their master his praise!

And one would bury his brow with a blind plunge down to hell,
Burrow awhile and build, broad on the roots of things,
Then up again swim into sight, having based me my palace well,
Founded it, fearless of flame, flat on the nether springs.

And another would mount and march, like the excellent minion he was,
Ay, another and yet another, one crowd but with many a crest,
Raising my rampired walls of gold as transparent as glass,
Eager to do and die, yield each his place to the rest:
For higher still and higher (as a runner tips with fire,
When a great illumination surprises a festal night—
Outlining round and round Rome's dome from space to spire)
Up, the pinnacled glory reached, and the pride of my soul was in sight.

In sight? Not half! for it seemed, it was certain, to match man's birth,
Nature in turn conceived, obeying an impulse as I;
And the emulous heaven yearned down, made effort to reach the earth,
As the earth had done her best, in my passion, to scale the sky:
Novel splendours burst forth, grew familiar and dwelt with mine,
Not a point nor peak but found and fixed its wandering star;
Meteor-moons, balls of blaze: and they did not pale nor pine,
For earth had attained to heaven, there was no more near nor far.

Nay more; for there wanted not who walked in the glare and glow,
Presences plain in the place; or, fresh from the Protoplast,
Furnished for ages to come, when a kindlier wind should blow,
Lured now to begin and live, in a house to their liking at last;

Or else the wonderful Dead who have passed through the body and gone,
But were back once more to breathe in an old world worth their new:
What never had been, was now; what was, as it shall be anon;
And what is,—shall I say, matched both? for I was made perfect too.

All through my keys that gave their sounds to a wish of my soul,
All through my soul that praised as its wish flowed visibly forth,
All through music and me! For think, had I painted the whole,
Why, there it had stood, to see, nor the process so wonder-worth:
Had I written the same, made verse—still, effect proceeds from cause,
Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told;
It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,
Painter and poet are proud in the artist-list enrolled:—

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,
Existent behind all laws, that made them and, lo, they are!
And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a star.
Consider it well: each tone of our scale in itself is nought;
It is everywhere in the world—loud, soft, and all is said:
Give it to me to use! I mix it with two in my thought:
And, there! Ye have heard and seen: consider and bow the head!

Well, it is gone at last, the palace of music I reared;
Gone! and the good tears start, the praises that come too slow;
For one is assured at first, one scarce can say that he feared,
That he even gave it a thought, the gone thing was to go.

Never to be again! But many more of the kind
As good, nay, better, perchance: is this your comfort to me?
To me, who must be saved because I cling with my mind
To the same, same self, same love, same God: ay, what was, shall be.

Therefore to whom turn I but to thee, the ineffable Name?
Builder and maker, thou, of houses not made with hands!
What, have fear of change from thee who art ever the same?
Doubt that thy power can fill the heart that thy power expands?
There shall never be one lost good! What was, shall live as before;
The evil is null, is nought, is silence implying sound;
What was good shall be good, with, for evil, so much good more;
On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven, a perfect round.

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard;
Enough that he heard it once: we shall hear it by and by.

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or agonized?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?
Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized?

Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe:
But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;
The rest may reason and welcome; 'tis we musicians know.

Well, it is earth with me; silence resumes her reign:
I will be patient and proud, and soberly acquiesce.
Give me the keys. I feel for the common chord again,
Sliding by semitones till I sink to the minor,—yes,
And I blunt it into a ninth, and I stand on alien ground,
Surveying awhile the heights I rolled from into the deep;
Which, hark, I have dared and done, for my resting-place is found,
The C Major of this life: so, now I will try to sleep.

Abt Vogler (Summary) -Robert Browning Abt Vogler is written in the voice of an actual historic personage, as are many of Browning's dramatic monologues. Vogler was a composer and musical innovator; in this poem, Browning imagines him aged, growing more infirm, meditating on the purpose and value of his life. This poem lies directly before a poem that is, I think, slightly more famous in Browning's body of work, Rabbi Ben Ezra. In both of these luminous poems, Browning reflects on finding peace in old age, a comfort in what has been accomplished and a trust in God for the future, both in this world and out of it. The two poems make wonderful companion pieces, both being suffused with the kind of optimism that might seem maudlin, or even senile, if someone less talented than Browning tried to express it. Vogler realizes that many of his musical achievements will not outlive him and even those that do will not be enough to assure that he is remembered. Vogler is right about this; an aficionado of classical music, I was still introduced to Vogler through Browning and he is rarely mentioned in any other context outside of very small circles. Vogler is also not so blind as to believe that he's achieved any kind of perfection in his work or in his life. He sees his grand achievement as still "broken arcs." He sees himself as a man who has been able to bring his grand inspiration into actual being only sporadically and only up to a point. His work has never quite been the triumph in this world that it has been in his mind and in his soul. There isn't a creative person in the universe who will fail to understand this, save perhaps Browning's version of Andrea del Sarto, who feels himself to have achieved a kind

of perfection at least. But it's the curse of all other artists to forever be striving for an ideal that cannot quite be reached. Vogler is no del Sarto; he has done many things of which he is proud, but he isn't arguing for his canonization. Yet, even with this pragmatic and clear-eyed perspective, Vogler is able to find peace and comfort in the life he has lived. He has done what he could, as Christ said of the woman with the alabaster box. He has believed in good and in God and he believes in them still, even as his talents begin to atrophy with age, even as death approaches. The poem is gifted with two astoundingly moving passages in particular. In the first, Vogler returns to his faith in God and his steadfast belief that God will ultimately be just, that the ultimate fate of the universe will be, in God's hands, for good. Vogler unabashedly looks for a new life after this old one has passed away in a heaven where all goods that were only partial on this earth will be finally completed. The second is the closing stanza of the poem. In it, Vogler takes himself through several chord changes in his mind, reflecting on the art of music and the technique of it too. He closes with one of the most satisfying resolutions in the history of poetry, stating that, as in his music he has brought every piece he has composed to its necessary resolution, so too he brings himself and his life. He closes, he says, resting in the "C Major of this life." Any musician will understand the power of that central chord, that central resting place in music. It's a thought so beautiful that it seems strange that it hadn't already been expressed. No one can deny the absolute power of the resolving chord, not even in this post-rock era, when songs often meander away into electronic dissonance or simply fade out in progress.

Vogler, Georg Joseph

Born June 15, 1749, in Wurzburg; died May 6, 1814, in Darmstadt. German composer, music theorist, conductor, and organist; Catholic priest.

Vogler studied in Bologna under G. B. Martini and in Padua under F. A. Vallotti. He traveled a great deal and exhibited a keen interest in the music of various peoples, including those of eastern nations. In 1775 he moved to Mannheim, where he founded a school of music. In 1784 he became chief *Kapellmeister* in Munich. From 1786 to 1788 and from 1794 to 1799, Vogler served as *Kapellmeister* in Stockholm. In 1788 he visited St. Petersburg. In 1807 he became *Kapellmeister* to the grand duke of Darmstadt.

Vogler gave organ concerts, and he constructed a portable organ known as the orchestrion. He was the composer of many operas and two ballets, as well as symphonies, overtures, vocal works, concerti for piano and orchestra, and other instrumental works. He also wrote treatises on music theory and guides to counterpoint. Among Vogler's many pupils were C. M. von Weber and G. Meyerbeer.

Reviews

'Abt Vogler' is the richest, deepest, fullest poem on music in the language.

[View in context](#)

It is rather fully expressed as a whole, in two of Browning's best known and finest poems, 'Rabbi ben Ezra,' and 'Abt Vogler.' Some critics, it should be added, however, feel that

Browning is too often and too insistently a teacher in his poetry and that his art would have gained if he had introduced his philosophy much more incidentally.

View in context

The music monologues "Master Hugues of Saxe Gotha," "A Toccata of Galuppi's," and "Abt Vogler" are an important explication of this use of symbolism as they focus on the tension between the empirical view of music as form and the Romantic view of music as philosophy in order to express the relationship of fancy to reason and of the ideal to the real.

Indeed, although Browning's music monologues, "Abt Vogler" (1864), (33) "Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha" (1855; "Men and Women," CW, 5: 285-292), and "A Toccata of Galuppi's" (1855; "Men and Women," CW, 5: 197-199), have not been seen to encompass one unified idea about music, in the light of Browning's music symbolism, it is apparent that these monologues are companion pieces in which Browning uses music to express his foundational Romantic epistemology.

