

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's
"The Cry of the Children" (1843)

"Pheu pheu, ti prosderkesthe m ommasin, tekna;"
[Alas, alas, why do you gaze at me with your eyes, my children.]—
from Euripides's *Medea* (431 B.C.)

Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers,
Ere the sorrow comes with years? STANZA 1
They are leaning their young heads against their mothers,
And that cannot stop their tears.
The young lambs are bleating in the meadows, 5
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! 10
They are weeping in the playtime of the others,
In the country of the free.

Do you question the young children in the sorrow STANZA 2
Why their tears are falling so?
The old man may weep for his to-morrow 15
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: 20
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, 25 STANZA 3
And their looks are sad to see,
For the man's hoary anguish draws and presses
Down the cheeks of infancy;
"Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary,
Our young feet," they say, "are very weak; 30
Few paces have we taken, yet are weary—
Our grave-rest is very far to seek:
Ask the aged why they weep, and not the children,
For the outside earth is cold,
And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering, 35
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. 40
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, 45
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, lull’d and still’d in
The shroud by the kirk-chime. 50
It is good when it happens,” say the children,
“That we die before our time.”

Alas, alas, the children! they are seeking
Death in life, as best to have:
They are binding up their hearts away from breaking, 55
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 your handfuls of the meadow-cow-slips pretty,
Laugh aloud, to feel your fingers let them through! 60
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, 65
And we cannot run or leap;
If we car’d 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; 70
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 75
In the factories, round and round.

“But, no!” say the children, weeping faster, 125 STANZA 11
“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. 130
Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving:
We look up for God, but tears have made us blind.”
Do you hear the children weeping and disproving,
O my brothers, what ye preach?
For God’s possible is taught by His world’s loving, 135
And the children doubt of each.

And well may the children weep before you! STANZA 12
They are weary ere they run:
They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory
Which is brighter than the sun. 140
They know the grief of man, without its wisdom;
They sink in man’s 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 145
The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.
Let them weep! let them weep!

They look up with their pale and sunken faces, STANZA 13
And their look is dread to see, 150
For they mind you of their angels in high places,
With eyes turned on 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, 155
And tread onward to your throne amid the mart?
Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper,
And your purple shows your path!
But the child’s sob in the silence curses deeper
Than the strong man in his wrath.” 160