

# **THE EFFECTS OF CHILD LABOR EXPLOITATION AS REFLECTED IN ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING'S "THE CRY OF THE CHILDREN"**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" is one of many poems which portray the condition of child labors in Victorian Era. The objectives of this thesis are to show that child labor exploitation really happens through intrinsic elements, to describe the conditions of the child labors, and to explain several effects of child labor exploitation in Victorian Era. The writer uses library research in collecting the data. To analyze the extrinsic elements of the poem, the writer uses sociological criticism. The result of this thesis is that the exploitation gives several effects to the child labors. It is represented by the child labors' wish for death, the loss of happiness as children, and the skepticism towards God. It can be concluded that children should have freedom so they can feel love and happiness.

Keyword: exploitation, social criticism, child labors, victorian era

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## 1. Introduction

The poem "The Cry of the Children" is written by Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the nineteenth century during Victorian Era. The poem is rich with imagery to portray how mournful the conditions of child labor working in mines in the era are. This poem is a social critic to the government of England who do not give protection to children and to the factory owners who employ children to work in their factory without insurance.

Labor has become a major issue since hundreds of years ago. Most labors come from poor families. Because the labors do not have sufficient ability, they usually work in factories. However, they are often exploited by factory owners. They are forced to work under pressure and get paid in a very minimum wage.

In the nineteenth century, child labor is one example of exploitation victims because it forces children to work over hour and get paid under wage. Poverty is the major reason why children become child labor. Their wages are expected to increase their families' income although it does not help to raise their economical situation. They are hired to be chimney sweepers or carriage pullers in the factory. The bourgeois do not care for the child labor's safety as long as they can get the benefit from the selling of their products.

The writer is interested in analyzing the effects of exploitation faced by child labor related to bad effects mentioned above. In analyzing the poem, the writer uses library research. Regarding those topics, the writer believes that this research can provide answer about the condition of the child laborers and the exploitation effects towards them in the nineteenth century. For those reasons, the writer chooses “The Effects of Child Labor Exploitation as Reflected in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children”” as the title of the thesis.

The writer uses library research to support the analysis of structures of the poem. Books and articles from internet sources are used by the writer in gathering the data. This thesis analyzes the effects of child labor exploitation through figurative language; they are imagery, irony, and overstatement for the intrinsic elements. In the extrinsic elements, the writer focuses on the effects of the child labor exploitation by using sociological criticism.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Intrinsic Elements

The writer finds it essential to figure out intrinsic elements in a poem in order to understand the poem well. If the readers do not understand the figurative language used in the poems they read, there will be confusion in understanding the poems. Imagery concerns about the description by using human senses, so that the readers can understand the depth of a poem. Cuddon explains that “Imagery as a general term covers the use of language to represent objects, actions, feelings, thoughts, ideas, states of mind and any sensory or extra-sensory experience” (1999:414). In “The Cry of the Children”, Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses imagery to exhibit the misery of child labor exploitation to the readers. For this poem, the writer chooses two kinds of imageries; they are visual imagery and kinesthetic imagery.

The writer also analyzes irony as it is explained by Meyer that “irony is a technique that reveals a discrepancy between what appears to be and what is actually true” (2011:433). The last intrinsic element is overstatement. Perrine writes that “overstatement, or hyperbole, is simply exaggeration but exaggeration in the service of truth” (1984:110). Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses overstatement in “The Cry of the Children” because she wants to stress the sadness felt by the child labor.

## 2.2 Extrinsic Elements

Extrinsic elements in a poem may concern the situation within the poem itself. The situation can be the society where the poets write their poems. Literature has a relation with society. De Bonald says that literature is an expression of society (Wellek & Warren: 95). Works of literature are created because the authors want to depict the situation of society at that moment. Poetry is one of the medium to state the condition of society. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" has its own statement about the conditions of child labor in the nineteenth century of England.