Gathering Sense from Song: Robert Browning and the Romantic Epistemology of Music

Tennyson's Poems Themes

- Death. The great poets commonly take up the subject of death in their works, but it is rare to see a great poet treat death in such a sustained and deeply personal way as Tennyson does. ...
- Nature. Nature plays many roles in Tennyson's poetry. ...
- Grief. ...
- Artistic Isolation. ...
- Spirituality. ...
- Time. ...
- Courage.

Tennyson's Poems Themes

Death

The great poets commonly take up the subject of death in their works, but it is rare to see a great poet treat death in such a sustained and deeply personal way as Tennyson does. Many of his greatest works were written in the aftermath of the death of his closest friend, Arthur Henry Hallam. "Ulysses" is about the great hero searching for life in spite of old age and coming death, and "Tithonus" concerns the weariness of life on earth when all one wants to do is fade into the earth and no longer linger on. "The Two Voices" is a debate about whether or not to commit suicide. "In Memoriam" is the poet's lengthy meditation on his profound grief and his desire to know what happens after death as well as his occasional musing that he wishes to die and join his friend. As "In Memoriam" proceeds, however, Tennyson appears to accept the reality of death in the natural cycle of life and to understand that he can still find pleasure on earth until his time comes. He looks forward to his reunion with Hallam and believes that his friend's death occasioned his transcendence to a higher spiritual state. The acceptance of death is manifested in one of his last works, "Crossing the Bar," in which he looks upon his passage from life to death as a meaningful and happy occasion.

Nature

Nature plays many roles in Tennyson's poetry. Occasionally she is beguiling and sensuous, as in "The Lotos-Eaters." In that poem the men sojourning on the isle are entranced by their natural surroundings and do not want to return to their normal lives. Nature is also an ever-present reminder of the cycle of life from birth to death; existing outside of that cycle can bring grief and separation from one's mortal humanity, for better or for worse. Occasionally Nature is a reminder of the vitality of life and existence; other times Nature is used as a metaphor for death (see "Break, break, break" for the former and "Crossing the Bar" for the latter). Finally, Nature can also be chaotic, hostile, and indifferent to Man. The casual way she discards species and wreaks havoc leads the poet to conclude that life might be meaningless.

Grief

Grief permeates Tennyson's poetry and was a major feature of Tennyson's emotional life. He endured the deaths of his parents, the ensuing mental illness and addictions of many of his family members and, as a kind of muse, the death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam. His poems are frank discussions of despair and the trouble of using words sufficient to express it, and he demonstrates the significance of writing poetry in the face of sorrow and loss. In some of the poems his grief is overwhelming, and he does not know if he wants to continue living. In others he finds ways to manage his grief, coming to accept that sorrow may always be a part of one's life, while acknowledging other things in life inspire happiness and hope.

Artistic Isolation

Tennyson struggled with the question of whether great art had to be produced in artistic isolation or if engagement with the world was acceptable and would not cloud artistic vision. In "The Lady of Shalott" he examines this question. Her island is a safe haven for artists, and she creates her magic web in contentment. However, she is not actually creating reality, since she only sees things reflected in the mirror, and she eventually tires of her estrangement from life and love. When she chooses to look out the window and leave her tower, thus breaking the rule in the curse, she chooses to embrace a full and passionate life. However, this life is actually death, and her art is destroyed as well. The poem suggests that the end of artistic isolation brings a loss of creativity and artistic power.

Spirituality

Tennyson adhered to a Christian faith that can most vividly be seen in "In Memoriam," but he was not wary of expressing his difficulties with that faith and religious belief, particularly in the wake of the death of Hallam. He engages with the scientific findings of the Victorian era, wondering whether Nature is truly indifferent to Man and whether death only brings obliteration of the soul. He finds it difficult to be optimistic and positive that he will be reunited with Hallam after death and that there is any purpose in living. The poet's lapses in faith, however, are reconciled by the end of the poem. He moves from doubt to acceptance, certain once more that the spirit is not gone after death but lives on and progresses to a higher state. He believes that God does have a plan for human beings and that one's presence on earth is not accidental or unheeded.

Time

Many of Tennyson's works reflect his working through the implications of time. Growing old and lingering on are laborious and enervating in poems like "Tithonus" and "The Two Voices," while in "Ulysses" the title character wants to keep adventuring as long as he can. Life on earth can be very sad because one is separated from loved ones who have died and because knowledge is limited. Time is also complicated by the tensions between science and religion; science reveals that time stretches on for a very long time, and religion asserts but

does not prove what happens after death. Generally the poet's reflection is that life is fleeting and short, wasted if one dwells merely in sadness or in hope, and worth savoring while it lasts.

Courage

Many of Tennyson's greatest poems feature individuals displaying great courage, especially under duress. Courage is a universally admired virtue, but during the Victorian age and for the British in particular, it was extremely important. "The Charge of the Light Brigade" features the "noble" six hundred soldiers who rush into a battle even though they know they will probably perish; their courage and willingness to follow orders are exemplary. Similarly, Tennyson creates a highly sympathetic character in Princess Ida from "The Princess: A Medley." She is firmly committed to her vision and does not yield to those who wish to dissuade her from her noble goal of securing gender equality. In "Morte d'Arthur," one of the most heroic men in legendary history, King Arthur, is depicted demonstrating his courage not in the heat of battle but in his willingness to face death; much like Ulysses. Courage is perhaps the greatest Tennysonian virtue.

Tennyson's Poems Summary and Analysis of "The Lotos-Eaters" and "Choric Song"

Ulysses tells his men to have courage, for they will get to land soon. It seems like it is always afternoon there, and the languid air breathes like a dream. A "slender stream" trickles off a cliff. Other streams (this is a land of streams) roll throughout the land. Three snow-topped peaks gleam in the sunset, covered with pine trees topped with dew. As the sun sets, they see a dale and meadow far inland.

Here everything seems always to be the same. Dark but pale faces are set against a backdrop of "rosy flame"; they possess melancholy smiles and mild eyes. They are the Lotos-Eaters. They carry branches heavy with flower and stem and give them to the men. When the men taste these flowers and fruits they hear a rushing of waves, and if their companion speaks, their voice sounds far away, as if from the grave.

The men sit on the sand "between the sun and moon." It is pleasant to think of one's home and one's family, but every one of them is weary of the sea and the oar and the fields of foam. One of them says that they will never return, and all of them sing together, "our island home / Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam."

In the "Choric Song," sweet music falls, softer than petals dropping or night dew resting on walls of granite. It is gentle on the spirit and brings gentle sleep. In this place are soft beds of mosses and flowers floating on streams.

A speaker asks why they are weighed upon with a feeling of heaviness and why they must be consumed with distress when it is natural for all things to have rest. He wonders why they should "toil alone" when they are the "first of things." They go from one sorrow to another and wander ceaselessly, without listening to their inner spirit that tells them, "There is no joy but calm!"

In the middle of the wood a folded leaf is coaxed out from a bud by the wind; it grows green in the sun and is moistened by the night dew before it turns yellow and falls to the ground. An apple is "sweeten'd in the summer light" and drops to the ground. When its time is up, a flower ripens and falls. It never experiences toil.

The dark blue sky is "hateful." Death is the end of a life, but why should life be only labor? Time will continue on, but they want to be left alone. They want to have peace and do as

other things do, to ripen and go to the grave. They want “long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease.”

It is sweet to dream on and on, listening to the whispers of others and eating the Lotos every day. They watch the rippling sea and let their minds wholly turn to “mild-mannered melancholy.” The faces of their past are buried as in urns. Memories of their wedded lives are dear to them, but by now changes must have occurred. The hearths are cold, and their sons are now the masters. They would look strange and come “like ghosts to trouble joy.” Other island princes may have taken their places while minstrels sing of the great deeds of those at Troy. If things are broken, they should remain that way. It is more difficult to bring order back and impart confusion, which is worse than death. Their hearts are weary, and their eyes grow dim.

Here, however, they are lying on soft earthen beds with sweet warm air blowing on them; they watch rivers moving slowly and hear echoes from cave to cave. The Lotos blooms by the peak and blows by the creek, and their spicy dust blows about. The men have had enough action and enough motion. They want to swear an oath to live forever in the Lotos-land and recline like Gods together, “careless of mankind.”

