The Cry of the Children

POEM TEXT

"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 '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;
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, alas the 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 drops adown 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,' moaning breaking out in a mad
'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,
Grinding life down from its mark;
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 you 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
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,
And their look is dread to see,
For they think you see 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,
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."

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."

THEMES

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 prioritizes, if it wanted to, and thus put an end to the horrific practice of child labor.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 21-24
- Lines 25-36
- Lines 37-52

- Lines 53-64
- Lines 65-160

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-14
- Lines 33-36
- Lines 57-64
- Lines 89-100
- Lines 101-104
- Lines 107-110
- Lines 125-132
- Lines 133-136
- Lines 137-148
- Lines 149-160

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-10
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 29-32
- Lines 37-40
- Lines 41-42
- Lines 51-52
- Lines 53-64
- Lines 65-76
- Lines 77-88
- Lines 89-100
- Lines 105-106
- Lines 127-130
- Lines 138-148

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?"

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 93-136
- Lines 139-148
- Lines 149-154
- Lines 159-160

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

BEFORE LINE 1, LINES 1-4

"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 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.

LINES 5-12

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.

Lines 5-8 introduce the poem's first implied metaphor, which, like much of the figurative language in "The Cry of the Children," relies on nature. The speaker describes the innocent and frolicsome attitude of baby animals and "young flowers," as they bleat, chirp, play, and blow in the wind of their natural habitats.

These youthful creatures are then immediately juxtaposed in lines 9-10 with the weeping children first encountered in the poem's opening. "But," the speaker cries, explicitly contrasting the animals with the children, "the young, young children, O my brothers, / They are weeping bitterly!"

This metaphor (made especially powerful through the anaphora of "The young" and the parallelism of the lines' structure) effectively conveys how unnatural the "bitter" tears of the children are, in contrast to the baby animals' naturally happy state. It also establishes a prominent theme in the poem, in which nature is equated with well-being, happiness, and childhood innocence.

In the final two lines of the stanza, however, the speaker shifts abruptly from the realm of metaphor to reality. No longer content with comparing the "weeping" children with animals, the speaker now contrasts them with "the others"—that is, children with access to "playtime," or, in other words, access to wealth. It is wealth and wealth alone, the speaker implies, that enables children to truly live "in the country of the free." For the working-class children who weep bitter tears and never get to

play, freedom is an ideal, but not a reality.

At this point, the poem's form has become clear. This first stanza is 12 lines long, and can further be broken up into three quatrains. Each of those, in turn, follows an ABAB rhyme scheme. This lends a tidiness and predictability to the poem.

LINES 13-20

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.

The second stanza of "The Cry of the Children" opens with its second rhetorical question. Once again addressing the poem's readers, this time the speaker not only asks *if* the readers hear the children's cries, but *whether* they "question the young children [...] Why their tears are falling so?" In other words, the speaker of the poem pushes the audience not only to notice the bitter weeping of child laborers, but to pay attention to the root cause of their pain and sorrow.

This pain and sorrow, lines 15-20 suggest, is different from the pain and sorrow felt by the old. "The old man may weep for his to-morrow, / Which is lost in Long Ago," the speaker admits, acknowledging that many adults mourn the loss of their youthful potential. However, through a series of metaphors that compare old age to a tree "leafless in the forest," or a long life to a sore old wound, the poem argues that this sort of grief is natural and to be expected at the end of one's life.

Once again, anaphora and parallelism lends a rhythmic quality to these lines, through the repetition of "The old" and the shared sentence structure. This hearkens back to the repetition of "The young" in the first stanza, and establishes these lines as a contrast to those earlier ones, juxtaposing the experiences of the young with the experiences of the old. This further affirms the poem and speaker's perspective that these experiences of old age, however sad, are perfectly natural at the end of life, just the way "birds [...] chirping in the nest" are natural at the beginning of life.

LINES 21-24

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?

Lines 21-24 cap off the second stanza by once again juxtaposing the plight of child laborers with that of a more privileged group. In this case, they are being contrasted with the old, who may also mourn and weep, but at least have lived their lives to their fullest. The speaker sees the elderly's grief as very different from the sorrow the children experience—and challenges the poem's readers to learn why:

> 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?

This third use of a rhetorical question—alongside yet another ironic, rose-tinted vision of England, this time as a "happy Fatherland"—once again operates as an indictment of the poem's readers. It forces readers to confront their ignorance of or indifference to the sad state of so many vulnerable working-class children. It also demands that readers reckon with their experience of England—"our happy Fatherland"—and the fact that happiness is not equally available to everyone in the country. What's more, the answer to this rhetorical question is an uncomfortable one: the reason the children are crying is because of their exploitation.

These lines thus prompt readers to wrestle with the idea that their happiness in the thriving Fatherland of England is in no small part founded on the exploitation of others. Those others, as the speaker reminds readers through the pointed epizeuxis of "young, young," are mere children. They "weep [...] sore before the bosoms of their mothers," and are unable to find comfort. "The Cry of the Children" has often been accused of purposefully tugging on the heartstrings of its readers, and this line is perhaps one of the clearest such examples, explicitly laying the injustice and cruelty of child labor at the feet of better-off citizens of England.

LINES 25-30

They look up with their pale and sunken faces,
And their looks are sad to see,
For the man's '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;

The third stanza of the poem continues to juxtapose youth with old age. However, this stanza is the first to explicitly make the point that the child laborers at the heart of the poem have themselves been forced to age before their time, and suffer physically as a result.

"They look up with their pale and sunken faces / And their looks are sad to see," the speaker says, describing the ill effects of hard labor on the children's bodies. What's more, "hoary anguish draws and presses / Down the cheeks of infancy." The word "hoary" means old or white (as with age). In other words, the children resemble old, anguished men, their "infant" cheeks weathered as though by old age.

Having established both their misery and their unfortunate early maturity, the poem now turns to the children themselves,

who speak for the first time in lines 29-30:

> "Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary;
> Our young feet," they say, "are very weak;

The caesura and parallelism in these lines has a powerful effect, not only stopping readers in their tracks to remind them who is speaking, but doing so *twice* in quick succession to emphasize the monumental nature of this moment. *This* is what the children have to say: that "your," the readers' earth, is "very dreary," and that their "young feet [...] are very weak."

Not only do these lines affirm what the speaker said earlier—that child laborers have been forced to mature before their time, recognizing the dreariness of life well before most children do or should—but they also echo the poem's depiction of child laborers as young and uniquely vulnerable. These lines reassert that their "dreary" circumstances are the result of decisions made by people and forces beyond their control: the very readers of the poem, as that subtle "your" implies.

In sum, these first lines spoken by the children emphasize their humanity and their suffering, which are central to the poem's overall theme condemning the exploitation of children as workers. They also implicitly condemn the readers of the poem responsible for shaping this "old earth," hinting at another of the poem's main messages: that greed and classism have created child labor, but also that powerful people and institutions can put an end to it as well.

LINES 31-36

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."

Lines 31-36 continue the poem's first inclusion of child laborers' voices and perspectives. These lines concretely establish the children's exhaustion. Despite having taken "Few paces," or steps, they are "weary"—because the nature of those "paces" has involved grueling labor. These lines even suggest that the children look forward longingly to the "rest" they "seek" in their graves. Clearly, these are downtrodden children indeed.

However, despite their exhaustion, the children are not without opinions or frustrations. Seemingly addressing both the poem's speaker and its readers (who have been inquiring in the earlier stanzas why the children weep), a child laborers insist, "Ask the old why they weep, and not the children." After all, "the outside earth is cold," young children are left "without" what they need to survive and thrive, and "the graves are for the old." In other words, is it any surprise that the children weep, when the world is so cold and unwelcoming, and they have many more years of hard labor to go before they take to their graves?

The matter-of-factness with which the children state these dismal facts and feelings testifies to their truly beaten-down condition. Their tone, in addition to the children's explicit description of their state as "bewilder[ed]," or confused, demonstrates that the children are confused in no small part by the adults' inquiries because they cannot imagine any other way of life but their own.

LINES 37-40

"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.

Line 37 marks the beginning of the fourth stanza, which is an unusual one for a number of reasons. For starters, it is the only stanza to extend beyond 12 lines, reaching 16 lines in total. Secondly, it is the only stanza in which one of the child laborers is given a name and identity.

Little Alice becomes a symbol for the truly tragic nature of child labor due to her death. She is introduced here through the surviving children's admission that "True [...] it may happen that we die before our time," implying that Little Alice is not alone in meeting this tragic fate. The children describe Little Alice's grave as "shapen / Like a snowball, in the rime," or ice, a pitiful image indeed.

Importantly, the caesura demarcating "say the children" in the opening of this stanza establishes how crucial it is to hear this story of Little Alice from the children's perspectives. The feeling of detachment in their tone is chilling—both the way they accept the likelihood of an early death, and the way they describe Little Alice only in terms of her grave. Besides the descriptor, "little," which emphasizes Little Alice's status as both a very small child and a weak one, the children tell readers nothing about what Little Alice was like, or even how she died.

In some ways, this tells readers as much about the children speaking as it does about Little Alice. They have lost a good deal of empathy. Before her death, they (and the world) saw her as merely one of the many masses of child laborers. After her death, it is only this tragic fact of her early demise that sets her apart.

LINES 41-46

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:

Lines 41-46 continue the tragic tale of Little Alice, told through the perspective of her fellow child laborers. The children

describe how they "looked into" her empty grave, and were shocked to see that there "was no room for any work in the close clay!" Even after she is buried, the children express surprise that when they call down to her, "Get up, little Alice! it is day," she does not wake up and get back to work, and that when they press their ears down to her grave, they cannot hear her crying anymore. In sum, these lines capture the children's realization that death brings an opportunity to rest. There is no more work for little Alice, and no more pain or tears.

The alliteration, assonance, and consonance in these lines are crucial to their overall effect. The story that the children are telling is horrific: a child died due to the terrible working conditions they all endure. She was buried on-site in a crude "pit," where the children can easily call out to her and listen for the sounds of her cries.

Nevertheless, the tragedy and terror of this story never quite seems to reach the children's tone. These lines have a merry, sing-song quality, as a result of the repetition of many types of sounds: alliterative /w/, /p/, /l/, and /cl/ sounds; assonant long /a/ and /i/ sounds; and consonant /k/, /p/, and /n/ sounds. This effectively conveys how distanced the children have become from the truly horrifying circumstances of their lives, even the death of a friend and their own potential deaths. Instead, the tone here feels almost celebratory.

LINES 47-52

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."

The fourth stanza of the poem closes with one of its most shocking images: that of children eagerly awaiting and enjoying death. In these lines, the child laborers continue to tell the story of Little Alice. They reflect that even if they could see her again, down in her grave, they would not recognize her. Why? Because, in death, her "smile has time for growing" and "merry go her moments." In other words, little Alice is finally happy. She has been "lulled and stilled" by death, which, compared to her life of hard labor, represents a welcome and much-needed rest. As the children conclude at the stanza's end, "It is good when it happens [...] That we die before our time."

This is one of the poem's most persuasive and powerful moments in capturing the deep damage of child labor. Not only has it resulted in the death of a child, it has so harmed the surviving children that they *welcome* the very idea of death.

The inclusion, at the very end of the stanza, of the refrain, "say the children," uses both caesura and repetition to emphasize just how disturbing this moment really is. It reminds readers who is speaking—since the entire stanza consists of one long quoted speech—and adds fresh horror to their initial admission at the top of the stanza that sometimes child laborers die young by revealing that the children also *look forward* to such a death.

In many ways, this moment is more powerful than other points in the poem when the speaker directly addresses or reproves the poem's audience. Here, readers are presented with the children's psychological damage without extra embellishment or explanation. The horror is allowed to stand for itself.

LINES 53-56

Alas, alas the 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.