To explain about the conditions of the child labor, the writer takes Hindman quotes as follows:

Several factors explain this heavy reliance on children and adolescents. As the pioneers in industrialization, and facing substantial investments in novel technologies, many British factory owners were desperately eager to cut labor costs in order to maximize return on equipment. Children's wages, far lower than those of adults, seemed particularly attractive. (2009:39)

To describe that exploitation really happens in Victorian Era, the writer concludes from Cody's article that states "Many children worked 16 hour days under atrocious conditions" (n.d.: par.2). It can be concluded from what Cody explained above that the form of child labor exploitation was excessive work hours. Moreover, no guarantee of safety and health caused many child labors died before they reached twenty-five years old. Therefore, act of labor was formed so that child labors were protected from exploitation.

It can be inferred that the child labors do not have free time as it is explained by Cody that child labors in Victorian Era used to work for sixteen hours a day. Because of that, there must be several effects felt by the child labors. They do not have time for education and playing. Because they do not have time to play, they do not feel happiness as what normal children should feel. Also, the lack of knowledge can make them do not understand about their surroundings.

### 3. Discussion

#### 3.1 Intrinsic Aspects

##### 3.1.1 Imagery

###### 3.1.1.1 Visual Imagery

The following stanza contains a visual imagery

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** (stanza 1, line 1-4)

The word 'tears' is a visual imagery because it needs the sense of sight to notice tears. It tells that the tears keep running down from children's faces even though their mothers have already hugged them. Elizabeth Barrett Browning tries to show how forlorn the condition of child laborers is and how strenuous the burden which child laborers have to endure in the stanza.

In addition, three visual images can be seen in the following stanza

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!" (stanza 3, line 25-30)

Elizabeth wants to tell the readers about the expression of the child laborers by using the visual imagery. The visual imagery can be seen in the third stanza from the words 'pale', 'sunken', and 'sad'. We can see that someone has a pale face from his skin color which gets lighter. We also can assume that someone has a sunken face from his feeble expression. The word 'sad' is also considered as a visual imagery because it integrates the two previous words that are 'pale' and 'sunken'.

###### 3.1.1.2 Kinesthetic Imagery

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 ! (Stanza 1, line 3-10)

The writer sees several kinesthetic imageries in the first stanza above. The first word is 'leaning'. It is kinesthetic imagery because the child labors' heads are moving towards their mothers. The child labors feel so tired that all they want to do is to rest themselves on their mothers' lap. The word 'playing' is a kinesthetic imagery as well since it requires the movement of body parts in order to play with shadows. 'Blowing' is considered as a kinesthetic imagery because the flowers are moving from one location to another location. Yet, the child labors cannot go anywhere else. Those kinesthetic imageries explain that while the child labors are weeping bitterly, on the other side of the world other creatures are playing, showing that they are happy with their conditions, unlike the child labors' condition, who know only bitterness in their lives.

### 3.1.2 Irony

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 ? (Stanza 2, line 13-24)

The irony in the second stanza above lies in the last four lines of the stanza. Elizabeth questions why the children are crying in a happy country like England. 'Happy Fatherland' means prosperous country since England has become a wealthy country after the industrial revolution had occurred. Yet, the happiness cannot be felt by the child labors because the social gap between the rich and the poor is too distant. That means no matter how happy the Fatherland is, as long as the underage children work overtime and not given enough time to rest or to play, they will always feel sorrow and sadness.

### 3.1.3 Overstatement

“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 —** (Stanza 7, line 77-83)

The bold-marked lines in the seventh stanza above are overstatement. It is explained by the wind from the wheels which keep stirring. It keeps stirring that make the child labors' pulses burning although in fact it is not really burning. And the powerful strength of the wheels' wind can turn the wall upside down. The wind also can cover the sky from the high window until the people staying inside the mines are no longer to see the sky. Not only does the wind turn the sky but also does it make the light cannot come through the window. Also, the wind also turns the flies which usually crawl on the ceiling. Elizabeth uses the overstatement in the lines above to point out the fact that there is no break time for child labors from work since it can be seen from the wheels which keep moving relentlessly.

“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.”** (Stanza 11, line 125-132)

Another example of overstatement can be seen in stanza eleven above. Elizabeth writes the bold-marked line in overstatement because she wants to show the readers how deep the misery of child labors is. They try to look up for God, but the sadness inside them has blinded their belief to God. God cannot help them out from their sorrowful situation.