Like Gods they can look over wasted lands and see the trials and travails of men: “blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery / sands,” but here they smile and listen to the music of lamentation from the “ill-used race of men” who labor and suffer and die. The men in the Lotos-land rest their tired limbs and find sleep more pleasant than work or toil at sea or the wind and waves. The speaker tells his fellow mariners to rest because they will “wander no more.”

Analysis

Published in 1832, “The Lotos-Eaters” with its “Choric Song” is one of Tennyson’s most popular poems. It derives from a 15-line episode in Homer’s *Odyssey* that depicts Odysseus (Ulysses) and his men journeying to the land of the lotos-eaters on their way home from the Trojan War. Homer does not spend too much time describing the location, and he has Odysseus forcing his men back to the boat although they do so with bitter tears and lamentation. In Tennyson’s version, the men come to this land and fall under the spell of the languid and sensuous land due to its powerful flowers and fruits that they consume.

Tennyson, in contrast to Homer, spends almost the entire poem dwelling on the languorous effects of the lotus flower and the magnificent, beguiling beauty of the isle. Whereas Homer’s Ulysses is aware of the disadvantages of such a life void of adventure, Tennyson creates a lush mood and sets up a harmonious and complementary relationship between the natural landscape and the inertia brought on by the flower.

Critics believe that the poem was inspired by a trip to Spain taken by Tennyson and his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam (the friend whose death inspired the poem “In Memoriam”). The scenery likely inspired this poem as well as “Oenone” and “Mariana in the South.” Critics also note allusions to and inspiration drawn from the biblical Garden of Eden and the forbidden fruit, Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden,” and John Milton’s “L’Allegro.” James Joyce would later devote an entire chapter of his magnum opus *Ulysses* (1922) to this Homer/Tennyson creation.

The first part of the poem consists of five stanzas of nine lines each in an *ababbcbcc* rhyme scheme; these are called Spensarian stanzas, after the writer of [The Faerie Queen], Edmund Spenser. This scheme lends itself to a slow and dreamy sensation. This is furthered by the Alexandrine 12-syllable line, which contains an extra poetic foot (poems often use 10

syllables or five feet), which slows down the lines even more. The “Choric Song” is longer than the first part of the poem and is irregular in its rhyme scheme and structure, suggesting a greater level of disorder to reflect the unfocused lives of the men.

In the poem the mariners are pleased to alight at a place where they can forget their toil and weariness, and they set their minds at ease about their creeping old age and irrelevance (embodied by the line stating that their sons are taking over their rule). They are tired of the endless waves of the ocean and the hard labor they have performed; they believe that they are due a period of rest and dreaming. It is natural for men to ripen and fall like leaves and apples, and they only want to rest as they near their end. This is an understandable position for the mariners to take, although it differs greatly from that of the Ulysses we meet in Tennyson’s poem about him. Desired or not, this feeling comes from the rich and stupefying lotos flower. It lulls them into a somnolent, dreamy state as they spend their days lying idly and comfortably on beds of moss.

Since Tennyson does not include Ulysses’s forcible tearing of his men away from the island as in Homer, the reader is left to see judgment of this lifestyle through Tennyson’s portrayal of it. While the men’s desire for rest may be legitimate, their complete and utter escape from the realities of life seems disturbing. Critics from the 19th century tended to regard the poem, as critic Malcolm MacLaren writes, “as primarily artistic rather than didactic” and “find in it an implied criticism of idleness and indifference,” while more recent critics see the poem as “a defense of the life of the detached, self-sufficient artist; these critics suppose that Tennyson means to commend the decision of the mariners to abandon the outside world.” Note that the poem begins with “Courage!” and adventuring on the land, and it is not until they taste the lotos that they choose to stay and loaf—the question is whether the lotos clouds their judgment or clears it up.

More broadly, Tennyson’s poetry often comments on the nature of poetry itself, dwelling on the mind’s experience and understanding of the world. The poem is about more than the idleness and dreaminess of the men on the island. Note that the poem is structured, especially in the song, with a similarly lazy and torpid structure. The rhyme scheme and the sensuous, descriptive language create an environment for the reader that expresses a pleasure of reading poetry, that of escaping into another world where one can reflect on the real world and, perhaps, prefer the alternative one. One recent critic, William Flesch, writes, “It is not necessary to derive a moral from ‘The Lotos-Eaters,’ which seems more about the fact that poetry attempts to offer some consolation for the difficulties and essential painfulness of human life.” Yet, such a decision—not to judge—seems to side with the men rather than with the adventurous Odysseus, who thrives on such difficulties and pains as a key to making the most of his life.

The Lotos-eaters

BY ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON

"Courage!" he said, and pointed toward the land,

"This mounting wave will roll us shoreward soon."

In the afternoon they came unto a land

In which it seemed always afternoon.

All round the coast the languid air did swoon,

Breathing like one that hath a weary dream.
Full-faced above the valley stood the moon;
And like a downward smoke, the slender stream
Along the cliff to fall and pause and fall did seem.

A land of streams! some, like a downward smoke,
Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn, did go;
And some thro' wavering lights and shadows broke,
Rolling a slumbrous sheet of foam below.
They saw the gleaming river seaward flow
From the inner land: far off, three mountain-tops,
Three silent pinnacles of aged snow,
Stood sunset-flush'd: and, dew'd with showery drops,
Up-clomb the shadowy pine above the woven copse.

The charmed sunset linger'd low adown
In the red West: thro' mountain clefts the dale
Was seen far inland, and the yellow down
Border'd with palm, and many a winding vale
And meadow, set with slender galingale;
A land where all things always seem'd the same!
And round about the keel with faces pale,
Dark faces pale against that rosy flame,
The mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters came.

Branches they bore of that enchanted stem,
Laden with flower and fruit, whereof they gave

To each, but whoso did receive of them,
And taste, to him the gushing of the wave
Far far away did seem to mourn and rave
On alien shores; and if his fellow spake,
His voice was thin, as voices from the grave;
And deep-asleep he seem'd, yet all awake,
And music in his ears his beating heart did make.

They sat them down upon the yellow sand,
Between the sun and moon upon the shore;
And sweet it was to dream of Fatherland,
Of child, and wife, and slave; but evermore
Most weary seem'd the sea, weary the oar,
Weary the wandering fields of barren foam.
Then some one said, "We will return no more";
And all at once they sang, "Our island home
Is far beyond the wave; we will no longer roam."

CHORIC SONG

I
There is sweet music here that softer falls
Than petals from blown roses on the grass,
Or night-dews on still waters between walls
Of shadowy granite, in a gleaming pass;
Music that gentlier on the spirit lies,
Than tir'd eyelids upon tir'd eyes;
Music that brings sweet sleep down from the blissful skies.

Here are cool mosses deep,
And thro' the moss the ivies creep,
And in the stream the long-leaved flowers weep,
And from the craggy ledge the poppy hangs in sleep."

II

Why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness,
And utterly consumed with sharp distress,
While all things else have rest from weariness?
All things have rest: why should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are the first of things,
And make perpetual moan,
Still from one sorrow to another thrown:
Nor ever fold our wings,
And cease from wanderings,
Nor steep our brows in slumber's holy balm;
Nor harken what the inner spirit sings,
"There is no joy but calm!"
Why should we only toil, the roof and crown of things?

III

Lo! in the middle of the wood,
The folded leaf is woo'd from out the bud
With winds upon the branch, and there
Grows green and broad, and takes no care,
Sun-steep'd at noon, and in the moon
Nightly dew-fed; and turning yellow

Falls, and floats adown the air.
Lo! sweeten'd with the summer light,
The full-juiced apple, waxing over-mellow,
Drops in a silent autumn night.
All its allotted length of days
The flower ripens in its place,
Ripens and fades, and falls, and hath no toil,
Fast-rooted in the fruitful soil.

IV

Hateful is the dark-blue sky,
Vaulted o'er the dark-blue sea.
Death is the end of life; ah, why
Should life all labour be?
Let us alone. Time driveth onward fast,
And in a little while our lips are dumb.
Let us alone. What is it that will last?
All things are taken from us, and become
Portions and parcels of the dreadful past.
Let us alone. What pleasure can we have
To war with evil? Is there any peace
In ever climbing up the climbing wave?
All things have rest, and ripen toward the grave
In silence; ripen, fall and cease:
Give us long rest or death, dark death, or dreamful ease.