Just in case readers did not understand stanza 4, the speaker uses the opening of stanza 5 to explain exactly what is going on: "Alas, alas the children! they are seeking / Death in life, as best to have." The repetition (specifically epizeuxis) of "alas" emphasizes the speaker's dismay in the moment. This somewhat awkward turn of phrase ("as best to have") expresses the speaker's deep horror over the fact that child laborers long for death, and view it as preferable to life.

The enjambment between lines 53 and 54 is important to this revelation. The break between the words "seeking" and "Death" propels readers onto the next line, forcing them to immediately consume a shocking idea, that of children desiring death, which they might otherwise have shrunk from.

Lines 55-56 serve a similar purpose, as the speaker once again reiterates that the children see death as a respite. "They are binding up their hearts," to protect them "from breaking," the speaker says, not with, say, a bandage or a sling, ordinary guards for wounds, but instead with a "cerement from the grave." A cerement is a special kind of wax cloth used in the 19th-century to wrap corpses. This gruesome image of children metaphorically wrapping themselves in corpses' shrouds—embracing death, in other words—as a form of psychological protection against the likelihood of their early demise is shocking indeed. The alliteration of "binding" and "breaking" draws further attention to the image.

LINES 57-64

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!

The second half of this stanza captures the speaker's response to the children's longing for death, as well as the children's own response in turn. Disturbed by their death wish, the speaker urges the children to seek out different lives. Returning once

again to nature as a metaphor for well-being, happiness, and youthful innocence, the speaker begs the children to leave their infernal jobs in the mines and factories, and instead regain their full humanity and the potential of their childhoods in the heavenly countryside.

It's a lovely image, full of beauty and hope, enhanced by the repetitive language. There is parallelism in these lines, which each start with a command directed at the children, as well as gentle consonance of soft /f/, /l/, and /s/ sounds:

> 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!

The children immediately puncture this beauty, however, with their reply in the lines that follow:

> 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!

The children have never seen "cowslips of the meadows." They are only familiar with weeds, and the thought of leaving their jobs to frolic in the countryside is clearly alien to them, an impossible fantasy. Indeed, the children scold the speaker for even suggesting such a thing. They order the speaker to leave them alone "in the dark" of the mines, and not to tempt them with "pleasures fair and fine" that they cannot access. Better not to know at all what they are missing out on, these lines imply.

In addition to capturing just how dire the child laborers' circumstances are, this is a crucial moment that confirms the speaker of the poem's identity. The suggestion that the speaker makes is idealistic but foolhardy. The children's rebuke confirms that the speaker is not part of their class, the working class. If so, the speaker would never have begged the children to do the impossible and quit their jobs, or used references, like "cowslips of the meadow," that they do not understand. Instead, as the earlier lines "O, my brothers" suggested, the speaker is of the same background as the poem's audience, middle- and upper-class members of English society.

As a result of this confirmation of the speaker's identity, this moment suggests that readers might read the children's responses to the speaker as moments of apostrophe, or direct address, to themselves as well. When they say "your pleasures fair and fine," they don't just mean the speaker's pleasures, but those of all people of the speaker's class, and thus, implicitly, all of the intended readers of this poem. The children's rebuke, therefore, goes beyond the speaker, and reaches the poem's audience as a whole.

LINES 65-70

> *"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;*

The sixth stanza marks the beginning of the poem's most vivid imagery depicting the cruelty of child labor. The children describe the physical impact of their work upon their small and young bodies: they are "weary," they "cannot run or leap," their "knees tremble," they "stoop," and they even "fall upon [their] faces" trying to leave work.

Even if they could access the countryside and meadows full of flowers, the children confess, they are so exhausted and worn-down that they would merely "drop down in them and sleep." It's a shocking statement out of the mouths of children, who are generally thought of as full of energy and youthful potential, and underscores how deeply damaged these children have been as a result of their hard labor. The thudding alliteration of "drop down" draws readers' attention to the horror of the image.

Indeed, these lines are filled with poetic devices that enhance the poem's sound. Alternating end rhymes, powerful assonance ("weary," "we," "leap," "merely," "sleep" and "knees" all contain a long /ee/ sound), consistent consonance (including /y/, /g/, /p/ and /d/ sounds), and alliteration all lend these lines strong musicality and a sense of rhythm and momentum as the children pick up steam.

The repetition of the phrase "say the children," as well as words from earlier in the poem (like "weary" and "meadows") adds to the poem's unified feeling as well. It also begins to hint at the unchanging nature of the children's dire circumstances; they were weary back in the third stanza, and are still weary now in stanza 6.

LINES 71-76

> *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.*

Lines 71-76 continue to describe the impacts of hard labor on the children. These lines are written in the children's voices, as they further emphasize the physical damage done to them by their work. Like the speaker, the children also turn to metaphors with references to nature to capture their experience; they are so tired, they explain, that in their eyes the brightest, "reddest flower would look as pale as snow." In other words, they are so exhausted they cannot even see straight.

The children then go on to paint a picture of what their work actually looks like. "All day, we drag our burden tiring / Through the coal-dark, underground," they explain, "Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron / In the factories, round and round." Here, the poem neatly captures two different forms of child labor—work in the mines and work in the factories of industrializing England—and links them together as equally exhausting and monotonous. This is the first time that the prominent symbol of the wheels appears in the poem, and it is immediately linked with the "round and round" monotony of industrial labor.

The juxtaposition here of the "reddest flower" and "pale [...] snow" in line 72 with the mining and manufacturing imagery in the second half of this passage is important. It is a microcosm of the poem's overall contrast between the natural world and the industrial one, a contrast that always connects nature with happiness and full humanity, and industry with despair and the loss of human potential. The way the red flower is drained of color by the end of line 72 almost feels like foreshadowing, in fact, of what the poem is about to show readers in terms of industry's impact on human life.

LINES 77-82

"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 drops adown the wall,

The seventh stanza is one of the most memorable in the poem, and contains some of its most graphic and disturbing imagery. Told entirely in the children's voices, without even the interruption of a phrase like "they say" or "say the children," it focuses entirely the grueling monotony and unspeakable working conditions in the factories of England. This horror is embodied in the symbol of the iron wheels, which the children say are "all day [...] droning, turning."

These first six lines of the seventh stanza describe the way the wheels' endless motion permeates every aspect of the children's workdays, and thus their lives (an endlessness well captured by the parallelism of "For all day" that echoes the end of the previous stanza). Their droning and turning creates what feels like harsh "wind" in the children's faces, causing their "hearts" and "heads" to "turn," or spin, as well. They describe their "pulses burning," or in other words the throbbing sensation of being surrounded by so much machinery. The wheels also make the walls, windows, and lights seem to spin, and the sky in the windows to appear blank and "reeling" (or dizzying) as well.

The imagery is vivid and claustrophobic, and the repetition of the word "turn" mimics the sensation the children are describing, of being constantly surrounded by the same brutal industrial circumstances, day in and day out. The consonance and alliteration of these lines adds to the effect, creating a sense of monotony and claustrophobia through repetitive sounds (for example: "Till our hearts turn," "long light that drops adown the wall"). Readers cannot help but empathize with the children's plight, as the poem's language and imagery brings to life the truly horrific conditions of a 19th-century factory.

LINES 83-88

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,' moaning breaking out in a mad
'Stop! be silent for to-day!'"

The second half of the seventh stanza continues to describe the factories, and in particular the wheels, at the center of child laborers' working lives. Like the iron wheels in the machines they use, the "black flies that crawl along the ceiling"—a truly vivid and repulsive image that captures the horrific conditions under which the children work—seem to "turn" or spin. In fact, "all are turning, all the day, and we with all," the children add, a line made all the more emphatic through repetition (in the form of both anaphora and epanalepsis on the word "all").

Like the flies (and the windows, walls, and lights in the first half of the stanza) the children too feel like they turn and turn nonstop, in the same monotonous way that the wheels do. As this line makes clear, the wheels symbolize not only the brutal, repetitive motions of the factory, but also the miserable effect those have on the children who work there—children who figuratively become yet another spinning wheel in the machine of industry.

In addition to turning their bodies into cogs in the machines, the wheels also do great damage to the children's psychological well-being. The sound of the wheels, in particular, has a terrible effect, as lines 85-88 describe. "All day, the iron wheels are droning," the children testify, capturing both the monotony of the sound and its grating sensation. As a result, the children sometimes "pray" that the sound will stop; they cry out, "'O ye wheels [...] Stop! be silent for to-day!'" But the wheels never stop, of course, as the modifier "could" in line 86 suggests. This endless droning has a maddening effect on the children, who describe their cries as "mad moaning" that nevertheless goes unheard and unanswered.

LINES 89-94

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:

The eighth stanza of opens with the speaker's passionate plea on behalf of the children. Employing caesura, parallelism, anaphora, diacope, and apostrophe, these lines are powerfully rhythmic, musical, and persuasive. The speaker addresses both the wheels of industry and the poem's readers directly, crying out, "Ay, be silent!" Then the speaker implores readers to:

> **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:

Note the anaphoric cry of "Let them," plus the parallelism of these lines, in which "Let them" is followed by a sensory verb; "hear," "touch," "feel." This repetition not only touches a deep emotional chord, it also reminds readers that the power to "let" the children finally hear each other, touch each other, and feel that there is more to life than the "cold metallic motion" of the factory, is in *their* hands. This "cold metallic motion" is a metaphorical reference to the previously introduced iron wheels—a symbol in the poem for the grinding, crushing labor machine in which the children are trapped. The speaker is saying that the *children* cannot change their lives, but the people in power can—the people to whom the speaker directs this urgent plea.

Line 94 is also key to the poem in its introduction of God. It reveals the speaker's understanding of the world as a place "fashion[ed] or reveal[ed]" by God; in other words, the speaker views God as the world's creator. This line also suggests that the reader sees God as a benevolent force for good, since the speaker believes God has made more to life than the children's current plight, and establishes the poem's perspective on religion as a positive influence.

LINES 95-100

> *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,*
> *Grinding life down from its mark;*
> *And the children's souls, which God is calling sunward,*
> *Spin on blindly in the dark.*

The speaker continues to address the poem's assumed audience. In the stanza's final moment of explicit apostrophe, the speaker begs readers to "Let [the children] prove their inward souls," and defy the common belief that they "live in you, or under you, O wheels!" The wheels, of course, should not read literally; they are a symbol for the oppressive force of industry. The speaker is really speaking to the powerful people who *command* those wheels, and who view child laborers as less than, or "under" them, and thus see no issue in mistreating them.

Here, the speaker rallies against that mistreatment by building on the religious theme introduced earlier in the stanza. By pitting those forces of industry against the children's "inward souls," the speaker makes a moral case for respecting the children's full humanity and putting an end to their abuse.

Likewise, in line 99, when the speaker describes the children's souls as being "call[ed] sunward," out of their nightmarish mines and factories, by God, the speaker is once more pointedly using religion to back up the speaker's argument.

Importantly, however, it is not up to God whether the children get to stop working or not, but rather up to the people on earth who control those mines and factories. As the speaker acknowledges, "all day, the iron wheels go onward / Grinding life down from its mark." In other words, industrialization has robbed children of their humanity and their spiritual well-being. They "spin on blindly in the dark," denied even the support and sustenance of God himself. The contrast between God calling the children "sunward" and their "spin[ing]" in "the dark"—without light—emphasizes the immoral horror of their plight.

LINES 101-106

> *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?*

The ninth stanza opens with another instance of apostrophe. The speaker instructs readers to tell these child workers to pray to God, to insist that God is benevolent and will "bless" the children once again.

Of course, the children's lives are *not* blessed, as the poem has made emphatically clear. These lines are heaped with sarcasm and verbal irony, as the speaker mimics the way the wealthy use religion to mask their indifference to the suffering of the poor. The speaker does not actually believe that telling "the poor young children" to pray will "bless them." Rather, the speaker is calling out readers' hypocrisy, and their reliance on pious words over concrete action. The poor young children need much more than prayer to help them.

The polyptoton here reflects the speaker's sarcasm, with a version of the word "blessed" repeated in three variations in two lines:

> So the **blessed** One who **blesseth** all the others,
> Will **bless** them another day.

