



IRAQI
Academic Scientific Journals



العراقية
المجلات الاكاديمية العلمية



ISSN: 2663-9033 (Online) | ISSN: 2616-6224 (Print)

Journal of Language Studies

Contents available at: <http://www.iasj.net/iasj/journal/356/about>

Exploring the Inevitability of Death in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *The Cry of the Children* Poem

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Received: 12 / 3 /2023, Accepted: 3 /4 /2023, Online Published: 31 / 7 / 2023

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Abstract

The Cry of the Children is one of the significant poems written by the Victorian poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning. In this poem, the poetess protested an industrial society that employed children as an industrial workers. She showed the social realities of the era where women and children were inferior individualities. Because of the Industrial Revolution, poverty, unemployment, diseases and death increased. What's more the death of the children increased rapidly. The poetess through this poem expressed the situation of those children who worked in factories and mines.

Thus, this paper tries to examine briefly the Victorian period in which Elizabeth Barrett Browning tried to put her poetic voice. It also focuses on her poetic career and individuality as a female poet and her place in social and public sphere. Furthermore, this paper tries to analyze the aspect of death in the poem *The Cry of the Children*.

Key Words: Victorian Age, Industrialization, Poetess, Child Labour, Death, The Cry of the Children

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استكشاف حتمية الموت في قصيدة صرخة الأطفال إليزابيث باريت براوننج

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كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية- جامعة تكريت

المستخلص

صرخة الأطفال هي واحدة من القصائد الهامة التي كتبتها الشاعرة الفيكتورية إليزابيث باريت براوننج. في هذه القصيدة، احتجت الشاعرة على مجتمع صناعي يستخدم الأطفال كعمال صناعيين. أظهرت الحقائق الاجتماعية للعصر الذي كانت فيه النساء والأطفال شخصيات أقل شأنًا. بسبب الثورة الصناعية، ازداد الفقر والبطالة والأمراض والوفيات. وعبرت الشاعرة من خلال هذه القصيدة عن أوضاع هؤلاء الأطفال الذين عملوا في المصانع والمناجم. وهكذا، تحاول هذه الورقة أن تدرس بإيجاز الفترة الفيكتورية التي حاولت فيها إليزابيث باريت براوننج أن تضع صوتها الشعري. كما تركز على مسيرتها الشعرية وتفردا كشاعرة ومكانتها في المجال الاجتماعي والعام. علاوة على ذلك، تحاول هذه الورقة تحليل جانب الموت في قصيدة صرخة الأطفال.

الكلمات الدالة: العصر الفيكتوري، التصنيع، الشاعرة، عمالة الاطفال، الموت، صرخة الاطفال .

Introduction

Elizabeth Barret Browning (1806-1861) was a well-known Victorian poet. She is the wife of Robert Browning, a most famous poet of the time. She was a prominent voice of Victorian poetess and an important figure in English literature. Her works, both in poetry and prose, addressed important social issues of her time, including gender inequality, slavery, and child labor. Her poetry are primarily on morality and the expression of moral and social ideas. One of her poems, which she dubbed "The Cry of the Children" (1841), expressed her disapproval of industrialists who used children as labourers in their factories. In this poem, she employs theatrical monologues to depict the situation of children who work in factories and mines. As Avery (2006) pointed out:

critics have reconsidered EBB and her works from a number of illuminating and per suasive critical positions. Indeed, we are now coming to recognize EBB as important for our understanding of areas as diverse as the experiences of the nineteenth-century woman writer, developments in Romantic and Victorian poetic aesthetics, and the construction of the nineteenth-century vates figure. (p.405)

Browning wrote poems to express her views on problems like child labour, women's rights, and other contentious topics in the political reform movement. Studying her poetry is necessary if we are to learn more about her outspoken stance against social injustice,

especially as it pertained to the treatment of children, slavery, and the rights of women. In addition, Browning worked to reduce the widening gap between the rich and the poor urbanisation.