V

How sweet it were, hearing the downward stream,
With half-shut eyes ever to seem
Falling asleep in a half-dream!
To dream and dream, like yonder amber light,
Which will not leave the myrrh-bush on the height;
To hear each other's whisper'd speech;
Eating the Lotos day by day,
To watch the crisping ripples on the beach,
And tender curving lines of creamy spray;
To lend our hearts and spirits wholly
To the influence of mild-minded melancholy;
To muse and brood and live again in memory,
With those old faces of our infancy
Heap'd over with a mound of grass,
Two handfuls of white dust, shut in an urn of brass!

VI

Dear is the memory of our wedded lives,
And dear the last embraces of our wives
And their warm tears: but all hath suffer'd change:
For surely now our household hearths are cold,
Our sons inherit us: our looks are strange:
And we should come like ghosts to trouble joy.
Or else the island princes over-bold
Have eat our substance, and the minstrel sings
Before them of the ten years' war in Troy,
And our great deeds, as half-forgotten things.

Is there confusion in the little isle?
Let what is broken so remain.
The Gods are hard to reconcile:
'Tis hard to settle order once again.
There *is* confusion worse than death,
Trouble on trouble, pain on pain,
Long labour unto aged breath,
Sore task to hearts worn out by many wars
And eyes grown dim with gazing on the pilot-stars.

VII

But, propt on beds of amaranth and moly,
How sweet (while warm airs lull us, blowing lowly)
With half-dropt eyelid still,
Beneath a heaven dark and holy,
To watch the long bright river drawing slowly
His waters from the purple hill—
To hear the dewy echoes calling
From cave to cave thro' the thick-twined vine—
To watch the emerald-colour'd water falling
Thro' many a wov'n acanthus-wreath divine!
Only to hear and see the far-off sparkling brine,
Only to hear were sweet, stretch'd out beneath the pine.

VIII

The Lotos blooms below the barren peak:
The Lotos blows by every winding creek:

All day the wind breathes low with mellower tone:
Thro' every hollow cave and alley lone
Round and round the spicy downs the yellow Lotos-dust is blown.
We have had enough of action, and of motion we,
Roll'd to starboard, roll'd to larboard, when the surge was seething free,
Where the wallowing monster spouted his foam-fountains in the sea.
Let us swear an oath, and keep it with an equal mind,
In the hollow Lotos-land to live and lie reclined
On the hills like Gods together, careless of mankind.
For they lie beside their nectar, and the bolts are hurl'd
Far below them in the valleys, and the clouds are lightly curl'd
Round their golden houses, girdled with the gleaming world:
Where they smile in secret, looking over wasted lands,
Blight and famine, plague and earthquake, roaring deeps and fiery sands,
Clanging fights, and flaming towns, and sinking ships, and praying hands.
But they smile, they find a music centred in a doleful song
Steaming up, a lamentation and an ancient tale of wrong,
Like a tale of little meaning tho' the words are strong;
Chanted from an ill-used race of men that cleave the soil,
Sow the seed, and reap the harvest with enduring toil,
Storing yearly little dues of wheat, and wine and oil;
Till they perish and they suffer—some, 'tis whisper'd—down in hell
Suffer endless anguish, others in Elysian valleys dwell,
Resting weary limbs at last on beds of asphodel.
Surely, surely, slumber is more sweet than toil, the shore
Than labour in the deep mid-ocean, wind and wave and oar;
O, rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.

Summary

Odysseus tells his mariners to have courage, assuring them that they will soon reach the shore of their home. In the afternoon, they reach a land “in which it seemed always afternoon” because of the languid and peaceful atmosphere. The mariners sight this “land of streams” with its gleaming river flowing to the sea, its three snow-capped mountaintops, and its shadowy pine growing in the vale.

The mariners are greeted by the “mild-eyed melancholy Lotos-eaters,” whose dark faces appear pale against the rosy sunset. These Lotos-eaters come bearing the flower and fruit of the lotos, which they offer to Odysseus’s mariners. Those who eat the lotos feel as if they have fallen into a deep sleep; they sit down upon the yellow sand of the island and can hardly perceive their fellow mariners speaking to them, hearing only the music of their heartbeat in their ears. Although it has been sweet to dream of their homes in Ithaca, the lotos makes them weary of wandering, preferring to linger here. One who has eaten of the lotos fruit proclaims that he will “return no more,” and all of the mariners begin to sing about this resolution to remain in the land of the Lotos-eaters.

The rest of the poem consists of the eight numbered stanzas of the mariners’ choric song, expressing their resolution to stay forever. First, they praise the sweet and soporific music of the land of the Lotos-eaters, comparing this music to petals, dew, granite, and tired eyelids. In the second stanza, they question why man is the only creature in nature who must toil. They argue that everything else in nature is able to rest and stay still, but man is tossed from one sorrow to another. Man’s inner spirit tells him that tranquility and calmness offer the only joy, and yet he is fated to toil and wander his whole life.

In the third stanza, the mariners declare that everything in nature is allotted a lifespan in which to bloom and fade. As examples of other living things that die, they cite the “folded leaf, which eventually turns yellow and drifts to the earth, as well as the “full-juiced apple,” which ultimately falls to the ground, and the flower, which ripens and fades. Next, in the fourth stanza, the mariners question the purpose of a life of labor, since nothing is cumulative and thus all our accomplishments lead nowhere. They question “what...will last,” proclaiming that everything in life is fleeting and therefore futile. The mariners also express their desire for “long rest or death,” either of which will free them from a life of endless labor.

The fifth stanza echoes the first stanza’s positive appeal to luxurious self-indulgence; the mariners declare how sweet it is to live a life of continuous dreaming. They paint a picture of what it might be like to do nothing all day except sleep, dream, eat lotos, and watch the waves on the beach. Such an existence would enable them peacefully to remember all those individuals they once knew who are now either buried (“heaped over with a mound of grass”) or cremated (“two handfuls of white dust, shut in an urn of brass!”).

In the sixth stanza, the mariners reason that their families have probably forgotten them anyway, and their homes fallen apart, so they might as well stay in the land of the Lotos-eaters and “let what is broken so remain.” Although they have fond memories of their wives and sons, surely by now, after ten years of fighting in Troy, their sons have inherited their property; it will merely cause unnecessary confusion and disturbances for them to return now. Their hearts are worn out from fighting wars and navigating the seas by means of the constellations, and thus they prefer the relaxing death-like existence of the Land of the Lotos to the confusion that a return home would create.

In the seventh stanza, as in the first and fifth, the mariners bask in the pleasant sights and sounds of the island. They imagine how sweet it would be to lie on beds of flowers while watching the river flow and listening to the echoes in the caves. Finally, the poem closes with the mariners' vow to spend the rest of their lives relaxing and reclining in the "hollow Lotos land." They compare the life of abandon, which they will enjoy in Lotos land, to the carefree existence of the Gods, who could not care less about the famines, plagues, earthquakes, and other natural disasters that plague human beings on earth. These Gods simply smile upon men, who till the earth and harvest crops until they either suffer in hell or dwell in the "Elysian valleys" of heaven. Since they have concluded that "slumber is more sweet than toil," the mariners resolve to stop wandering the seas and to settle instead in the land of the Lotos-eaters.

Form

This poem is divided into two parts: the first is a descriptive narrative (lines 1–45), and the second is a song of eight numbered stanzas of varying length (lines 46–173). The first part of the poem is written in nine-line Spenserian stanzas, so called because they were employed by Spenser in *The Faerie Queene*. The rhyme scheme of the Spenserian stanza is a closely interlinked *ABABBCBCC*, with the first eight lines in iambic pentameter and the final line an Alexandrine (or line of six iambic feet). The choric song follows a far looser structure: both the line-length and the rhyme scheme vary widely among the eight stanzas.

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Commentary

This poem is based on the story of Odysseus's mariners described in scroll IX of Homer's *Odyssey*. Homer writes about a storm that blows the great hero's mariners off course as they attempt to journey back from Troy to their homes in Ithaca. They come to a land where people do nothing but eat lotos (the Greek for our English "lotus"), a flower so delicious that some of his men, upon tasting it, lose all desire to return to Ithaca and long only to remain in the Land of the Lotos. Odysseus must drag his men away so that they can resume their journey home. In this poem, Tennyson powerfully evokes the mariners' yearning to settle into a life of peacefulness, rest, and even death.