It sounds a bit like hollow gibberish, the word repeated so much

it begins to lose its power.

The children emphatically agree. In lines 105-106, they add their voices to the mix, crying, "Who is God that He should hear us, / While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred?" It is a rhetorical question, for the children already know the answer: God does *not* hear their cries, because the forces of the "iron wheels," or industry, here on earth, overpower whatever power God may have in heaven.

LINES 107-112

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?

Not only do the children believe that God is deaf to their prayers, the second half of this stanza shows that they also believe the rest of society is indifferent to their suffering as well.

"When we sob aloud, the human creatures near us / Pass by, hearing not, or answer not a word," the children say, as blunt and brutal an indictment of upper-class society's indifference as can be: people walking by totally ignore their cries. The enjambment between lines 107 and 108 adds to the line's ferocity; if any hope dangles at the end of line 107 that the "human creatures" might do something, anything, in response to those sobs, it is swiftly undercut in the following line.

What's more, not only do the children go unheard and ignored, they cannot hear from "strangers speaking at the door," or the outside world, because of the noise of those symbolic iron wheels. Industrialization has not only reduced them to sobs and made them victims of terrible cruelty, then; it has also cut them off from any potential sources of rescue or relief.

This includes God, as lines 111-112 indicate, when the children ask, in another rhetorical question, "Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him, / Hears our weeping anymore?" They doubt even in the ability of God, whom society insists is dedicated to their well-being, to *hear* their cries, or care about their suffering. In sum, the children feel completely, utterly neglected by both Heaven and earth.

LINES 113-124

"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.'

The tenth stanza captures the child laborers' attempts to pray to and make contact with God. They confess to remembering just two words of prayer: "Our Father," an explicit allusion to the Lord's Prayer, a foundational part of the Christian faith, and often the prayer taught to children to say before they go to sleep. The repetition of "Our Father" throughout this stanza reflects the intensity of the children's prayer—and makes God's silence in response ring out all the more clearly.

Despite having already expressed doubt about God in earlier stanzas, and despite knowing only two words of prayer, the children say the words anyway—in their case, "at midnight's hour of harm"—and hope against all hope that this "soft charm" will somehow be heard in Heaven during a "pause of angels' song."

If so, the children hope that God "may pluck" their whispered words out of the silence and "hold both within His right hand which is strong." In other words, they pray that God will finally hear their pleas, and use his power, or strength, to keep them safe. "If He heard us, He would surely [...] answer," the children say, their hope and desperation evident in line's wistful tone.

They even seek to back up their argument with evidence—"(For they called Him good and mild)"—drawing on what little religious learning they possess to assert that God is *supposed* to be good and peaceful, so why he would not treat them that way?

As to how the children hope God will keep them safe, yet again, the poem returns to a metaphor of a better life in death. The child laborers' fervent prayer is that God will invite them to "come and rest with" him in heaven. In sum, even in their prayers, the best the children imagine that God can do for them is rescue them through death. They hold no other hope for escape from their lives of hard labor.

LINES 125-132

"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."

In sharp contrast to the prior stanza, in lines 125-132 the child laborers who had briefly entertained the hope that God might hear their prayers swiftly bring themselves back down to earth. "But, no!" the children proclaim. "[God] is speechless a stone." The sibilance here—with the hushed /s/ sounds of "speechless" and "stone"—reflects God's silence.

This stark simile captures the children's despair, as does the comparison made between religion and industry in the following lines, in which the children explain that they have been taught to view "the master / Who commands us to work on" as created in God's image. In other words, they've been taught to believe that human beings, including their cruel bosses, were created in God's image. No wonder then, that child laborers have lost their faith—for how could they pray to a deity as cruel and tyrannical as the industrial leaders who abuse them?

"Go to!" the children cry, rebuking anyone who dares tell them to seek solace in religion. "Up in Heaven, / Dark wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find." Once again, the symbol of the wheels returns, linking the evil of industry with the children's utter lack of faith in a Heaven that is better than life on earth.

The children make this connection even more explicitly in lines 131-132: "Grief has made us unbelieving," they say. "We look up for God, but tears have made us blind." The parallelism of these phrases underscores the fact that the children's misery has completely turned them away from faith.

Earlier in the stanza, the speaker also describes them as "weeping faster." These references to tears and weeping bring back a symbol that dominated the beginning of the poem—the children's tears—and links the children's suffering and oppression, as embodied by those tears, with their lack of faith. This mention of crying also underscores the power in this moment, in which the children use those tears to literally cry out, or speak out, against both society and religion for failing them completely.

LINES 133-136

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,
And the children doubt of each.

Lines 133-136 return the stanza to the speaker's voice, capping off the children's earlier indictment of God and religion as insufficient responses to their plight. In these closing lines, the speaker once again condemns the poem's readers for their hypocrisy: "Do you hear the children weeping and disproving, / O my brothers, what ye preach?"

The opening refrain recalls the very first line of the poem, and the line as a whole also hearkens back to lines 101-104, when the speaker first chastised readers for their religious hypocrisy: telling impoverished children that prayer will solve their problems, but doing nothing themselves to actually make a difference. Here, the speaker builds on that earlier argument, explicitly pointing out that the children's moving, heartrending testimony has "disprov[ed]" what they "preach."

In lines 135-136, the speaker moves beyond scolding to implicitly urging the poem's audience to take real, tangible action to improve the children's lives. "For God's possible," the speaker says, summing up in one neat metaphor all the blessings that God and a full, happy life can bestow, "is taught by His world's loving."

In other words, religious beliefs and pious words are *not enough* to ensure a moral world. Society's supposed religious values must be backed up by action. Right now, the speaker says, "the children doubt of each"—both "God's possible" and God's "loving"—and it's no wonder. They have been left to fend for themselves, abandoned by society and God alike. By pointing this out, however, and by once again using a rhetorical question to prod the poem's assumed audience into self-reflection, the speaker subtly argues that change is possible, and as a result, "God's possible" can be brought to life on earth.

LINES 137-142

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:

The twelfth and penultimate stanza of "The Cry of the Children" is an especially vivid and damning section of the poem, employing dramatic imagery and complex metaphors to advocate fiercely for the end of child labor. It opens with the speaker righteously defending the children's tears—and within those tears, symbolically, all the children's moving words and testimony, or "cries," that have made up the bulk of the poem: "And well may the children weep before you!"

The speaker then goes on to explain exactly why the children have a right to their sorrow and their anger: they are "weary" before they can even run, they have "never seen the sunshine" and have lost their faith in God, "which is brighter than the sun." Their lives must be truly dark if they can't behold such light, the intensity of which is emphasized by the repetition (technically polyptoton) of "sunshine" and "sun."

They "know the grief" of grown adults, but they lack adults' "wisdom"; they "sink in the despair" of adulthood, without having acquired the life experience that might bring them perspective or "calm." In other words, they have been denied access to nature, faith, and childhood—denied their full humanity.

In addition to the vivid imagery of these lines, they also use anaphora, parallelism, and diacope to achieve their stunning effect:

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:

The speaker is really hammering the point home, not letting readers turn away from the children and their plight. There is also a strong musicality to these lines, including the alliterative /w/ sounds that appear in every line but 139.

LINES 143-148

Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom,
Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm:
Are worn as if with age, yet unretrievingly
The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—
Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.
Let them weep! let them weep!

The second half of the twelfth stanza continues with the speaker's fierce defense of child laborers and vivid depiction of the exploitation they have endured. Using anaphora to achieve a rhythmic, powerful effect, and maintaining the parallelism and diacope established in the first half of the stanza, the lines continue to describe the children's plight via metaphor and imagery:

> Are slaves, without the liberty in Christdom,
> Are martyrs, by the pang without the palm:
> Are worn as if with age, yet unretrievingly
> [...]
> Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.

In particular, the poem returns to two of its major metaphorical themes: religion and nature. The child laborers are compared to slaves because they lack "the liberty in Christdom." In other words, the speaker equates religious faith, specifically Christian faith, with eternal heavenly freedom—something the speaker believes the children's lack of faith has robbed from them.

Likewise, the speaker explicitly compares the children to Jesus Christ, calling them "martyrs" who suffer mightily, even if by different means than nails through "the palm," an allusion to crucifixion. Lines 145-147, however, hearken back to the very beginning of the poem, once again referencing the children's forced maturity—they "are worn as if with age"—while also condemning the theft of their youth, which has left them "unretrievingly" without happy memories to look back on, a "harvest" that "cannot [be] reap[ed]."

The children "are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly," the speaker concludes, unloved and abandoned by both God and people alike. In a return to the refrain of the eighth stanza, the speaker cries, "Let them weep! let them weep!" Again, the speaker turns to repetition (this time epizeuxis) to drive the point home for readers.

The sonic devices of this section also add to its intensity. Note, for example, the alliterative /p/ sounds of "pang" and "palm"—a loud sound picked up later in "reap" and, of course, "weep."

LINES 149-152

They look up, with their pale and sunken faces,
And their look is dread to see,
For they think you see their angels in high places,
With eyes turned on Deity.

Lines 149-150 repeat, nearly word-for-word, lines 25-26, only subbing in "dread" for "sad." "Dread" means frightening, terrible, dire, horrible; it's thus an intensification of the beginning of the poem. Otherwise, these two lines are nearly verbatim as those at the beginning of the poem. As a result they serve as a poetic refrain, and also a strong condemnation of everything the poem has spent 12 stanzas describing thus far:

> They look up, with their pale and sunken faces,
> And their look is dread to see,

While once these lines were used to introduce the children, and make space for them to make their voices heard, now they encapsulate "The Cry of the Children" on a number of levels. They hammer home, once more, the physical toll that child labor takes on its victims. They emphasize the children's youth and vulnerability, their powerlessness as "they look up" to the adults who have the real power to make the world a different place. The repetition, too, serves as a subtle indication that, despite nine stanzas in between, nothing has changed for child laborers—not even these lines.

And, as lines 151-152 explain, these lines also emphasize the children's despair: "For they think you see their angels in high places, / With eyes turned on Deity." Given their lot in life, the children believe that, as far as the rest of society is concerned, they are already dead. They know their lives have been written off, treated as disposable, with little guilt or care. No wonder, then, that their look is "dread," or chilling, "to see." They are rightfully furious to be sacrificed in this way.

LINES 153-160

"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 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."

The last eight lines of "The Cry of the Children" deliver a passionate plea for the end of child labor, and righteous condemnation of the powerful. They open with a rhetorical question, delivered via the children's voices, and made more powerful through the diacope of the phrase "how long":

> "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?

Unlike the speaker, the children do not refer to poem's assumed audience as their "brothers," but instead address the nation as a whole, indicting *everyone*. They ask them all the same question: how much longer will they grow wealthy on the backs of exploited children?

The language used to make this simple point, however, is rich with metaphor and imagery. The children describe their exploitation as the nation "stand[ing ...] on a child's heart" and "stifl[ing it] with a mailed heel." They also link to their exploitation to wider global forces; they are mistreated and abused, they say, in order "to move the world," and enable the powerful to "tread onward to [their] throne amid the mart," or marketplace. In other words, the children understand full well that their exploitation is linked to capitalism and empire—larger forces that benefit off their labor, but treat them as disposable.

In the lines that follow, the children narrow their focus to the particular titans of industry responsible for their deaths and exploitation:

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."

Here, they argue, using metaphor, that even the royal purple carpets that these "gold-heaper[s]" see unrolling before them, have been "splashe[d]" with child laborer's blood. The powerful may view themselves as "strong m[e]n," but, the children argue, "the child's sob in the silence curses deeper" than any strong man's "wrath," or anger.

Ultimately, the poem closes on 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. It also invokes the "sob," or cry, of the children themselves, a self-referential line pointing to the power, as the poem has along, of listening and paying attention to the tears or cries of the exploited children themselves. This closing line affirms that the entire poem should be read as a "sob in the silence," as well as "curse" upon the people responsible for their suffering.