England had a large and powerful empire that colonised several countries throughout the Victorian era. Furthermore, this age saw enormous changes in the economy, religion, and social life. These changes were brought about by scientific, material, and intellectual advancements. The Industrial Revolution, as well as other revolutions that people could not yet internalise, were huge changes. Among the unexpected scientific and technological achievements were steam power and railroads. During the early Victorian period, England changed its economy from agriculture to manufacturing and urbanisation. These rapid developments had an impact on practically every element of life. New miracles, like the development of electricity, were discovered by science and proved useful to humankind. The most fascinating results came from the work of Charles Darwin (1809-1882), which was published as "The Origin of Species." The biological evolution theory transformed how people thought about the world in general. (Chaniago, n.d.)

Avery (2006) assert that "In particular, EBB detested religious doctrine which sought to close down freedom and the right of choice-interesting" (p.417). Old religious beliefs that had a profound effect on society for a long time were challenged by the changes that occurred after the Industrial Revolution and scientific discoveries. This is why Victorians questioned the existence of God, organised religion, and even death itself. In contrast, some critics have noted the religious themes that are present in "The Cry of the Children." As critic Patrick Swinden argues, the poem can be read as a "theodicy, a justification of God in the face of evil and suffering" (Swinden, 2013, p.10). The poem reflects Browning's own religious faith and her belief that God would ultimately bring justice to those who were suffering. This perspective adds a deeper layer of meaning to the poem and underscores the importance of faith and hope in the face of adversity.

Furthermore, during the time of the Industrial Revolution, child labour was extremely common. Instead of playing with other kids of the same age, these innocent children were forced into labour in conditions that were often horrible, dangerous and even deadly. They lived in constant fear of hunger, and the high infant mortality rate was terrible. Illness was frequent because of crowded living conditions, a lack of cleanliness, the use of polluted water and a rise in lack of food, particularly among children. As the result, industrialization and harsh working conditions, increased the number of the death of the children in the Victorian age. Additionally, the pessimistic atmosphere affected children's belief in God and they gradually lose their hope and trust as well (Karakuzu and Sayar, 2016).

In England during the 19th century, the main reason for the disappearance of childhood was the requirement for cheap labour when factories and mines were constructed at the start of the Industrial Revolution. Working conditions in coal mines and factories with unguarded machines and chemicals created an ongoing danger to the health of children. Children began labouring as early as the ages of four and five. The minimum age for factory employment was set at nine in the Factory Act of 1833, but it was rarely enforced. In coal mines, many of the youngest children worked as "trappers". They were opening trap doors for coal carts, whereas older children from the age of six used to drag loaded coal carts. "Another, specifically British tradition, was the custom of cleaning

chimneys by sending tiny boys and girls up the chimneys. They would be taken as apprentices as early as four years of age". (More, 2013, p.37)

One prominent critical view of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "*The Cry of the Children*" is that it is a powerful indictment of industrialization and capitalism, and the exploitation of children that resulted from these forces. As critic Linda K. Hughes notes, Browning's poem "paints a picture of industrialization that is more like the nightmare of the Romantics than the dream of the Victorians" (Hughes, 2021, p.64). The poem reflects Browning's deep concern for the welfare of working-class children and her belief that their exploitation was a symptom of a larger social problem.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Resonance as a Poetic Voice

During the Victorian era, which spanned from 1837 to 1901, women were generally considered inferior to men in many aspects of life, including in the literary world. Female Victorian poets faced significant challenges and biases when trying to establish themselves as writers. One of the most notable examples of this bias is the fact that women were not allowed to attend universities during the Victorian era. As a result, female writers had limited access to formal education, which was necessary for establishing themselves as respected writers. This lack of education meant that women were not taken seriously as writers, and their work was often dismissed as sentimental or trivial. According to Elaine Showalter, "In the Victorian period, women were not supposed to have intellects or artistic talents, and if they did, these attributes were regarded as freakish or even dangerous" (Showalter, 1977, p. 49). Male Victorian poets, on the other hand, did not face the same limitations and biases. They were free to pursue their writing careers without societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. Moreover, male poets were more likely to have access to formal education, which gave them a head start in the literary world. As a result, male poets were generally more respected and well-regarded than their female counterparts.