The poem draws not only on Homer's *Odyssey*, but also on the biblical Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis. In the Bible, a "life of toil" is Adam's punishment for partaking of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: after succumbing to the temptation of the fruit, Adam is condemned to labor by the sweat of his brow. Yet in this poem, *fruit* (the lotos) provides a *release* from the life of labor, suggesting an inversion of the biblical story.

Tennyson provides a tempting and seductive vision of a life free from toil. His description of the Lotos Land rivals the images of pleasure in Milton's "L'Allegro" and Marvell's "The Garden." Yet his lush descriptive passages are accompanied by persuasive rhetoric; nearly every stanza of the choric song presents a different argument to justify the mariners' resolution to remain in the Lotos Land. For example, in the second stanza of the song the mariners express the irony of the fact that man, who is the pinnacle and apex of creation, is the only creature made to toil and labor all the days of his life. This stanza may also be read as a pointed inversion and overturning of Coleridge's "Work without Hope," in which the speaker laments that "all nature seems at work" while he alone remains unoccupied.

Although the taste of the lotos and the vision of life it offers is seductive, the poem suggests that the mariners may be deceiving themselves in succumbing to the hypnotic power of the flower. Partaking of the lotos involves abandoning external reality and living instead in a world of appearances, where everything "seems" to be but nothing actually is: the Lotos Land

emerges as “a land where all things always seemed the same” (line 24). Indeed, the word “seems” recurs throughout the poem, and can be found in all but one of the opening five stanzas, suggesting that the Lotos Land is not so much a “land of streams” as a “land of seems.” In addition, in the final stanza of the choric song, the poem describes the Lotos Land as a “hollow” land with “hollow” caves, indicating that the vision of the sailors is somehow empty and insubstantial.

The reader, too, is left with ambivalent feelings about the mariners’ argument for lassitude. Although the thought of life without toil is certainly tempting, it is also deeply unsettling. The reader’s discomfort with this notion arises in part from the knowledge of the broader context of the poem: Odysseus will ultimately drag his men away from the Lotos Land disapprovingly; moreover, his injunction to have “courage” opens—and then overshadows—the whole poem with a sense of moral opprobrium. The sailors’ case for lassitude is further undermined morally by their complaint that it is unpleasant “to war with evil” (line 94); are they too lazy to do what is right? By choosing the Lotos Land, the mariners are abandoning the sources of substantive meaning in life and the potential for heroic accomplishment. Thus in this poem Tennyson forces us to consider the ambiguous appeal of a life without toil: although all of us share the longing for a carefree and relaxed existence, few people could truly be happy without any challenges to overcome, without the fire of aspiration and the struggle to make the world a better place.

Non-Detailed

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 !"

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" is a passionate indictment of child labor in 19th-century industrial England. First published in 1843 and later revised multiple times, the poem captures the immorality of exploiting children as workers, and condemns both the people and societal institutions that uphold child labor as a practice. The poem was criticized then and is still sometimes viewed today as a deeply sentimental work, relying on stark stories of children's suffering in an effort to tug on readers' heartstrings. Nevertheless, the poem was a popular success, succeeding not just in exposing the exploitation of working-class children, but also in rallying greater public support for child labor reforms in industrial England.

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The Full Text of "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.

1 Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,

2 Ere the sorrow comes with years?

3 They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,

4 And *that* cannot stop their tears.

5 The young lambs are bleating in the meadows,

6 The young birds are chirping in the nest,

7 The young fawns are playing with the shadows,

8 The young flowers are blowing toward the west:

9 But the young, young children, O my brothers,

10 They are weeping bitterly!

11 They are weeping in the playtime of the others,

12 In the country of the free.

13 Do you question the young children in the sorrow,

14 Why their tears are falling so?

15 The old man may weep for his to-morrow

16 Which is lost in Long Ago;

17 The old tree is leafless in the forest,

18 The old year is ending in the frost,
19The old wound, if stricken, is the sorest,
20 The old hope is hardest to be lost.
21But the young, young children, O my brothers,
22 Do you ask them why they stand
23Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers,
24 In our happy Fatherland?
25They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
26 And their looks are sad to see,
27For the man's 's hoary anguish draws and presses
28 Down the cheeks of infancy.
29"Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary;
30 Our young feet," they say, "are very weak;
31Few paces have we taken, yet are weary—
32 Our grave-rest is very far to seek:
33Ask the old why they weep, and not the children,
34 For the outside earth is cold,
35And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering,
36 And the graves are for the old."
37"True," say the children, "it may happen
38 That we die before our time:
39Little Alice died last year, her grave is shapen
40 Like a snowball, in the rime.
41We looked into the pit prepared to take her:
42 Was no room for any work in the close clay!
43From the sleep wherein she lieth none will wake her,
44 Crying, 'Get up, little Alice! it is day.'
45If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower,
46 With your ear down, little Alice never cries:
47Could we see her face, be sure we should not know her,
48 For the smile has time for growing in her eyes:
49And merry go her moments, lulled and stilled in
50 The shroud, by the kirk-chime.
51It is good when it happens," say the children,
52 "That we die before our time."
53Alas, alas the children! they are seeking
54 Death in life, as best to have;

55 They are binding up their hearts away from breaking,
56 With a cerement from the grave.
57 Go out, children, from the mine and from the city,
58 Sing out, children, as the little thrushes do;
59 Pluck you handfuls of the meadow-cowslips pretty,
60 Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through!
61 But they answer, "Are your cowslips of the meadows
62 Like our weeds anear the mine?
63 Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows,
64 From your pleasures fair and fine!
65 "For oh," say the children, "we are weary,
66 And we cannot run or leap;
67 If we cared for any meadows, it were merely
68 To drop down in them and sleep.
69 Our knees tremble sorely in the stooping,
70 We fall upon our faces, trying to go;
71 And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping,
72 The reddest flower would look as pale as snow.
73 For, all day, we drag our burden tiring
74 Through the coal-dark, underground,
75 Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron
76 In the factories, round and round.
77 "For all day, the wheels are droning, turning;
78 Their wind comes in our faces,
79 Till our hearts turn, our heads, with pulses burning,
80 And the walls turn in their places:
81 Turns the sky in the high window blank and reeling,
82 Turns the long light that drops adown the wall,
83 Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,
84 All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
85 And all day, the iron wheels are droning;
86 And sometimes we could pray,
87 'O ye wheels,' moaning breaking out in a mad
88 'Stop! be silent for to-day!'"
89 Ay, be silent! Let them hear each other breathing
90 For a moment, mouth to mouth!
91 Let them touch each other's hands, in a fresh wreathing

92 Of their tender human youth!
93 Let them feel that this cold metallic motion
94 Is not all the life God fashions or reveals:
95 Let them prove their inward souls against the notion
96 That they live in you, or under you, O wheels!
97 Still, all day, the iron wheels go onward,
98 Grinding life down from its mark;
99 And the children's souls, which God is calling sunward,
100 Spin on blindly in the dark.
101 Now tell the poor young children, O my brothers,
102 To look up to Him and pray;
103 So the blessed One who blesseth all the others,
104 Will bless them another day.
105 They answer, "Who is God that He should hear us,
106 While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred?
107 When we sob aloud, the human creatures near us
108 Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word.
109 And *we* hear not (for the wheels in their resounding)
110 Strangers speaking at the door.
111 Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him,
112 Hears our weeping any more?
113 "Two words, indeed, of praying we remember,
114 And at midnight's hour of harm,
115 'Our Father,' looking upward in the chamber,
116 We say softly for a charm.
117 We know no other words, except 'Our Father,'
118 And we think that, in some pause of angels' song,
119 God may pluck them with the silence sweet to gather,
120 And hold both within His right hand which is strong.
121 'Our Father!' If He heard us, He would surely
122 (For they call Him good and mild)
123 Answer, smiling down the steep world very purely,
124 'Come and rest with me, my child.'
125 "But, no!" say the children, weeping faster,
126 "He is speechless as a stone:
127 And they tell us, of His image is the master
128 Who commands us to work on.