The poem does not end without some hope, however. By phrasing that initial condemnation in the form of a question—"How long [...] will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart?"—the poem once again addresses readers directly, prompting them to ask the same question of themselves. Implicit in this question is the suggestion that they, and their "cruel nation," *could* make a change, and put an end to the horrific practice of child labor.

SYMBOLS

TEARS

Tears are everywhere in "The Cry of the Children," including the poem's title, which implies both meanings of the word "cry"—to shed tears, and to call or speak out. This dual meaning is key to understanding how tears work as a symbol throughout the poem.

First and foremost, tears in this poem are indicative of *literal* "weeping" and, of course, the emotions that accompany crying. However, this weeping should not be mistaken for *ordinary* childish tears, shed over a skinned knee or a lost toy. "They are weeping bitterly!" the speaker exclaims at one point, emphasizing that the child laborers' tears are unique: they express the children's *extreme* grief and pain as a result of their exploitation.

Even the children's mothers "cannot stop their tears," and are unable to bring comfort as a mother ordinarily might. When the poem compares the children's tears to those of an old man mourning his past, the speaker seems to suggest that the two types of weeping are not equal, and that the children's tears are caused by worse suffering. Later, the children themselves equate their tears with suffering and hard labor, when they report that now that she is dead, "little Alice never cries." The children's tears thus serve an important symbolic purpose in indicating for the reader just *how* grim and desperate the child laborers' lives really are.

In addition, the children's tears throughout the poem also function as a form of protest, symbolizing the children's "cry" as they speak out against the injustice of their situation. Given the poem's title, readers might assume that each portion of the poem written in the children's voices is a kind of "cry," and indicative of both meanings of the word. Thus the children's verbal expression of their anger, sorrow, and frustration, and their unflinching indictment of those responsible, is linked to the literal tears they shed.

No wonder, then, that the speaker draws attention again and again to these tears: "Do ye hear the children weeping" and "Do you question [...] why their tears are falling so?" The speaker is not really asking that readers pay attention to the tears welling in the children's eyes or dripping down their cheeks, but rather to what they have to say—that they are being horribly exploited.

These tears thus symbolize speaking truth to power. The children themselves also make this connection at the poem's conclusion, when they state that children's tears are mightier than even a powerful man's anger: "The child's sob in the silence curses deeper / Than the strong man in his wrath." This closing line affirms that the entire poem can be read as a "sob in the silence," in which the exploited children speak out against

an injustice that the rest of the world prefers to ignore, as well as "curse" upon the people responsible for their suffering. Tears, therefore, symbolize not just the children's pain and sorrow, but also the strength of their voices and testimony, as they cry out against their unjust plight.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-4:** "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."
- **Lines 9-12:** "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."
- **Lines 13-14:** "Do you question the young children in the sorrow, / Why their tears are falling so?"
- **Lines 15-24:** "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?"
- **Lines 33-36:** "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.""
- **Lines 43-46:** "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:"

NATURE

Nature takes on symbolic significance in "The Cry of the Children" beginning with the first stanza, in which the speaker compares the weeping child laborers to "young lambs [...] bleating in the meadows," "young birds [...] chirping in the nest" and "young fawns [...] playing with the shadows." This juxtaposition of the blissful natural world with the sorrow of child laborers sets the tone for nature's role as a symbol of all that is good, human, and even heavenly in the poem.

In particular, the natural world becomes closely associated with childhood innocence. This can be seen in these early references to baby animals, as well as when the speaker urges the children to flee the mines and factories and "pluck you handfuls of the meadow-cowslips pretty" instead. Though lines 57-60 ("Go out, children, from the mine [...] feel your fingers let them through!") on one level literally urge the children to go pick flowers in a meadow, they also symbolically express the speaker's wish that the children regain their lost childhoods.

Nature also surfaces in the metaphors used to describe religious faith. "They have never known the sunshine," the speaker laments, referring simultaneously to child laborers' dark workplaces as well as their lack of faith in God, which has deprived them of the spiritual support the speaker believes that God provides.

Similarly, by virtue of its juxtaposition against the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, the natural world also becomes symbolically linked with the fullness of human existence—as seen in the metaphor that describes looking back on a life well-lived (which the children cannot do) as "harvest[ing]" memories.

Since the majority of the poem is dedicated to describing the hellish industrial landscape in which the children work, these fleeting references to nature stand out sharply. They serve as a reminder of what could have been had the children led different lives. However, despite the poem's consistent use of nature imagery to depict what childhood, religious faith, and full humanity *should* be like, it is evident that the children at the center of the poem lack access to all three, an injustice that the poem strongly condemns.

"The Cry of the Children" never strays from this binary in which nature is associated only with positive forces, and industry with negative ones. Some critics have argued that this cut-and-dry symbolism lacks nuance, but it also speaks to the poem's political aims. The poet sought to stir the hearts and minds of readers who might have otherwise looked the other way regarding child labor. The black-and-white metaphors in which nature symbolizes "good" and industry symbolizes "bad" may well be a bit simplistic and moralizing, but that is part of the poem's purpose.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "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:"
- **Lines 17-18:** "The old tree is leafless in the forest, / The old year is ending in the frost,"
- **Lines 39-40:** "her grave is shapen / Like a snowball, in the rime."
- **Lines 43-46:** "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:"
- **Lines 57-64:** "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!"

- **Lines 67-68:** "If we cared for any meadows, it were merely / To drop down in them and sleep."
- **Lines 71-72:** "And, underneath our heavy eyelids drooping, / The reddest flower would look as pale as snow."
- **Lines 99-100:** "And the children's souls, which God is calling sunward, / Spin on blindly in the dark."
- **Lines 129-130:** ""up in Heaven, / Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find."
- **Lines 139-140:** "They have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory, / Which is brighter than the sun."
- **Lines 145-146:** "Are worn as if with age, yet unretrievingly / The harvest of its memories cannot reap,—"

LITTLE ALICE

Little Alice is a child laborer who dies. She is the focus of the fourth stanza, though she is not mentioned again in other sections of the poem. As the only child in the poem who receives a name or a specific identity, little Alice takes on symbolic resonance as soon as she appears. Merely by virtue of being called by her name, she helps to show that behind the many faces and voices of the child laborers—who are otherwise always discussed en masse, and only ever speak in the plural "we"—are unique human beings worthy of individual recognition and deserving of full lives.

However, little Alice's individuality is inextricably linked to the terrible tragedy of her early death. Apart from her name and her defining characteristic—that she is "little," which implies both youthfulness and weakness—the only thing readers learn about little Alice is that she died a year ago and is finally at rest. Any other parts of her story, including whether she was a factory worker or a laborer in the coal mines, go unexplained, and are largely besides the point. Before her death, little Alice was merely one of the masses of working children. However, as a result of her death, she is transformed into a martyr (as the speaker later refers to the child laborers) and specifically identified, taking on greater symbolic significance as a victim of greed and classism.

In addition to symbolizing the worst of child labor and industrialization, little Alice's other role in the poem is to symbolize how badly these systems have affected even the child laborers who are still living. The fact that they express surprise that there is "no room for any work" in little Alice's grave, and then go on to celebrate her death, indicates the depth of their psychological damage. Not only does child labor murder little children like Alice, her story shows that those who survive are left permanently scarred.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 37-52:** ""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.""

WHEELS

The wheels in "The Cry of the Children" represent the grueling, monotonous labor that the children are forced to perform, as well as the oppression that they face.

The wheels first appear in the poem when the children describe what their day-to-day lives look like. They cannot even begin to imagine frolicking among flowers in the meadow for, "all day, we drive the wheels of iron / In the factories, round and round."

The entire next stanza is dedicated to the way the wheels' endless motion permeates every aspect of their workdays, and indeed their lives. The "droning, turning" wheels cause the children's heads to spin and their "pulses" to "burn." They also make the walls, windows, and lights seem to spin, the sky in the windows to appear blank and "reeling" (or dizzying), and the black flies "that crawl along the ceiling" to "turn" or spin as well.

"All are turning, all the day, and we with all," the children say. In other words, they too turn and turn nonstop, just like the wheels. In short, the wheels symbolize the brutal, repetitive motions of a factory as well as the despairing effect those have on the people who work there—people who figuratively become yet another spinning wheel in the machine of industry.

The "droning" sound of the wheels is also a vital part of their symbolic significance. In lines 87-88 ("'O ye wheels,' breaking out in a mad moaning / 'Stop! be silent for to-day!'"), the children not only plead for an end to their labor and the horrible circumstances in which they work, but explicitly link their effects to madness and despair.

Later, the children cite the wheels as the reason their prayers go unanswered—"Who is God that He should hear us, / While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred?"—as well as the likely reason that human passersby ignore their plight. The wheels drown out any possibility of the children being heard.

The wheels thus not only symbolize the factory's grueling conditions and the suffering they cause, they also symbolize

the oppression the children face. They are ignored by society, forgotten by God, and unable to make themselves heard. What's more, the wheels are so loud—and their oppression is so great—that the children cannot even hear noises from outside the factory coming in: "And *we* hear not (for the wheels in their resounding) / Strangers speaking at the door." No wonder, then, that they are so unfamiliar with meadows, or any other aspect of the natural world or life outside the factory or mines.

The speaker says that "the iron wheels go onward / Grinding life down from its mark." The wheels are the symbol of the very forces of industry and social injustice that keep the children from any hope of a better life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 75-76:** "Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron / In the factories, round and round."
- **Lines 77-88:** ""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 drops adown 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,' moaning breaking out in a mad / 'Stop! be silent for to-day!'""
- **Lines 89-100:** "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, / Grinding life down from its mark; / And the children's souls, which God is calling sunward, / Spin on blindly in the dark."
- **Lines 101-112:** "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?"

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Assonance is a major device in "The Cry of the Children," helping to create a sense of cohesion across the poem through sound. This is particularly crucial to the poem's success since it is highly irregular in other ways, such as meter (or lack thereof) and its use of slant rhymes. In contrast, the assonance, or repetition of vowel sounds, is highly consistent from the first stanza to the last.

This assonance draws attention to certain words and phrases in the poem. In the first stanza, the assonance (and consonance) of "birds" and "chirping" lends a bright, happy feel to this image of the natural world. In the next stanza, the long /ee/ sounds of "tree is leafless" and the long /o/ sounds of "old hope" help these striking phrases stand out for the reader.

"The Cry of the Children" also relies on several of the *same* vowel sounds to create assonance in almost every stanza. The most prominent example is the poem's use of the long /ee/ sound, first introduced with "ye hear" and "weeping" in line 1. This sound resurfaces again and again, not just within the first stanza but as a major source of assonance in almost all the poem's stanzas. In the first stanza alone, it can be heard again in "leaning," "bleating," the repetition twice more of "weeping," and "free."