Female Victorian poets were also expected to conform to traditional gender roles, which included being a wife, mother, and caregiver. These societal expectations often limited women's ability to focus on their writing, as they were expected to prioritize their domestic duties. This expectation was reflected in the literature of the time. For example, Christina Rossetti, a prominent female Victorian poet, wrote poems that reflected her struggle to balance her artistic ambitions with her duties as a woman. In her poem "In an Artist's Studio," Rossetti writes about a male artist who views his female muse as a source of inspiration, but ultimately reduces her to an object of his desire. (Bryson, 2018)

However, Avery (2014) points out that if women were to produce poetry, they should write about love, nature, or sincere religion; in other words, they should avoid writing about topics that were considered to be too cognitively challenging. Barrett Browning, on the other hand, set out from the beginning not only to defend her right to be a poet but also to establish herself as a poet who dealt with significant social and political issues of the time, such as conflict, nationalism, industrialization, slavery, religious controversy, the manipulation of power, and the struggle for liberty on multiple fronts. By way of illustration, Sanders (2010) shows that "Elizabeth Barrett Browning is an original figure in Victorian literature because of the way she was able to assert her independent identity as a woman writer" (p.20).

Elizabeth Browning's poetic style and themes underwent a transformation as she grew older. Her writing began in childhood and continued until the publication of her final

volume, *Poems of 1844*, which she released prior to getting married. By examining her family relationships and the evolution of her writing, we can see how she struggled to break free from patterns that limited her artistic growth, ultimately succeeding in creating a unique female voice in English poetry. Despite facing challenges similar to male Victorian poets, such as Matthew Arnold, Browning's experience as a woman gave her a distinctive perspective that allowed her to make a significant contribution to the poetic tradition. The Victorian Era is sometimes referred to as the "prose era" of English literature. There were also some really good poems written at this time, but due to the difficulties of the times, more prose than poetry was written. Victorian poetry is distinguished by its reduction of the free-flowing lyricism typical of Romantic poetry. The serious tone and focus on reflection, inquiry, and criticism have taken their place. Poems written during the Victorian era often dealt with social issues, scientific discoveries, and religious themes (Mermin, 1986).

An 1842 essay on *The Seraphim*, Riede claims that Elizabeth Barrett Browning intended to produce poetry that would revivify the human world rather than residing among the angels, and that he aspired to reconcile Romantic self-expression with Christian self-effacement. However, Her Christian aesthetic of grief seemed to imply a harmful association with Romantic figures like Byron, Shelley, and Lucifer, which left her terrified by the possibility that Romanticism would lead to her spiritual demise. Riede shows out the extra danger that Christian humility is the questionable virtue of the Victorian angel in the house in a reading of several of the 1844 sonnets and then of *A Drama of Exile*; more arrestingly, he points out that Eve's abasement has a lot in common with Satan's revolt. "The attempt to move from the meek role of Victorian poetess to that of Romantic-prophetic empowerment, Riede concludes, is not yet complete" (Mermin, 2000, P.4).

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a highly acclaimed female poet in the Victorian era. However, her path to success was not without obstacles. As a woman, she had to overcome societal expectations and gender biases that relegated women to the domestic sphere. She struggled to establish her identity as a female poet in a male-dominated literary world, where women were often dismissed as sentimental or lacking in depth (Gage, 2020). According to some critics like Mermin, the concept of "passionate receptivity" in poetry is viewed in a negative light as it suggests that the act of creating poetry involves a form of "sexual subjugation." (Taylor, 2006 p.154)

Barrett Browning's early attempts at publishing were met with rejection. She faced criticism not only for her gender, but also for her unconventional poetic style. In her collection, *"The Seraphim and Other Poems,"* she experimented with religious themes and free verse, which were not widely accepted at the time. Critics dismissed her work as too "feminine" and lacking in substance (Thomson, 2012).

Despite these setbacks, Barrett Browning continued to write and publish. She gained recognition for her poetry through a series of critical essays and reviews written by prominent literary figures of the time, such as John Ruskin and William Makepeace Thackeray (Gage, 2020). In 1850, she published her most famous work, *"Sonnet from the Portuguese,"* which chronicled her love affair with Robert Browning. The collection cemented her reputation as a skilled poet and garnered critical acclaim (Thomson, 2012).