129Go to!" say the children,— "up in Heaven,
130 Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find.
131Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving:
132 We look up for God, but tears have made us blind."
133Do you hear the children weeping and disproving,
134 O my brothers, what ye preach?
135For God's possible is taught by His world's loving,
136 And the children doubt of each.
137And well may the children weep before you!
138 They are weary ere they run:
139They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory,
140 Which is brighter than the sun.
141They know the grief of man, without its wisdom.
142 They sink in the despair, without its calm:
143Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom,
144 Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm:
145Are worn as if with age, yet unretrievingly
146 The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
147Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.
148 Let them weep! let them weep!
149They look up, with their pale and sunken faces,
150 And their look is dread to see,
151For they think you see their angels in high places,
152 With eyes turned on Deity.
153"How long," they say, "how long, O cruel nation,
154 Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart,—
155Stifle down with a mailed heel its palpitation,
156 And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
157Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
158 And your purple shows your path!
159But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper
160 Than the strong man in his wrath."

- "The Cry of the Children" Summary

- Do you hear the children crying, brothers of mine, before they are even old enough to know sorrow? They are leaning their young heads against their mothers for comfort, but even *that* cannot make them feel better. Out in nature, the young lambs are baaing in the meadows, the young birds are chirping in their nests, the young fawns are

playing in the woods, and the young flowers are being blown about by the wind. But here, these children, who are so young, my brothers—they are bitterly crying! While other children play, these child laborers are crying—right here, in our so-called free country.

Have you thought to ask these poor young children why they are crying so much? Old men mourn their pasts, though their futures were lost long ago—just as old trees in the forest shed their leaves; just as the year ends with the winter frost; just as an old wound, if re-opened, hurts the most; and just as old hopes are hardest to let go of. But the young, young children, brothers of mine, do you ask them why they stand there crying out in pain, while they are still young enough to press themselves against their mothers' breasts—here, in our supposedly happy homeland?

The children look up with their pale and worn-out faces, and it's so sad to see how terrible they look—for their childish faces display the kind of worn-out suffering seen in grown men. They say, "Your old earth is a gloomy place, and even though we're young, our feet are so tired. We haven't been alive for long yet we're already exhausted—and we have so far to go before we can rest in our graves. Instead of asking us what's wrong, you should ask the old people why *they* cry. Because the world is cold and unwelcoming to us, and we young ones have been totally abandoned, left to wonder why the graves are only for the old."

"It's true," the children admit, "that we might die young. Little Alice died last year, and her grave is like a snowball in the ice. We looked into the pit they dug for her, and saw there was no room for any work down there in that narrow grave! No one can wake her up from her sleep, even if we cry, 'Get up, little Alice! It's daytime!' If you listen by that grave, rain or shine, with your ear down to the earth, you'll never hear little crying anymore. If we could see her now, we wouldn't even recognize her—because now her smile has time to reach her eyes, and her existence is a happy one, soothed and slowed by her burial shroud and the tolling of the church bells. It's a good thing," the children say, "when we die young."

Oh, those poor children! They welcome death as preferable to life; they harden their hearts with the wax cloth used to wrap a corpse. Run away, children, from the mine and the city! Sing, children, as the baby birds do. Pick handfuls of pretty flowers in the meadow and laugh aloud as you run your fingers through them! I urge them so, but they only answer, "Are your flowers like our weeds near the mine? Leave us alone in the dark of the coalmines, do not taunt us with your fine pleasures!"

"Because," the children say, "we're so tired, we can't run or jump. If we cared about meadows at all, it would only be to fall down in them and sleep. Our knees shake with pain from being bent over all day, and we fall over onto our faces just trying to move. Through our droopy eyelids, even the brightest flower would look pale and dreary. That's because, all day long, we exhaust ourselves dragging our burdens through the dark of the underground coal mines; or, all day long, we push the iron factory wheels around and around.

"All day long, the wheels drone and spin. We feel the force of them in our faces, until our own hearts and heads spin and throb too, and the walls themselves seem to spin as well. The blank sky in the distant window seems to spin, the light on the wall seems to spin, the black flies that crawl on the ceiling seem to spin. Everything spins, all day long, ourselves included. And all day, the wheels drone on and on; sometimes, we wish we could beg, moaning like madmen, "Oh, wheels! Stop! Be quiet, just for one day!"

Yes, be silent! Let the children actually hear each other's breath, just for a moment, mouth to mouth! Let them touch each other's hands and be reconnected with the innocence of their youth! Let them understand that cold industrialism is not the only life God creates or makes possible. Let them test their souls against the false notion that they live forever in your clutches, oh wheels of industry! Still, all day long, the iron wheels keep turning, grinding life down from what it ought to be, and the children's souls, which God calls toward the light, keep spinning in the dark.

Now tell the poor young children, brothers of mine, to look up to God and pray; tell them they should pray so that the goodhearted God, who blesses everyone, will keep on blessing them as well. The children answer, "What makes God so special, that he can somehow hear us over the noise of the spinning iron wheels? When we sob out loud, our fellow human beings pass right by; they don't hear us, or even worse, they choose not to answer our cries. And *we* cannot hear (due to the noise of the wheels) if anyone speaks to us through the door. So why would God, with angels singing all around Him, hear our cries anymore?

"We do remember two words of prayer, and at the deadly midnight hour, we whisper 'Our Father,' and look up toward the ceiling, as though these words might be magic. We know no other prayers, except 'Our Father," and we hope that, if the angels' song should stop singing for a moment, God might gather up our two words in this moment of silence, and hold them both in His strong right hand. 'Our Father!' If He heard us, He would surely (Wouldn't he? For they call Him good and kind!)

answer, and smile down at the distant world, very sincerely, saying, 'Come and rest with me, my child.'

"But no!" the children say, crying even harder, "God is silent as a rock. And the powerful insist that the boss who commands us to keep working is made in God's image. Go to Heaven!" say the children, "Up in Heaven, all we can imagine are dark clouds that spin like iron wheels. Do not mock us with your words of prayer; grief has made unfaithful. We look for God, but tears have blocked our vision, and we cannot find faith." Do you hear the children crying and putting to shame, brothers of mine, all those religious niceties you preach? For the promise of God is shown via the world's love, and the children do not believe in that promise nor in the world's love.

The children have every right to stand there crying! They are exhausted before they can even move. They have never seen the sunshine, or the light of God, which is even brighter than the sun. They know a grown man's grief, but do not share his wisdom. They drown in despair, without the reassurance of life experience. They are slaves, denied the freedom of God's grace; they are martyrs, suffering like Christ even though they haven't been nailed to the cross. They are worn-out as if with age, yet denied memories of a long life to look back upon. They are orphans, denied love and care here on earth and up in heaven. Let them cry! Let them cry!

They look up, with their pale and worn-out faces, and their look chills you to the bone, for they think we see them dead already, angels in heaven turned toward God. "How long," they say, "how long, cruel nation, will you stand on a child's heart in order to carry on the world's affairs? How long will you crush a child's heartbeat with your armored heel, walking onward to your capitalist throne? Our blood splashes you, you greedy tyrant, even as a royal purple carpet unrolls before you. But know this: a child's sob ringing out in the silence is a curse far more powerful than even a strong man's rage."

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- "The Cry of the Children" Themes

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The Immorality of Child Labor

"The Cry of the Children" is a poem about the experiences of child laborers in England during the Industrial Revolution. Toggling between the voice of a sympathetic speaker and the words of the children themselves, the poem calls attention to the cruelty of exploiting children as workers and argues that such

exploitation destroys childhood innocence. Ultimately, the poem insists that child labor is a deeply immoral practice and seeks to persuade its audience that the exploitation of children must end.

Fittingly, given the title, most of the poem is dedicated to the children's "cries" as they recount their plight. They testify to their unspeakable working conditions—"all day, we drag our burden tiring / through the coal-dark, underground"—as well as to their exhaustion and despair. By presenting these details in the children's own voices—"we are weary, / and we cannot run or leap"—the poem hammers home again and again how wrong it is to force children to do hard labor, especially under conditions that even an adult would shrink from.

Additionally, throughout the poem, the speaker argues that child laborers in the mines and factories have been forced to mature before their time, and that this loss of their childhood innocence is itself immoral. Toward this end, the speaker compares the children's "bitter" tears and "sunken faces" to those of haggard old men, and makes clear that there is a cruel irony in an adult mourning the past and "weep[ing] for his to-morrow" when he has had so many of them, while child laborers weep because they have had their tomorrows stolen.

The poem also tells the tragic tale of Little Alice, a child laborer who dies. Disturbingly, however, rather than mourn her death, the children celebrate that Alice can finally rest. "It is good when it happens [...] that we die before our time!" they cry, a shocking statement that indicates these children have lost their hope of resting in life itself. The speaker then cries, "Alas, alas, the children!" leaving no doubt that the poem views the children's reaction as tragic, and that any system that causes children to welcome death is an immoral one.