In addition, the regular use of end rhyme (covered in the Rhyme Scheme section of this guide) is a major contributor to the poem's assonance, including the distinct /uh/ sound of "mothers," "brothers" and "others," which repeats several times. Ultimately, the poem's reliance on assonance as a source of euphony, as well as its preference for a shared body of vowel sounds across the poem, is a major component of what holds it together as a unified work.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "ye hear," "weeping," "brothers"
- **Line 2:** "years"
- **Line 3:** "leaning," "mothers"
- **Line 4:** "tears"
- **Line 5:** "bleating," "meadows"
- **Line 6:** "birds," "chirping," "nest"
- **Line 7:** "shadows"
- **Line 8:** "blowing," "west"
- **Line 9:** "young, young," "O," "brothers"
- **Line 10:** "weeping bitterly"
- **Line 11:** "weeping," "others"
- **Line 12:** "country," "free"
- **Line 13:** "sorrow"
- **Lines 14-14:** "falling / ?"
- **Line 14:** "so"

- **Line 15:** “old,” “to-morrow”
- **Line 16:** “lost,” “Long,” “ Ago”
- **Line 17:** “old ,” “tree,” “leafless,” “forest”
- **Line 18:** “year,” “frost”
- **Line 19:** “if stricken, is,” “sorest”
- **Line 20:** “old hope,” “lost”
- **Line 21:** “O,” “brothers”
- **Line 23:** “sore before,” “mothers”
- **Line 24:** “Fatherland”
- **Line 25:** “faces”
- **Line 26:** “see”
- **Line 27:** “presses”
- **Line 28:** “cheeks,” “infancy”
- **Line 29:** “they say,” “very dreary”
- **Line 30:** “feet,” “they say,” “very weak”
- **Line 31:** “paces,” “taken,” “weary”
- **Line 32:** “grave,” “very,” “seek”
- **Line 33:** “weep,” “children”
- **Line 34:** “cold”
- **Line 35:** “young ones,” “without,” “our,” “bewildering”
- **Line 36:** “old”
- **Line 37:** “happen”
- **Line 38:** “die,” “time”
- **Line 39:** “Little Alice,” “died,” “shapen”
- **Line 40:** “Like,” “rime”
- **Line 41:** “into,” “pit,” “take her”
- **Line 42:** “clay”
- **Line 43:** “lieth,” “wake her”
- **Line 44:** “Crying,” “little Alice! it is,” “ day”
- **Line 45:** “listen”
- **Line 46:** “little Alice,” “cries”
- **Line 48:** “smile,” “time,” “eyes”
- **Line 49:** “go,” “moments”
- **Line 50:** “chime”
- **Line 52:** “die,” “time”
- **Line 53:** “seeking”
- **Line 54:** “Death,” “best”
- **Line 55:** “away,” “breaking”
- **Line 56:** “grave”
- **Line 57:** “city”
- **Line 58:** “do”
- **Line 59:** “pretty”
- **Line 60:** “let them,” “through”
- **Line 61:** “meadows”
- **Line 62:** “Like,” “weeds,” “mine”
- **Line 63:** “Leave,” “quiet,” “shadows”
- **Line 64:** “fine”
- **Line 65:** “we,” “weary”
- **Line 66:** “we,” “leap”
- **Line 67:** “we,” “any,” “merely”
- **Line 68:** “sleep”
- **Line 69:** “knees,” “stooping”
- **Line 70:** “go”
- **Line 71:** “underneath,” “heavy,” “drooping”
- **Line 72:** “reddest,” “snow”
- **Line 73:** “tiring”
- **Line 74:** “underground”
- **Line 75:** “drive,” “iron”
- **Line 76:** “round,” “round”
- **Line 77:** “day,” “turning”
- **Line 78:** “faces”
- **Line 79:** “turn,” “burning”
- **Line 80:** “turn,” “places”
- **Line 81:** “Turns,” “sky,” “high,” “blank,” “reeling”
- **Line 82:** “Turns,” “long,” “ light,” “drops,” “wall”
- **Line 83:** “Turn,” “flies,” “crawl along,” “ceiling”
- **Lines 83-83:** “black / that ”
- **Line 84:** “All,” “turning,” “all,” “day,” “all”
- **Line 85:** “droning”
- **Line 86:** “pray”
- **Line 87:** “moaning,” “ breaking”
- **Line 88:** “day”
- **Line 89:** “be ,” “silent,” “Let them hear each,” “breathing”
- **Line 90:** “moment,” “mouth,” “mouth”
- **Line 91:** “Let them,” “ touch each other's,” “fresh wreathing”
- **Line 92:** “tender”
- **Line 93:** “Let them feel,” “cold,” “motion”
- **Line 94:** “not all,” “God,” “reveals”
- **Line 95:** “souls,” “notion”
- **Line 96:** “O wheels”
- **Line 97:** “iron wheels go”
- **Line 98:** “Grinding life,” “mark”
- **Line 99:** “souls,” “God,” “calling sunward”
- **Line 100:** “dark”
- **Line 101:** “brothers”
- **Line 102:** “pray”
- **Line 103:** “blessed,” “blesseth,” “others”
- **Line 104:** “bless them,” “day”
- **Line 105:** “hear,” “us”
- **Line 106:** “wheels,” “stirred”
- **Line 107:** “creatures near,” “ us”
- **Line 108:** “hearing,” “word”
- **Lines 109-109:** “we / hear”
- **Line 109:** “wheels,” “resounding”
- **Line 110:** “speaking,” “door”
- **Line 111:** “round Him”
- **Line 112:** “Hears,” “weeping,” “more”
- **Line 113:** “indeed,” “we,” “ remember”
- **Line 114:** “harm”
- **Line 115:** “chamber”
- **Line 116:** “say,” “charm”
- **Line 117:** “know no”
- **Line 118:** “pause,” “song”
- **Line 119:** “God”
- **Line 120:** “hold both,” “strong”

- **Line 121:** “heard,” “surely”
- **Line 122:** “mild”
- **Line 123:** “smiling,” “steep,” “very purely”
- **Line 124:** “my child”
- **Line 125:** “weeping,” “ faster”
- **Line 126:** “speechless,” “stone”
- **Line 127:** “His image is,” “master”
- **Line 130:** “find”
- **Line 131:** “grief,” “unbelieving”
- **Line 132:** “We,” “tears,” “blind”
- **Line 133:** “hear,” “weeping”
- **Line 134:** “ye preach”
- **Line 135:** “God's possible,” “taught”
- **Line 136:** “each”
- **Line 137:** “weep”
- **Line 138:** “weary ere”
- **Line 139:** “seen,” “sunshine,” “glory”
- **Line 140:** “sun”
- **Line 141:** “grief”
- **Line 144:** “pang”
- **Line 145:** “age”
- **Line 146:** “memories,” “reap”
- **Line 147:** “heavenly”
- **Line 148:** “weep,” “weep”
- **Line 149:** “pale,” “faces”
- **Line 151:** “they,” “angels,” “high places”
- **Line 152:** “eyes”
- **Line 153:** “they say,” “nation”
- **Line 154:** “child's ,” “heart”
- **Line 155:** “Stifle,” “mailed,” “palpitation”
- **Line 156:** “mart”
- **Line 157:** “O gold,” “-heaper”
- **Line 158:** “shows,” “path”
- **Line 159:** “deeper”
- **Line 160:** “wrath”

ANAPHORA

Anaphora is an important part of "The Cry of the Children." The speaker is really hammering home the argument about the immorality of child labor, and the repetitive nature of the poem adds to this feeling of emphatic insistence. Take the first stanza, where anaphora is used no fewer than eight times through the repetition of the phrases "they are," "the young" and "they are weeping":

> **They are** leaning their young heads against their mothers,
> [...]
> **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,

From the beginning, this use of anaphora helps to draw attention to the subject of the poem—the children (the group "The young" and "they" refer to)—and to never let the reader forget their plight. It creates a sense of urgency and strong feeling, as well as lending rhythm and momentum to the poem's language.

Both the third and fifth stanzas use anaphora (also via the words "they" and "they are") towards that same goal of focusing readers' attention on the children's plight. In the eighth stanza, this emphasis on the children takes a different variation, appearing now in the phrase "Let them," but remains anaphoric in nature, as the speaker repeatedly advocates on the children's behalf. "They are" then comes roaring back in the penultimate stanza, although the phrase is split in two, in two separate instances of anaphora:

> **They are** weary ere they run:
> **They** have never seen the sunshine, nor the glory,
> [...]
> **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
> [...]
> **Are** orphans of the earthly love and heavenly.

Once again, the repetitive nature of the poem in these lines keeps drawing readers' attention back to the issue at hand, adding more and more details to flesh out the horror of child labor. Additionally, the second stanza uses the anaphora of "The old" to create contrast with "the young" from the previous stanza, again helping to capture the tragic circumstances of child labor.

Where Anaphora appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “They are”
- **Line 5:** “The young”
- **Line 6:** “The young ”
- **Line 7:** “The young ”
- **Line 8:** “ The young”
- **Line 9:** “the young”
- **Line 10:** “They are,” “weeping ”
- **Line 11:** “They are,” “weeping”
- **Line 15:** “The old”
- **Line 17:** “The old”
- **Line 18:** “The old”
- **Line 19:** “The old”

- **Line 20:** “The old”
- **Line 21:** “the young,”
- **Line 53:** “they are”
- **Line 55:** “They are”
- **Line 81:** “Turns ”
- **Line 82:** “Turns”
- **Line 83:** “Turn ”
- **Line 89:** “Let them”
- **Line 91:** “Let them”
- **Line 93:** “Let them”
- **Line 95:** “Let them”
- **Line 138:** “They ,” “are”
- **Line 139:** “They ”
- **Line 141:** “They ”
- **Line 142:** “They ”
- **Line 143:** “Are ”
- **Line 144:** “Are ”
- **Line 145:** “Are”
- **Line 147:** “Are ”
- **Line 153:** “How long,” “how long”

APOSTROPHE

One of the most distinct features of "The Cry of the Children" is its use of apostrophe, or a direct address to someone who cannot respond—in this case, the poem's readers. It occurs in the first line, when the speaker asks, "Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers?" and swiftly thereafter in the second stanza when the speaker addresses them not just once but twice:

> Do you question the young children in the sorrow,
> Why their tears are falling so?

And:

> Do you ask them why they stand
> Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers,
> In our happy Fatherland?"

This device reappears so consistently and prominently that on some level the entire poem can be thought of as an overarching form of apostrophe. This direct address to readers is connected with the poem's purpose, which is political in nature, hoping to persuade its audience to change its views on child labor. The most explicit instances of apostrophe are the most effective in this regard, consistently reminding readers of their complicity in the horrific practice: "Now tell the poor young children, O my brothers, / To look up to Him and pray."

However, each occurrence of the word "you," and the moments when the children speak directly about their plight, can also be read as implicit instances of apostrophe. Even when "you" or the children's speech is intended for the speaker ("Leave us quiet in the dark of the coal-shadows, / From your pleasures fair and fine!"), because the speaker is presumably of the same background as the poem's readers, these lines can be read as addressing the poem's audience as well. Thus, the poem implicates its readers through many kinds of apostrophe from start to finish.

The overall effect of all this apostrophe is to constantly remind readers of their complicity in child labor, as well as to empower them to recognize that by playing a role in supporting the exploitation of children, they can also play a role in ending it. "Let them hear each other [...] Let them touch each other [...] Let them feel that this cold metallic motion / Is not all the life God fashions or reveals," the speaker implores towards the end of the poem. Via this powerful use of apostrophe, readers have no choice but to consider their role and responsibility in the poem's subject of child labor.

Where Apostrophe appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** “Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers, / Ere the sorrow comes with years?”
- **Lines 9-10:** “But the young, young children, O my brothers, / They are weeping bitterly!”
- **Lines 13-14:** “Do you question the young children in the sorrow, / Why their tears are falling so?”
- **Lines 21-24:** “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?”
- **Lines 29-36:** “"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."”
- **Lines 45-46:** “If you listen by that grave, in sun and shower, / With your ear down, little Alice never cries:”
- **Lines 61-64:** “"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!”
- **Lines 65-76:** “"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.”
- **Lines 77-88:** “"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 drops adown 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,' moaning breaking out in a mad / 'Stop! be silent for to-day!'"

- **Lines 89-96:** "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!"
- **Lines 101-104:** "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."
- **Lines 105-112:** ""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?"
- **Lines 131-132:** "Do not mock us; grief has made us unbelieving: / We look up for God, but tears have made us blind.'"
- **Lines 133-136:** "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, / And the children doubt of each."
- **Lines 151-160:** "For they think you see 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, / 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.'"

METAPHOR

"The Cry of the Children" relies on metaphor throughout, primarily using nature, religion, industry, and even war as its main points of comparison. These metaphors are almost always intended to more vividly express the dire circumstances of the child laborers at the heart of the poem.