In the midst of her success, Barrett Browning was deeply affected by the news of child labor and exploitation in Britain. This inspired her to write one of her most powerful and socially engaged poems, *"The Cry of the Children,"* which was published in

Blackwood's Magazine in 1842. The poem reflects her deep concern for the welfare of working-class children and her belief that their exploitation was a symptom of a larger social problem. "The Cry of the Children" quickly gained popularity and became one of her most well-known works, solidifying her position as a leading voice in Victorian literature. Barrett Browning's success as a poet challenged traditional gender roles and paved the way for future female writers. She became a role model for women who aspired to enter the literary world and was celebrated for her pioneering spirit. Today, she is regarded as one of the most important poets of the Victorian era and a symbol of feminist empowerment (Gage, 2020).

In her poetry, Elizabeth Barrett Browning portrayed a female character who was able to defy the societal expectations of Victorian womanhood while also asserting herself as a talented poet. As Linda M and Lewis notes, Barrett Browning "presented a unique and complex female character in her poetry, one who managed to navigate the expectations and restrictions of Victorian womanhood while also asserting herself as a skilled and passionate poet" (1998, p. 41). Through her writing, Barrett Browning challenged the notion that women could not be both creative and feminine, thereby paving the way for future generations of female writers to claim their own voices and pursue their artistic passions. She struggled to establish her identity as a female poet in the Victorian era, but her perseverance and talent ultimately triumphed over societal expectations and gender biases. Her contributions to the literary world challenged gender roles and paved the way for future female writers. Barrett Browning's legacy as a pioneering feminist icon continues to inspire generations of women today.

Death as an Escape from Life's Hardships

Elizabeth Barrett Browning as a Victorian poetess appeared as a significant figure who achieved an enduring place in the dominant male poetic tradition. She was concerned with a primary mission of the poet. Elizabeth Barrett Browning believed that the poet, whether a male or female should see the realities and problems of the era, society and people. The role of the poet and poetess to have a clear vision of the society with its politics, economics, diseases, injustices, death and all aspects of the life and people who live in the society. In other words, their mission not to be blind but on the contrary to see all the realities with its positive and negative sides. Therefore, Elizabeth Barrett Browning put the social realities of the age in the center of her poetry.

In Elizabeth Barrett's early poems, children often are in death-like sleep or their youth brings thoughts of death and frailty to their elders. In "A Song Against Singing" from *The Seraphim and Other Poems of 1838* (she was then thirty-two), the minstrel thinks that the power of her song for child is fleeting, as is her own life: "I may view thee, mutely loving; / But shall view thee so in dying". As Miss Barrett she was merely an observer of this uniquely female experience, and as Mrs. Browning she was a primary participant. The evidence of her change is in her poems: those on the death of a child, those on childhood and maternity, and those in which she uses imagery from female experiences. (Donaldson, 1980 p.51)

The aspect of the death was an essential part in the Victorian period and exemplified in different poems of the era. Death could be viewed as a salvation island where misery, sorrow, grief, pain, injustices, suffering could not take place and it has connection with paradise where all these types of negativeness replace with eternal happiness and the God's grace. And especially in Victorian epoch, the death was a way to escape from misery,

suffering and enter another world where hopes, dreams, love are realized. In that respect, it can be argued that a wish for death was not a dream of older people but on the contrary, it was a dream of children who were innocent and what's more they were at the beginning of their life path. These innocent children were slaves and victims of the ongoing and cruel socio-economic conditions in the society.

In *The Cry of the Children* poem, Elizabeth Barrett Browning focused on the children's suffering, pain, misery and wish for death. The social problem of child labour, their powerlessness and death troubled the poetess and she raised her voice against this injustice. Elizabeth Barrett Browning was protesting and angry towards the system in society and she showed in *The Cry of the Children* poem that death could be a solution and salvation. In this sense, Donaldson (1980, p.51) points out that in this poem the poetess showed "child's death as the consolation that at death one is received into a happy life in the heaven".

Who commands us to work on.
Go to ! " say the children,—"up in Heaven
(Browning, 1850/2009, p. 155)

The poetess appeals to children's emotions and tries to show them that there is a heaven where you will be happy. All these your sufferings, pain, misery will disappear and you will be in a salvation island.