Morality comes most explicitly into play, however, towards the end of the poem, when the speaker invokes God and religion as a potential force for good. The children swiftly reveal these hopes to be unfounded: "Is it likely God [...] Hears our weeping any more?" In their eyes, God resembles "the master / Who commands us to work on," and religious values exist only as talking points. This portion of the poem indicts child labor as an immoral force on a literal level, since it has stripped children of their religious faith and values.

The poem closes on a righteous note, condemning the "cruel nation" that crushes children's lives in its dedication to "the mart," or marketplace. It describes the child laborers as "martyrs" and their exploiters as "gold-heaper[s]," and depicts the prioritization of wealth and capitalism over children's well-being as deeply depraved.

However, the poem also offers the opportunity to imagine a different set of priorities, by posing this condemnation in the form of a question: “how long” must this immoral cruelty go on? Implicit in this question is the suggestion that the country *could* change its values and prioritize, if it wanted to, and thus put an end to the horrific practice of child labor.

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Classism and Injustice

Though “The Cry of the Children” is primarily focused on the experiences of child laborers, it is also deeply attuned to the vast distance between the rich and the poor in industrializing England, and the way the upper and middle classes’ greed and ignorance are responsible for the exploitation of working-class children. The poem explicitly condemns this classism and selfishness, both on an individual and a societal level.

Throughout the poem, many of the scenes and images that capture the immorality of child labor are also used to point to the wide gap between the rich and the poor. For instance, the child laborers “weeping in the playtime of the others” serve as a reminder of the stark difference between the lives of poor children and rich ones, due only to their class.

Likewise, the poem’s use of nature imagery also often reveals a gap between the experiences of the rich and poor. For example, when urged to flee to the countryside to frolic, the child laborers beg the speaker to “leave us [...] from your pleasures fair and fine”; even just hearing about joys and pleasures they themselves cannot partake in is painful.

Not only does the poem frequently draw attention to these social inequalities, but it also rebukes the middle and upper classes for selfishly turning a blind eye to injustice. This occurs most often through a direct address to the poem’s readers, whom the speaker refers to as “my brothers.” “Do you question the young children [...] why their tears are falling so?” the speaker demands, a rhetorical question that suggests the upper classes in fact do *not* ask questions about the workings of their own society, and thus willfully ignore the exploitation of working-class children in their midst. At one point, the speaker begs, “Let them touch each other’s hands” and “Let them prove their inward souls,” confirming that the poem’s intended audience is indeed those who have the power to “let” these children lead different lives—in other words, the

very institutions and members of society who depend on child labor, and thus prefer to ignore its human cost.

However, as the children themselves confirm, this audience is indifferent to their plight. Later in the poem, the children describe “human creatures” who, in response to their sobs, simply “pass by,” ignoring the sound and letting their exploitation go on. The speaker’s references to “the country of the free” and “our happy Fatherland” must therefore be read as ironic indictments of 19th-century England, not as honest praise; the poem makes devastatingly clear that everyone in England is *not* equally free or happy, least of all child laborers. As such, these references serve as a pointed reminder to those who *are* living freely and happily that their lifestyles are founded on the exploitation of others, namely those in a lower class than themselves.

Ultimately, the poem closes with a resounding and explicit condemnation of the greed that underpins the entire exploitative system of child labor, which is itself part of the structures of industrialization and capitalism. In an image that casts child laborers as “martyrs” and the wealthy benefitting from their labor as “gold-heapers” (who “tread onward to [their] throne amid the mart” while the children’s “blood splashes upward”) the children denounce the selfish, classist society that treats their lives as disposable, and privileges wealth and economic gain above all else. They conclude by arguing that a “child’s sob in the silence curses deeper / than the strong man,” an implicit reference to the poem itself—both a sob and curse—leaving no question as to how the poem views those who let them suffer.

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The Human Cost of Industrialization

In addition to criticizing child labor, “The Cry of the Children” also strongly condemns industrialization as a whole. This was a timely subject when the poem was first published. In the 1840s, England was shifting from a largely agricultural economy to one increasingly centered on mining and manufacturing, which became the subject of great societal and political debate. The poem clearly picks a side in this argument—using vivid imagery, it depicts industrial settings as hellish and deadly, while the countryside is portrayed as peaceful and heavenly. Ultimately, the poem argues that industrial labor is an unnatural way of life that robs people of their humanity.

The poem is primarily set in a wretched industrial landscape. It describes this world in great depth, from “the dark of the coal-shadows” in the mines to the “cold metallic motion” of factory life. In particular, the poem pays close attention to the deafening sound of the iron wheels, which “grind life down” whether in the mines or the factory. It also explicitly compares the child laborers to these wheels, for they too “are turning, all the day,” like cogs in a machine. The repeated emphasis on wheels and work captures the gruesome monotony of industrial life, as well as the despairing effect it has on the human soul. “Stop! be silent for to-day!” the children cry, but the wheels and their work drone on.

The poem also describes industrialization’s harmful impact on the physical body and the mind. The children’s knees “tremble sorely in the stooping,” their “heavy eyelids droop,” and they describe themselves as “weak” and “weary,” sapped of any youthful energy they might otherwise have had. In addition, the way the children celebrate Little Alice’s death because it finally gives her body a chance to rest indicates that industrial life inflicts severe psychological damage as well as physical pain.

In sharp contrast to this nightmarish industrial setting, the speaker of the poem often depicts the natural world as a heavenly place of refuge. The speaker laments that child laborers “have never seen the sunshine” and uses natural imagery as metaphors for human growth and development, essentially equating human well-being with the natural world in much the same way industrial life represents human misery.

In particular, the natural world takes on special significance for children, as the speaker draws a clear connection between nature and an ideal vision of childhood innocence, then makes strikingly clear that child laborers cannot access either. At one point, the speaker urges child laborers to “go out [...] from the mine and from the city” and “pluck you handfuls of the meadow-cowslips pretty,” but the children confess they are unfamiliar with meadows and flowers, and that even if they could visit the countryside, they would simply “drop down [...] and sleep.”

In sum, the poem paints a clear picture of industrialization as a force that robs people of their humanity—both figuratively transforming them into machinery and literally grinding down their bodies and spirits until they die. The natural world stands in profound relief as a better, purer alternative, equated with childhood innocence and human happiness—but the poem makes devastatingly clear that it remains out of reach for those condemned to an industrial life, who know no other existence than their own.

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God and Religion

In the latter half of “The Cry of the Children,” the poem turns to God and religion. Though the speaker clearly believes in a God who wants the best for all humanity, including child laborers, the children themselves do not, insisting that God does not hear their prayers or seem to care about their plight. The poem very pointedly lays this lack of faith at the feet of society at large, delivering a scathing rebuke of those who promise heavenly reward rather than seeking to end exploitation on earth. Ultimately, the speaker directly addresses the poem’s readers, calling on their religious values and pushing them to move past pious words and intentions to meaningful moral action.

After clearly establishing the children’s misery, the speaker argues that they deserve to know that their suffering “is not all the life God fashions or reveals.” The speaker even insists that God “is calling sunward” the children’s souls, and wants better for them than their lives of toil. These lines make clear that, in the speaker’s worldview, God is a moral force for good who wishes for humanity’s well-being.

Nevertheless, the speaker does not feel the same way about the people responsible for bringing God’s word to life on earth. With a heavy helping of sarcasm, the speaker instructs the poem’s audience to do what they normally do in the face of suffering: “Now tell the poor young children [...] To look up to Him and pray.” The hypocrisy of this gesture—telling impoverished children prayer will solve their problems—is immediately revealed by the children themselves. They chime in, “Who is God that He should hear us?” and argue, “Is it likely God [...] hears our weeping any more?”

Over the next two stanzas, the child laborers dismantle any notion that a heavenly power is enough to put an end to their suffering. They describe their desperate pleas falling on deaf ears, both human and divine, and ultimately reveal that they have lost all faith: “Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving— / We look up for God, but tears have made us blind.”

After allowing the children’s moving testimony to hammer home the injustice of relying on faith as a solution to social ills, the speaker then offers a fierce indictment of readers’ own hypocrisy: “Do ye hear the children weeping and disproving, / O my brothers, what ye preach?” The speaker makes the case that religious beliefs and pious words are not enough to ensure a moral world, arguing that society’s supposed

religious values must be backed up by action—“For God’s possible is taught by His world’s loving.”