In the early half of the poem, for example, the children are compared to the youthful animals and flowers of the natural world, while the elderly are compared to leafless trees, the first frost, and old wounds—emphasizing the stark difference between their stages of life through metaphor. The death of Little Alice, a child laborer, is likewise described via natural comparisons: her death is compared to the sweeter and more natural (for a child) state of sleep, while her grave is "like a snowball" (note that this is specifically a simile—which is sometimes included under the broader umbrella of metaphor, but just as often treated as a distinct poetic device).

On the other hand, metaphors of industry also appear throughout the poem, serving as symbols of despair. The "droning, turning" wheels become symbolic of the grueling monotony of manufacturing overall, while "this cold metallic motion" stands in for industrial child labor as a whole. The children's souls are described as "spin[ning] on blindly in the dark," a metaphor that uses the spinning looms of textile mills as emblematic of the children's tortured souls.

Metaphor also plays an important role in the poem's depiction of the children's spiritual deprivation. God is "speechless as a stone" (another simile) and "tears have made [the children] blind" to God's existence. Religion serves as a source of metaphor as well, especially in the penultimate stanza when the speaker compares the children's plight to Christ's crucifixion. Indeed, metaphors of religion, nature, and industry mix freely in this moment, as the children's lack of faith is described figuratively as never having "seen the sunshine, nor the glory, / Which is brighter than the sun."

In the following and final stanza, metaphors of war and conflict surface for the first time. A "mailed" or armored heel crushes the children's hearts, and a "throne" is used to describe the seat of powerful industry. This sudden invocation of battle, including "blood" meant literally but also figuratively as a metaphor for the children's exploitation, is a fitting conclusion for a poem that relies on metaphors of nature to depict its hope for a better world—but ultimately is unafraid to express through darker metaphors just how brutal this conflict over child labor really is.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-20:** "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."
- **Line 29:** ""Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary;"
- **Lines 34-36:** " For the outside earth is cold, / And we young ones stand without, in our bewildering, / And the graves are for the old.'"
- **Lines 39-40:** "her grave is shapen / Like a snowball, in the rime."
- **Line 43:** "From the sleep wherein she lieth none will wake her,"

- **Lines 55-56:** "They are binding up their hearts away from breaking, / With a cerement from the grave."
- **Lines 71-72:** "underneath our heavy eyelids drooping, / The reddest flower would look as pale as snow."
- **Lines 77-85:** ""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 drops adown 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;"
- **Lines 91-92:** "Let them touch each other's hands, in a fresh wreathing / Of their tender human youth!"
- **Lines 93-96:** "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!"
- **Lines 97-100:** "the iron wheels go onward, / Grinding life down from its mark; / And the children's souls, which God is calling sunward, / Spin on blindly in the dark."
- **Line 114:** "midnight's hour of harm"
- **Lines 118-120:** "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."
- **Line 126:** "speechless as a stone"
- **Line 129:** ""up in Heaven,"
- **Line 130:** " Dark, wheel-like, turning clouds are all we find."
- **Line 132:** " We look up for God, but tears have made us blind.""
- **Lines 138-147:** "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 / The harvest of its memories cannot reap,— / Are orphans of the earthly love and heavenly."
- **Lines 151-158:** "For they think you see 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, / And tread onward to your throne amid the mart? / Our blood splashes upward, O gold-heaper, / And your purple shows your path!"
- **Lines 159-160:** "But the child's sob in the silence curses deeper / Than the strong man in his wrath.""

CAESURA

Caesura plays a complex role in "The Cry of the Children." At the most basic level, it often appears in the form of commas that create a pause for elaboration or deeper description. For instance, line 40 includes an instance of caesura in which the children stop to further describe Little Alice's grave: it is not just shaped "like a snowball" but also "in the rime" or ice. Similarly, line 74 further emphasizes the claustrophobia of the mines by using caesura to pause and elaborate that the children are dragging their burdens through "the coal-dark, underground."

However, caesura also plays a key role in emphasizing the children's voices as pivotal parts of the poem. The first time their voices are introduced, in fact, in lines 29-30, is through the complex use of multiple caesuras, in which two lines get interrupted not just once but twice each, by both commas and quotation marks:

> "Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary;
> Our young feet," they say, "are very weak;

The effect is to draw extra attention to where these words come from—that they are being spoken by the children, a fact that is impossible to miss, since these caesuras and the phrase "they say" sits smack-dab in the center of both lines. As the poem goes on, caesura continues to play a prominent role along these same lines. It punctuates phrases like "say the children," "they answer," and "they say," emphasizing over and over that the children are testifying to their own experiences. Each comma and quotation mark forces readers to slow down and fully recognize the identities behind the poem's most moving voices.

In addition, the speaker of the poem frequently uses caesura as well. Often this is also indicative of the speaker's speech, since caesura is frequently used before the speaker's instances of apostrophe: "O my brothers," or "Ay, be silent! Let them hear each other breathing." The comma preceding "O" and the comma and exclamation point in "Ay, be silent!" focuses attention on the speaker's direct address and fervent pleas.

Lastly, the poem also uses caesura to emphasize certain elements of the poem's argument. "The young, young children," the speaker says, more than once, with that comma once again forcing readers to stop and think about the implications of twice-repeating the word "young"—these are very small children indeed. The dramatic caesuras in the lines capturing the children's dark views of God and Heaven also emphasize just how spiritually bereft they feel, employing an exclamation mark, quotation marks, commas, an em-dash, a hyphen, and a semicolon:

> 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."

In short, the caesura operates on many levels within the poem, but always as an attention-grabber, indicating to readers that they should linger over a moment in the poem and study closely what it is happening there.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “weeping, O”
- **Line 9:** “ young, young,” “children, O”
- **Line 19:** “wound, if,” “stricken, is”
- **Line 21:** “young, young”
- **Line 29:** “ earth," they say, "is”
- **Line 30:** “feet," they say, "are”
- **Line 31:** “taken, yet”
- **Line 35:** “without, in”
- **Line 37:** “True," say,” “children, "it”
- **Line 39:** “year, her”
- **Line 40:** “snowball, in”
- **Line 44:** “Crying, 'Get,” “up, little,” “ Alice! it”
- **Line 45:** “grave, in”
- **Line 46:** “down, little”
- **Line 47:** “face, be”
- **Line 49:** “moments, lulled”
- **Line 50:** “shroud, by”
- **Line 51:** “happens," say”
- **Line 53:** “Alas, alas,” “children! they”
- **Line 54:** “ life, as”
- **Line 57:** “out, children, from”
- **Line 58:** “out, children, as”
- **Line 60:** “aloud, to”
- **Line 61:** “answer, "Are ”
- **Line 65:** “oh," say,” “children, "we”
- **Line 67:** “meadows, it ”
- **Line 70:** “faces, trying”
- **Line 71:** “And, underneath”
- **Line 73:** “For, all day, we”
- **Line 74:** “coal-dark, underground”
- **Line 75:** “Or, all day, we”
- **Line 76:** “factories, round”
- **Line 77:** “day, the,” “droning, turning”
- **Line 79:** “turn, our,” “heads, with”
- **Line 84:** “turning, all”
- **Line 85:** “day, the”
- **Line 87:** “wheels,' moaning”
- **Line 88:** “Stop! be”
- **Line 89:** “Ay, be,” “silent! Let”
- **Line 90:** “moment, mouth”
- **Line 91:** “hands, in”
- **Line 96:** “ you, o,” “you, O”
- **Line 97:** “Still, all day, the ”
- **Line 99:** “souls, which”
- **Line 101:** “children, O”
- **Line 105:** “answer, "Who”
- **Line 107:** “aloud, the”
- **Line 108:** “by, hearing not, or ”
- **Line 109:** “not (for”
- **Line 111:** “God, with”
- **Line 113:** “words, indeed, of ”
- **Line 115:** “Father,' looking”
- **Line 117:** “except 'Our”
- **Line 118:** “that, in”
- **Line 121:** “ Father!' If ”
- **Line 123:** “Answer, smiling”
- **Line 124:** “me, my”
- **Line 125:** “"But, no!" say”
- **Line 127:** “us, of”
- **Line 129:** “to!" say,” “children,—"up”
- **Line 130:** “Dark, wheel-like, turning”
- **Line 131:** “us; grief”
- **Line 132:** “God, but”
- **Line 134:** “brothers, what ”
- **Line 139:** “sunshine, nor”
- **Line 141:** “man, without”
- **Line 142:** “despair, without”
- **Line 143:** “slaves, without”
- **Line 144:** “martyrs, by”
- **Line 145:** “age, yet”
- **Line 148:** “weep! let”
- **Line 149:** “up, with”
- **Line 153:** “ long," they say, "how”
- **Line 154:** “stand, to,” “world, on”
- **Line 157:** “ upward, O ”

ENJAMBMENT

Enjambment in "The Cry of the Children" helps the poem achieve momentum in key moments, and captures shocking or subversive imagery in compelling ways.

First off, it's important to note that, though each of the poem's sentences stretch over several lines, the majority do *not* use enjambment. Commas, colons, semi-colons, and periods are present at the end of most lines in "The Cry of the Children," even when a sentence or phrase continues on to the next line.

However, there are several occasions when the poem *does* employ enjambment. For instance, from lines 22-23, the phrase "stand / Weeping" is broken up only by a line break. As part of a larger question—"Do you ask them why they stand / Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers?"—this enjambment propels readers on to the next line, and forces them to finish the difficult question. It also abruptly inverts the traditional meaning of "stand" (to be upright and strong) with the image that follows, of vulnerable children "weeping sore" on their mother's breasts. It's a breathtaking reversal, and an excellent example of enjambment's ability to rock readers out of their expectations or preconceptions.

This kind of enjambment-based surprise occurs multiple times

throughout the poem. In lines 27-28, an old man's anguish "presses / Down the cheeks of infancy," creating an unexpected image of old age marring a child's innocent face. The enjambment of "seeking / Death" in lines 53 and 54 likewise uses its line break to compel readers to consume a shocking idea, that of children desiring death, which they might otherwise have shrunk from.

Later, in lines 61-62, meadows full of flowers are compared to weeds across an enjambed line break, and in lines 107-108, "the human creatures near us" do not stop to inquire after the children's well-being when they hear their sobs, but instead "pass by," a cruel dismissal made all the more brutal by the line break and enjambment in between.

Certainly, these are instances of enjambment in the poem that are less shocking or subversive. For example, lines 73-76 contain two enjambed lines that simply paint a vivid picture of life beneath the mines and in the factories. When considering that the poem's very subject was shocking at the time of publication, however, even this less dynamic use of enjambment stands out for creating simple momentum, moving readers along from one line to the next when they might have preferred instead to look away.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "to-morrow / Which "
- **Lines 22-23:** "stand / Weeping"
- **Lines 27-28:** "presses / Down"
- **Lines 37-38:** "happen / That"
- **Lines 39-40:** "shapen / Like"
- **Lines 49-50:** "in / The"
- **Lines 53-54:** "seeking / Death"
- **Lines 61-62:** "meadows / Like"
- **Lines 67-68:** "merely / To"
- **Lines 73-74:** " tiring / Through"
- **Lines 75-76:** "iron / In"
- **Lines 89-90:** "breathing / For"
- **Lines 91-92:** "wreathing / Of"
- **Lines 93-94:** "motion / Is"
- **Lines 95-96:** "notion / That"
- **Lines 107-108:** "us / Pass"
- **Lines 109-110:** "resounding) / Strangers"
- **Lines 121-122:** "surely / (For"
- **Lines 122-123:** "mild) / Answer"
- **Lines 127-128:** "master / Who"
- **Lines 145-146:** "unretrievingly / The"

IMAGERY

"The Cry of the Children" is famous for its imagery, which some have called overly sentimental, others heartbreaking. Most agree, however, that the poem's imagery contributed to its success as a rallying cry against child labor during England's Industrial Revolution.