## 3.2 Extrinsic Element

### 3.2.1 Literature and Society

It is inferred from the previous chapter that literature and society are related to each other. In “The Cry of The Children”, Elizabeth wrote the poem after she had read a report about the condition of child labor in the era. It proves that a poet can write a poem to report and to show the situation in an era through the poet’s poems.

### 3.2.2 The Conditions of Child Labor in Victorian Era

The conditions of child labor in the nineteenth century of England are full of sorrow. Their days are spent in sadness that the only thing they can do is laying their heads onto their mothers’ lap. It can be seen in stanza one line one to three: “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.” Yet, their mothers are helpless to calm them because the children will not stop crying. It indicates that the grief in their own life has already buried the happiness in them.

The child labors also do not have playtime. It is described by comparing the lives of child labors to the other creatures’. It can be seen in stanza one line five to twelve: “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.” While animals can have playtime and flowers can blow to any places, the child labors are being imprisoned in mines. They wish they have playtime but their works do not allow them to stop. In a free country like England where everyone can do everything freely, the child labors lose their free time in order to help their families’ needs.

### 3.2.3 The Effects of Child Labor Exploitation

#### 3.2.3.1 The Wish For Death

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 !” (Stanza 4, line 39-52)

The first exploitation effect shown in this poem is the child labors’ wish to dead. They really want to die because they cannot bear the burden of working any longer. They are able to say that kind of wish because they see with their own eyes that their friend, Little Alice, smiles when she dies. They assume that when they die, they hope they will get their smiles back, the innocent smiles that have been taken because of the exploitation.

#### 3.2.3.2 The Loss of Happiness as Children

“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. (Stanza 6, line 65-72)

The child labors do not seek for happiness with the term of playing outside. What they seek is sleeping time that they cannot find. It is shown in the lines when they say that if they could get a chance to go to a meadow, the only thing they would do was to sleep. They are so tired that playing outside is considered as a useless activity. The exploitation has made them lose the happiness of their childhood as children as a complete human being.

#### 3.2.3.3 The Skepticism towards God

“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. (Stanza 11, line 125-136)

The climax of the child labors' skepticism toward God is seen in the eleventh stanza. The child labors blatantly say that grief has covered their hearts. They describe God as a stone because He does not answer their prayer immediately. The child labors cannot see heaven above because what they see is only dark and turning clouds which come from the smoke inside the mine. The writer believes that heaven is symbolized with light color instead of darkness, so the child labors can see the bright world outside instead of the dark mines.

The child labors also try to look up for God but they cannot find Him because sadness and grief have made them sightless and disbelieving. They give up praying to God after their prayer is not answered by God. They initially believe that God will bless their prayer. However, the sadness blesses them quicker than God blesses their prayer, so they start to be Godless.

#### 4. Conclusion

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "The Cry of the Children" is one of the poems which describes the life of proletariats in the nineteenth century of England, and Elizabeth uses child labors as her object to portray the lives of proletariats in that era.

Elizabeth uses irony, imagery, and overstatement in the intrinsic aspects because she wants to emphasize the misery felt by the child labors, and she wants to make the readers feel what the child labors feel. For the extrinsic aspects, the writer found the effects of child labors in the poem. The extrinsic aspects show that underage children are not supposed to work because they have to make themselves as children, instead of working as labors. The exploitation has made the child labors' lives miserable. They do not look for playtime anymore because having a rest is much more necessary.

The poem criticizes the government of England in the nineteenth century by showing the sorrowful conditions of the child labors. Elizabeth uses the explicit language in her poem in order to directly strike and startle the heart of the readers. From the poem, it can be understood that the underage children should not work, but they have to play so they can be children as they should become.

In brief, not only does Elizabeth's "The Cry of the Children" have its descriptive aspect, a poem that tells the condition of the child labors, but also does it have its emotional aspect, a poem which arouses the readers feeling of pity towards the child labors. The emotional aspect which shows the miserable life of the child labors makes the poem very powerful.

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