The speaker culminates this argument by decrying that these children “have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory” of God, and explicitly linking “liberty” and “Christdom.” In short, the speaker argues that child laborers have been denied the spiritual benefits of faith, specifically Christian faith, which the speaker views as endowing people with eternal heavenly freedom—but not through any fault of their own. Instead, the speaker paints child laborers as religious “martyrs” and “orphans,” abandoned by those who might have saved their souls by making Christianity’s values reality.

Finally, the speaker and the poem explicitly argue for society to change its ways and do otherwise, asking “How long, O cruel nation, / Will you stand, to move the world, on a child’s heart?”

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- Line-by-Line Explanation & Analysis of “The Cry of the Children”
 - Before Line 1, Lines 1-4

The epigraph to “The Cry of the Children” comes from Euripides’s Greek tragedy *Medea*, which is about a woman who murders her children. This shocking invocation of infanticide is the poem’s first indictment of its readers, implicitly suggesting that the English people who let child labor take place are in essence responsible for the death of the nation’s children. The specific line quoted (“Why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children”) introduces a central theme of the poem: children’s own perspectives on their exploitation and harm.

The first four lines of the poem proper reflect this theme as well. The speaker uses a rhetorical question to immediately implicate and criticize readers of the poem for their role in the practice of child labor. When asking if the poem’s readers “hear the children weeping,” the speaker is well aware that these readers do not—that they are either ignorant or indifferent to working-class children’s plight. This early use of apostrophe makes clear that the poem as a whole is intended a form of direct address to a specific set of readers: the speaker’s “brothers.”

By referring to the poem’s readers as “my brothers,” the speaker also implies fellowship or kinship with the poem’s audience. This act of inclusion serves as an olive branch, extending a welcome to the poem’s readers and establishing trust and familiarity, even as the line scolds those readers at the same time.

On the other hand, the children's identities as child laborers have not yet been established by this point in the poem. They are just "the children." However, lines 3 and 4 make clear that these children suffer an extraordinary grief, well beyond the usual troubles of childhood. Not even their mothers can "stop their tears." As the second line states, these children's "sorrow" greatly outweighs their years, or age. All of these lines hint at the children's identities as working-class, exploited laborers.

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- The speaker describes a natural world through which God's presence runs like an electrical current, becoming momentarily visible in flame-like flashes that resemble the sparkling of metal foil when moved in the light. Alternately, the speaker describes God's presence as being like a rich oil (such as olive oil), whose true power or greatness is only revealed when crushed to its essence. Given this powerful undercurrent of evidence of God's presence in the world, the speaker asks, why do human beings not heed God's divine authority? The speaker starts to answer his own question by describing the state of human life: the way that humanity over the generations has endlessly walked over the ground, and the way that industry and economic pursuits have damaged and corrupted the landscape such that it looks and smells only of men (and not of God). Not only has the land been stripped bare of the natural things that once lived upon it, but even the shoes that people now wear have cut off the physical connection between their feet and the earth they walk on.

And yet, the speaker asserts, nature never loses its power, and deep down life always continues to exist. Though the sun will always fade into the darkness of night in the west, morning will always follow by springing up over the edge of the horizon in the east. The source of this constant cycle of regeneration is the grace of a God who guards the broken world much like a mother bird uses its body to watch over and keep warm its eggs and hatchlings.

- "God's Grandeur" Themes

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God, Nature, and Man

The poem's very first line establishes the profound connection between God and nature that the speaker explores throughout "God's Grandeur." God is not connected to nature merely because God *created* nature. Rather, the speaker describes God as actively suffused within nature, as an ever-present "charge" running through it. Further, by describing God's grandeur as being something that will "flame out," or as

being something as tangible as the oil that oozes from a crushed olive, the speaker makes an additional claim: that human beings can perceive, contemplate, or even interact with God through nature. The speaker reveres nature not only because it is a divine creation, but also because it is a direct conduit between humanity and God.

The belief in such a deep link among God, nature, and humanity explains the speaker's despair about how humanity is ruining the natural world. In destroying nature ("sear[ing]", "smear[ing]", and "blear[ing]" it), humanity is destroying God's creation and severing its own connection to God. Even worse, humanity is not only destroying nature, but replacing the pristine sights, sounds, and smells of the natural world—and God's "charge" within it—with the "smudge" and "smell" of human beings.

At the same time, nature's connection to God gives the speaker hope: because it is the creation of an omnipotent God who continues to watch over the world, nature can never be obscured or ruined by human beings. The natural cycles of life and death (implied by the references to sunset followed by sunrise), and the fact that God is still fulfilling his "charge" to protect nature (the way a mother bird "broods" over an egg), give the speaker confidence that nature will endure humanity's plundering and be reborn. Yet the speaker seems unsure about humanity's own place within nature's endless cycles: it's unclear if the speaker's vision of a reborn world includes humanity or not.

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Industry and Destruction

Hopkins wrote "God's Grandeur" in 1877, in the midst of the Second Industrial Revolution, which was a period of rapid technological advancement, including the expansion of factories, railroads, and electrical power. While the Second Industrial Revolution had many positive aspects, such as improving standards of living and loosening the social restrictions that blocked the lower classes from rising, it also had a brutal impact on nature: clear-cutting and mining for resources decimated the landscape; pollution from factories and trains darkened the air and water; and growing urbanization replaced countryside with cities and suburbs.

In short, the rise of industry came at the expense of the natural world. In lines 5-8, the speaker of "God's Grandeur" laments the destruction of nature and the reckless way that humanity is engaging in this destruction. The repetition of "have trod" in line 5

captures the unceasing and almost mindless way that humanity has worn down the earth over countless generations. Hopkins's expressive—or even graphic—choice of the words "seared," "bleared," and "smeared" conveys Hopkins's disgust at how "all" has been corrupted and destroyed by humanity's relentless "trade" and "toil." The rise of industry has caused nature, once pristine and free of the unnatural stains of mankind, to be marred by "man's smudge" and "man's smell."

Finally, in line 8, the speaker notes how the blind pursuit of economic growth has made humanity unable to even recognize the destruction that the rise of industry has left in its wake. The earth has been laid bare by industrial development, but people can no longer even feel the ground beneath their feet because they are wearing shoes that symbolize the mass production of the industrial world. In "God's Grandeur," the speaker describes a double tragedy: how humanity destroyed nature and its connection to God, and how the destruction is so complete that humanity can't even recognize what it has lost.

- Line-by-Line Explanation & Analysis of "God's Grandeur"

- Line 1

The first line of "God's Grandeur" establishes the poem's main theme as well as several stylistic characteristics of the poem. The line, a single declarative sentence, uses a metaphor to compare "the grandeur of God" to an electric force that "charges"—that is, that suffuses and animates—the world. This idea, of God being both a force that powers nature and an essence found throughout nature, is a fundamental concept that pervades the rest of the poem.

The word "charge" also carries a second, less common, meaning that is important to understand. A "charge" can also be an obligation. For instance, a mail carrier is "charged" with delivering the mail; a military general is "charged" with leading troops in battle. Applying this second meaning of "charged" to the first line of "God's Grandeur" evokes the implication that the world has a responsibility to recognize the magnificence of God—and lines 4-8 of the poem describe the way that humanity has failed in this responsibility.

The meter of the first line is also worth noting. "God's Grandeur" is a sonnet, and all sonnets are usually written in iambic pentameter—a poetic meter in which five iambs are written one after another to produce ten-syllable-long lines that follow a consistent pattern of unstressed-stressed syllables. However, while the first line of

“God’s Grandeur” *starts* with four syllables of iambic pentameter, it then goes a bit off the rails:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

Technically speaking, this line, rather than being made up of five iambs, is made up of two iambs followed by two anapests (which have an unstressed-unstressed-stressed pattern). This unconventional shift in meter creates a few notable effects:

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- It signals that the rest of the sonnet will *also* likely play with and subvert the norms of a standard sonnet's poetic meter, which it does.
 - It adds an extra "charge" to the stressed words in the line by reducing the number of stressed words in it from the traditional five of iambic pentameter to just four. Because the line contains fewer stressed words, those that are stressed get even more emphasis. This subtle unexpected "charge" makes the meter of the first line seem to embody and amplify the meaning of the poem's opening sentence.