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.
(Browning, 1850/2009, p. 155)

These lines show despair of the children, their grief made them blind and they could not see their life, happiness, childhood. What they could see only the darkness everywhere, what's more their tears, pain, misery prevent them to see and feel the God. Moreover, their life forced them not to believe in the Creator. They are alone with their grief and tears.

Our Father! If He heard us, He would surely
(For they call Him good and mild)
(Browning, 1850/2009, p. 155)

Children are angry with the God, because He does not hear them. Moreover, they argue that they called the God good, here 'they' might be other people except children, however in the reality they do not believe that He is good because, they are not close enough to Him. There is a distance between the God and these innocent and pure children.

" But, no!" say the children, weeping faster,
He is speechless as a stone;

These lines show that there is no connection between the God and these children. They see Him speechless as a stone, because He does not hear their cry and He does not see their misery, pain and suffering and He does not speak with them in the dark factories, mines,

mines. They are alone with their destiny. And they lost their hope, love and belief in God and life. These innocent and pure children are in pessimism, that's why they lose faith and hope. Being in harsh and bad environment, makes their heart being alien from optimism.

They just wait for death in order to escape from the dirty life. They do not believe in God and the meaning of the death is just have a rest. They do not have a spiritual support, and without it, it is really difficult to return their faith in God.

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
(Browning, 1850/2009, p. 68)

On the other hand, Elizabeth Barrett Browning believes to the power of the God and she insists children not to give up and continue praying and believing in God. On the contrary, the harsh conditions in which these innocent children were forced to work and live, were so undesirable that they lose their faith in God. They do not believe that their prayers are heard by Him, because there was no change in their life which is full of misery, pain and sufferings.

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
(Browning, 1850/2009, p. 68)

The poetess uses the name 'Alice' because it was very popular name for girls during Victorian period (retrieved from www.academia.edu). This little girl died in the pit where she worked as a worker. This pit is so small that no one can go and take her dead body from there. Her friends believe that Alice is now free and happy. She escapes from this dirty and harsh life. She is in peace and merry in her death. The death for Alice is a salvation island where she could be free from all these sufferings, misery, pain. Hence, the children say that it is good for them if they can die in young age because death will help them to take their smiles back.

Answer, smiling down the steep world very purely,
'Come and rest with me, my child.'
(Browning, 1850/2009, p. 155)

These lines shows that again the death is true relief for these suffering and innocent children. They could imagine death as a solution which can help to escape from darkness and enter to the lightness. To take back their happiness, dreams, hopes which were taken by industrialization and greedy rich society.

In fact, the poetess wants to make an accent on the powerless, pure and innocent children and the conditions in which they forced to work like slaves. They are victims of the society, Industrial revolution, poverty. Furthermore, she emphasizes that child labor is a big sin as the effect of industrialization.

Conclusion

In conclusion, female Victorian poets faced significant challenges and biases when trying to establish themselves as writers. They were not allowed to attend universities, were expected to conform to traditional gender roles, and were often dismissed as sentimental or trivial writers. These biases and limitations were not faced by male Victorian poets, who were free to pursue their writing careers without societal pressure to conform to traditional gender roles.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a Victorian poetess who tried to be a voice of women and children. During Victorian era, they didn't have any rights or voice and she, as a female poet, was deeply concerned with the duties of the poet. She thought that the poets should not be blind to the realities of the life and should not isolate themselves from the society. They should produce high literary works which focus on the real problems of the society. In other words, the poems should mirror the conditions and the problems of the age and the society.

Child labour was one of the significant social problems during machinery age. Small children worked long hours in factories, mines and other unsafe places where they were far away from their childhood. Elizabeth Barrett Browning emphasizes the pessimistic atmosphere in which innocent and pure children have to work and live. They lose their faith in God because He does not hear their prayer. They are alone with their misery, pain and suffering in the dark mines, factories and pits, where they feel forsaken and forgotten by the God and other people. These working places were hell for them and they wanted to escape from the hell and to die in order to have a rest. The death was their dream and wish which was like bridge between darkness and lightness.

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