Each stanza relies on vivid images that paint an unforgettable picture of child laborers' lives and working conditions. From descriptions of the children's "pale and sunken faces" and "heavy eyelids drooping," to the horrific rendering of the factory with its "high window blank and reeling" and "black flies that crawl along the ceiling," the poem leaves little to the imagination when it comes to the horrors of child labor. The poem also spares no detail in describing the people responsible for this exploitation; the final stanza is full of vivid imagery that depicts industry leaders and government institutions as cruel tyrants crushing children's hearts beneath their armored boots, splashing through their blood on their way to power and wealth.

Ultimately, the result of this rich and unflinching imagery is a poem jam-packed with emotion. Each image not only helps readers to see through the children's eyes, it also serves the crucial purpose of helping them feel what these children *feel*. In other words, the imagery in "The Cry of the Children" stirs up empathy, putting readers in the children's shoes. Whether describing pitiful Little Alice's grave as "shapen like a snowball, in the rime" or imagining a better childhood for these exploited laborers, "sing[ing] out [...] as the little thrushes do," the poem's imagery seeks to break through the classism and ignorance that the speaker and the children condemn as the root of child labor's evil. These images remind readers that the children are as human as they are, and inhabit a world as real and lived-in as their own.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- Lines 3-11
- Line 14
- Lines 17-24
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 29-30
- Lines 34-35
- Lines 39-42
- Lines 43-50
- Lines 55-56
- Lines 57-64
- Lines 65-76
- Lines 77-88
- Lines 89-94
- Lines 97-100
- Line 106
- Lines 107-112
- Lines 118-124
- Lines 125-132
- Lines 137-140
- Lines 149-150
- Lines 153-158

JUXTAPOSITION

Juxtaposition is one of the primary poetic devices by which "The Cry of the Children" achieves it persuasive aims. By comparing nature and industry, youth and old age, poverty and wealth, and faith and disbelief side-by-side, the poem highlights the stark gap between the deprivation of child laborers and the privileges of middle- and upper-class citizens.

For example, the first stanza juxtaposes child laborers "weeping bitterly" with wealthier children playing "in the country of the free," emphasizing the vast and cruel distance between working-class and upper-class children.

There is also a strand of irony laced through "The Cry of the Children" that is often tied to juxtaposition, such as when the poem refers to "the country of the free" in line 12 or to "our happy Fatherland" in line 24. Both references to the country of England take place in moments when the freedom and happiness of most of its citizens are being juxtaposed with the sorrow and inequality faced by exploited child laborers. Both references also use irony, or a comparison between how things *seem* to be versus how they actually *are*, in order to subtly point out to the poem's readers that these sweeping statements about freedom and happiness should be read in context of, or juxtaposed against, the stark reality of working-class lives.

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Line 2
- Lines 5-24
- Lines 25-28
- Lines 29-30
- Lines 43-52
- Lines 53-56
- Lines 57-64
- Lines 65-76
- Lines 107-112
- Lines 125-132
- Lines 133-136
- Lines 137-148
- Lines 149-160

REPETITION

Repetition is a major feature of "The Cry of the Children." Words, phrases, images, and sounds frequently recur throughout the poem, accruing deeper meaning and resonance the more often they appear. Repetition has also been scientifically shown to increase the likelihood of changing people's minds—so no wonder, then, that "The Cry of the Children" uses so much of this device, given its goal of persuading readers to change their views on child labor! (Anaphora is one of the most common types of repetition used in the poem, and we discuss that device in a separate entry in this guide.)

Among the most prominent examples of repetition in the poem are the phrases "the children" and "my brothers," which become refrains of the poem. Each points to a major aspect of the poem's message: the exploited child laborers whose voices are finally being heard, and the "brothers," or fellow countrymen of the speaker, who are finally being made to listen to their stories. Similarly, the repetition of the phrases "they say" and "say the children" emphasizes again and again that the children's voices are at the foreground, as the poem attempts to make heard a class of people otherwise silenced or ignored by the rest of society.

The repetition of "the wheels" as an image and symbol, and descriptions of the wheels and industry at large, helps convey the unending cruelty of child labor. The fact that this repetition occurs over such a compressed portion of the poem demonstrates the effectiveness of repetition as a poetic device. Over just three stanzas, the wheels are mentioned four times, and "turning," "round and round" or "droning" nine times, creating one of the most memorable and unrelenting moments in the poem.

In addition, diacope is frequently employed throughout the poem. "[R]ound and round" is one example, when referring to the wheels, as is the repetition of "all" throughout lines 84 and 85 of that same stanza:

> All are turning, all the day, and we with all.
> And all day, the iron wheels are droning;

In the following stanza, "mouth to mouth" is another classic example of diacope. Earlier, diacope is often found in the repetition of prepositional phrases, such as "in the," "with the," or "is the" repeated three times each across lines 5-7 and 17-19, and the close repetition of "from the mine and from the city" in line 57. Later in the poem, other examples of diacope include:

- "hearing not [...] answer not [...] hear not" in lines 108-109
- "has made us [...] have made us" in lines 131-132
- "without" repeated four times across lines 141-144
- "How long" repeated twice in quick succession in line 153.

Polysyndeton also adds to the repetition in this poem. The lack of coordinating conjunctions between the clauses in lines 81-83 enhances the anaphora of the phrase "Turns the." Similarly, in lines 103-14, the repetition of the word "bless" is emphasized by the use of polysyndeton:

> So the blessed One who blesseth all the others,
> Will bless them another day.

Here, the repetition reflects the speaker's sarcastic tone. Some

form of the word "bless" is repeated so often, so quickly, that is leaves the lines sounding hollow and false—reflecting the children's lack of faith in God.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** “the children weeping,” “O my brothers”
- **Line 2:** “sorrow”
- **Line 3:** “They,” “their mothers”
- **Line 4:** “their ,” “tears”
- **Line 5:** “The young,” “in the”
- **Line 6:** “ The young,” “in the”
- **Line 7:** “The young,” “with the”
- **Line 8:** “ The young”
- **Line 9:** “But the young, young children, O my brothers,”
- **Line 10:** “They are weeping”
- **Line 11:** “They are weeping”
- **Line 13:** “sorrow”
- **Line 14:** “their tears”
- **Line 15:** “The old,” “weep”
- **Line 17:** “The old,” “in the”
- **Line 18:** “ The old,” “in the”
- **Line 19:** “The old,” “is the”
- **Line 20:** “ The old”
- **Line 21:** “But the young, young children, O my brothers,”
- **Line 23:** “Weeping,” “their mothers”
- **Line 25:** “They look,” “ up with their pale and sunken faces,”
- **Lines 26-26:** “ And / are sad to see,”
- **Line 26:** “their looks”
- **Line 29:** “they say”
- **Line 30:** “they say”
- **Line 31:** “weary”
- **Line 33:** “Ask the old why they weep, and not the children,”
- **Line 36:** “ And the graves are for the old.”’”
- **Line 37:** “the children”
- **Line 38:** “ That we die before our time:”
- **Line 39:** “Little Alice”
- **Line 44:** “little Alice”
- **Line 46:** “little Alice”
- **Line 51:** “the children”
- **Line 52:** “ "That we die before our time."’”
- **Line 53:** “Alas, alas the children!”
- **Line 57:** “Go out, children,”
- **Line 58:** “ Sing out, children,”
- **Line 59:** “meadow-cowslips ”
- **Line 61:** “cowslips of the meadows”
- **Line 63:** “the dark of the coal-shadows,”
- **Line 65:** “"For oh," say the children, "we are weary,”
- **Line 67:** “meadows”
- **Line 74:** “the coal-dark”
- **Line 75:** “all day,” “the wheels of iron”
- **Line 76:** “ round and round.”
- **Line 77:** “all day, the wheels,” “turning”
- **Lines 77-77:** “ are droning, / ;”
- **Line 79:** “our,” “turn,” “our”
- **Line 80:** “turn”
- **Line 81:** “Turns,” “ the”
- **Line 82:** “ Turns the”
- **Line 83:** “Turn the”
- **Line 84:** “All,” “turning,” “all,” “ the day,” “all”
- **Line 85:** “all day,” “ , ,” “wheels”
- **Lines 85-85:** “the iron / are droning;”
- **Line 87:** “wheels”
- **Line 88:** “be silent”
- **Line 89:** “be silent”
- **Line 90:** “mouth to mouth”
- **Line 91:** “Let them”
- **Line 93:** “Let them”
- **Line 95:** “Let them”
- **Line 96:** “wheels”
- **Line 97:** “all day, the iron ,” “wheels”
- **Line 99:** “the children's”
- **Line 101:** “the poor young children, O my brothers,”
- **Line 103:** “blessed,” “blesseth”
- **Line 104:** “bless”
- **Line 106:** “the iron wheels”
- **Line 108:** “hearing not,” “not”
- **Line 109:** “hear not (for the wheels”
- **Line 112:** “Hears our weeping”
- **Line 115:** “'Our Father,'”
- **Lines 116-116:** “ / say”
- **Line 116:** “We”
- **Line 117:** “We,” “ know,” “'Our Father,'”
- **Line 118:** “ And we”
- **Line 121:** “'Our Father!'”
- **Line 125:** “the children, weeping”
- **Line 129:** “say the children”
- **Line 130:** “wheel-like,” “turning”
- **Line 131:** “has made us”
- **Line 132:** “tears,” “have made us”
- **Line 133:** “the children weeping”
- **Line 134:** “ O my brothers”
- **Line 136:** “the children”
- **Line 137:** “the children weep”
- **Line 139:** “They,” “sunshine”
- **Line 140:** “sun”
- **Line 141:** “They,” “without”
- **Line 142:** “They,” “without”
- **Line 143:** “Are,” “without”
- **Line 144:** “Are,” “without”
- **Line 145:** “Are”
- **Line 148:** “ Let them weep! let them weep!”
- **Lines 149-150:** “They / up, with their pale and sunken faces, / And their / is dread to see,”
- **Line 149:** “look”

- **Line 150:** "look"
- **Line 153:** ""How long," they say, "how long"

RHETORICAL QUESTION

A rhetorical question is a figure of speech in which a question is asked for a reason other than to get an answer—most commonly, it's asked to make a persuasive point. No surprise, then, that "The Cry of the Children" opens *and* ends with rhetorical questions, and peppers them throughout the poem. These questions are asked not because the speaker of the poem or the children expect answers from their audience, the poem's readers. Instead, these rhetorical questions serve as uncomfortable reminders of questions that the poem's audience *should* have been asking themselves all along--but clearly have not.

"Do ye hear the children weeping?" is the first of these questions, immediately challenging readers' complacency in the face of child labor. As the speaker of the poem already knows, they have *not* heard the children weeping, and have even gone out of their way to ignore the children's sobs, as the child laborers themselves attest to in the ninth stanza. A few lines later, "Do you question the question the young children in the sorrow, / Why their tears are falling so?" digs even more deeply into this question, pointing out that not only do readers not *hear* the children's tears, they do not even stop to wonder (let alone *ask*) what the children are crying about--their exploitation. "Do you ask them why they stand / Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers, / In our happy Fatherland?" the speaker asks once more, in the third rhetorical question of the poem's first two stanzas, firmly establishing both the speaker and the poem's purpose: indicting those who allow child labor to thrive.

Later in the poem, the children use rhetorical questions themselves to undermine the speaker's belief that God and religion might offer them solace. "Who is God that He should hear us?" the children ask. The next few stanzas make clear that the children know exactly who God is supposed to be, but by framing their retort as an expression of doubt or disbelief, they throw cold water over the speaker (and the poem's readers') assertion that "the blessed One who blesseth all the others, / Will bless them another day."

Finally, the poem closes on a rhetorical question: "How long [...] how long, O cruel nation, / Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart?" This powerful moment in the poem, rather than taking the form of an indictment or a demand, instead chooses to frame its advocacy--pleading for an end to child labor--in the form of a question. In doing so, the poem places the answer squarely in readers' hands, reminding them that *they* have responsibility and control over whether child labor continues to exist in England.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "Do ye hear the children weeping, O my brothers, / Ere the sorrow comes with years?"
- **Lines 13-14:** "Do you question the young children in the sorrow, / Why their tears are falling so?"
- **Lines 22-24:** "Do you ask them why they stand / Weeping sore before the bosoms of their mothers, / In our happy Fatherland?"
- **Lines 105-106:** ""Who is God that He should hear us, / While the rushing of the iron wheels is stirred?"
- **Lines 111-112:** "Is it likely God, with angels singing round Him, / Hears our weeping any more?"
- **Lines 133-134:** "Do you hear the children weeping and disproving, / O my brothers, what ye preach?"
- **Lines 153-156:** ""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?"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is a major feature of "The Cry of the Children," and we've highlighted some important examples in this guide. As with the poem's use of assonance, this consonance helps enhance the poem's rich imagery—in turn making the issue it describes all the more immediate and striking for the reader.

In the first stanza alone, for instance, the repetition of gerunds (or "ing" endings) in the words "weeping," "leaning," "bleating," "chirping," "playing" and "blowing" create a sense of cohesion, despite the rapidly changing subjects of each line (the children, and then a number of different fauna and flora) and the varying lengths of those lines. In addition, the /ng/ sound at the end of these words is also echoed in the /ng/ at the end of the word "young," which is repeated no fewer than seven times in just twelve lines. Finally, the sharp /t/ of "tears" resurfaces in "bleating," "bitterly" and "playtime."

As another example of striking consonance look to the fifth stanza, which employs a great deal of it as the speaker urges the children to find solace in the natural world:

> 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!

It makes sense that much of the speaker's description of the natural world is marked by gentle /l/ and /f/ sounds—sounds which then repeat when the children reject those "pleasures fair and fine."

Consonant alliteration appears throughout the poem as well, drawing extra attention to or connections between various words and phrases. Take "hope is hardest" in line 20. In fact, this line is filled with alliteration, consonance, and assonance—altogether making it quite striking and memorable for the reader:

> The old hope is hardest to be lost.

In a poem marked by metrical irregularity, the thick repetition of consonant sounds lends each stanza and the poem as a whole a sonic *consistency*. It is also closely linked to the poem's consistent use of end rhyme, since even the slant and eye rhymes tend to use the same consonant sounds to achieve their rhyming.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "children ," "weeping," "brothers"
- **Line 2:** "years"
- **Line 3:** "leaning ," "young," " mothers"
- **Line 4:** "their ," "tears"
- **Line 5:** "young ," "lambs," "bleating "
- **Line 6:** "young," " birds," "chirping "
- **Line 7:** "young," " fawns," "playing "
- **Line 8:** "young ," "flowers," "blowing ," "toward," "west"
- **Line 9:** "young," "young ," "children," "brothers"
- **Line 10:** "They ," "weeping," "bitterly"
- **Line 11:** "weeping ," "playtime ," "others"
- **Line 13:** "you ," "question ," "young ," "children "
- **Line 14:** "tears "
- **Line 15:** "weep ," "to"
- **Line 16:** "lost ," "Long ," "Ago"
- **Line 17:** "leafless," "forest"
- **Line 18:** "year," "ending," "frost"
- **Line 19:** "wound," "stricken," "sorest"
- **Line 20:** "hope ," "hardest ," "lost"
- **Line 21:** "young," "young," "children," "brothers"
- **Line 22:** "you ," "ask," "why," "stand"
- **Line 23:** "Weeping ," "sore," " before," "bosoms," "mothers"
- **Line 24:** "Fatherland"
- **Line 53:** "Alas," "alas ," "children," "seeking"
- **Line 54:** "life," "best "
- **Line 55:** "binding ," "hearts ," "breaking"
- **Line 56:** "cerement," "grave"
- **Line 57:** "Go ," "out," "children," "from ," "mine ," "from ," "city"
- **Line 58:** "Sing ," "out," "little ," "thrushes "
- **Line 59:** "Pluck ," "handfuls," "meadow," "cowslips ," "pretty"
- **Line 60:** "aloud," "feel ," "fingers," "let "
- **Line 61:** "But ," "they," "cowslips ," "meadows"
- **Line 62:** "the," "mine"
- **Line 63:** "Leave ," "quiet ," "dark ," "the ," "coal," "shadows"
- **Line 64:** "From," "pleasures ," "fair," "and ," "fine"

ALLITERATION

As with assonance and consonance, "The Cry of the Children" frequently relies on alliteration; we've highlighted some important moments in this guide. As with those other two devices related to sound, the alliterative quality of the language creates unity and cohesion. This is especially important given that many other elements of "The Cry of the Children" are *in*consistent, such as its meter and occasional deviation from its rhyme scheme.

Alliteration also gives poetic language a musical quality. In this case, since the alliteration is paired with a strong rhyme scheme, the musicality is reminiscent of nursery rhymes, lending the poem a childish air that fits its youthful characters—while also adding to the poem's shocking quality, since it recalls a lighthearted form even as it tackles a very dark subject. This is particularly evident, for example, in the fourth stanza, which describes Little Alice's 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,

Here, frequent alliteration of /l/ and /w/ sounds create unity across these five lines, while the repetition of /p/ and /cl/ sounds in proximity make those individual lines particularly musical. In addition, the /sh/ of "shapen" and "she," the /th/ of "the," and the /t/ in take, are all echoed in other parts of the full stanza, as well.

On the other hand, the alliteration in the seventh stanza takes on a dizzying drone not unlike the sound of the iron wheels being described. There is very little variety in the alliteration used in this stanza; it relies almost entirely on the repetition of /a/, /w/, /th/, /d/, and /t/ sounds:

> "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 drops adown the wall,
> Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,
> All are turning, all the day, and we with all.

There are also a great deal of consonant /l/ sounds above. The overall effect is one of claustrophobia and monotony, as the same sounds relentlessly pummel the lines. This reflects the horror and inescapable nature of the children's situation, and is

further supported by all the repetition (in the form of anaphora, diacope, and polyptoton) in these lines.

Alliteration is crucial to the poem's success, since it makes language feel more emphatic and more memorable—important qualities in "The Cry of the Children," which seeks to be in order to achieve its political aims and persuade its audience of the immorality of child labor.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "bleating"
- **Line 6:** "birds"
- **Line 7:** "fawns"
- **Line 8:** "flowers," "blowing"
- **Line 16:** "lost," "Long"
- **Line 17:** "leafless," "forest"
- **Line 18:** "frost"
- **Line 19:** "stricken," "sorest"
- **Line 20:** "hope," "hardest"
- **Line 22:** "stand"
- **Line 23:** "sore," "before," "bosoms"
- **Line 25:** "sunken"
- **Line 26:** "sad," "see"
- **Line 27:** "draws"
- **Line 28:** "Down"
- **Line 39:** "Little," "last"
- **Line 40:** "Like"
- **Line 41:** "We looked," "pit prepared to take"
- **Line 42:** "Was," "work," "close clay"
- **Line 43:** "wherein," "lieth," "will wake"
- **Line 77:** "all day," "droning," ", turning"
- **Line 78:** "wind"
- **Line 79:** "Till," "hearts turn," "heads"
- **Line 80:** "walls turn"
- **Line 81:** "Turns," "window"
- **Line 82:** "Turns," "long light," "drops adown," "wall"
- **Line 83:** "Turn"
- **Line 84:** "All," "turning," "all," "day," "all"
- **Lines 84-84:** "we with / ."
- **Line 85:** "all day," "wheels," "droning"
- **Line 86:** "we"
- **Line 87:** "wheels," "moaning," "mad"
- **Line 88:** "Stop," "silent"

PARALLELISM

"The Cry of the Children" frequently uses parallelism, in which lines share a similar grammatical structure. A clear example occurs in the first and second stanzas, in which lines 5-10 and 17-21 not only use anaphora, or the repetition of the same opening phrase, but also share the same sentence structure: a subject ("the young lambs") followed by a present participle verb ("are bleating") followed by an object ("in the meadows"). Altogether, this creates a unified vision of nature as a beautiful peaceful place that then contrasts sharply with the reality of the children's lives, which follow the structure of a subject ("the young, young children") followed by a verb ("are weeping"). The parallelism of these lines actually highlights the *difference* between the world of nature and that of the child laborers.

Later, in lines 29-30, parallelism is paired with antithesis, in which the "old earth" is juxtaposed with the children's "young feet." However, despite the sharp contrast between these two very different things, the sentence structure of both lines is the same, or parallel:

> "Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary;
> Our young feet," they say, "are very weak;

This serves to *enhance* the contrast between the world's age and the children's youth, since they are otherwise presented to readers in exactly the same format.

Parallelism is fundamental to the stanzas dedicated to the turning wheels as well. Several sentences are structured around the phrase "all day, we" followed by a verb and then a reference to the children's labor:

> For, all day, we drag our burden tiring
> [...]
> Or, all day, we drive the wheels of iron

Parallelism here underscores the relentlessness of the children's work, which repeats in some form day in and day out. Lines 82 and 83 also share parallel structure, again drawing attention to the relentless nature of the children's work. In the following stanza, the repetition of "Let them" followed by a verb ("touch," "feel," "prove") creates parallelism too. The goal, in all these instances, is also emphasis—either of the children's horrible working conditions, or of the speaker's advocacy on their behalf.

Similarly, the parallelism in lines 141-144 serves to highlight the children's dire circumstances as part of a passionate indictment of those who have allowed child labor to flourish:

> 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:

This parallel structure again emphasizes the speaker's message about the horrors of child labor, while also sharply contrasting the children's current experiences—"they know the grief," "they sink in the despair"—with the privileges that they lack—"without its wisdom," "without its calm," "without the liberty in Christdom."

Where Parallelism appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-8:** "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:"
- **Lines 9-10:** "But the young, young children, O my brothers, / They are weeping bitterly!"
- **Lines 17-20:** "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."
- **Line 21:** "But the young, young children, O my brothers,"
- **Lines 29-30:** ""Your old earth," they say, "is very dreary; / Our young feet," they say, "are very weak;"
- **Lines 73-76:** "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."
- **Line 77:** ""For all day, the wheels are droning, turning;"
- **Lines 82-83:** " Turns the long light that drops adown the wall, / Turn the black flies that crawl along the ceiling,"
- **Line 91:** "Let them touch," " each other's hands,"
- **Line 93:** "Let them feel," " that this cold metallic motion"
- **Line 95:** "Let them prove," " their inward souls against the notion"
- **Line 131:** "grief has made us unbelieving:"
- **Line 132:** "but tears have made us blind.""
- **Lines 141-144:** "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:"
- **Lines 154-156:** " 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?"

VOCABULARY

Ye (Line 1, Line 87, Line 134) - An archaic word for "you."

Ere (Line 2, Line 138) - Before.

Bleating (Line 5) - This refers to the cries of a sheep or goat.

Stricken (Line 19) - Struck, hit, wounded.

Bosoms (Line 23) - A woman's chest or breasts.

Fatherland (Line 24) - One's native land or country.

Hoary (Line 27) - Extremely old.

Anguish (Line 27) - Extreme pain, distress, or anxiety.

Paces (Line 31) - Steps.

Weary (Line 31, Line 65, Line 138) - Exhausted in strength, endurance, vitality, or freshness.

Rime (Line 40) - Frost or ice.

Kirk-chime (Line 50) - Church-bell.

Cerement (Line 56) - Wax cloth used to cover corpses in the 19th century.

Thrushes (Line 58) - Small- or medium-sized birds from the *Turdidae* family.

Meadow-cowslips (Line 59) - Common European primrose plants that grows in meadows and fields.

Reeling (Line 81) - To turn or move round and round; to be in a whirl.

Wreathing (Line 91) - Interweaving or twisting together.

Resounding (Line 109) - Impressively loud; producing or characterized by resonant sound.

Disproving (Line 133) - Refuting; proving false or wrong.

Christdom (Line 143) - Short for "Christendom," the part of the world in which Christianity prevails.

Martyrs (Line 144) - Victims; people who sacrifice something of great value, most often their lives, especially for religious principles.

Pang without the palm (Line 144) - A reference to Christ's crucifixion, comparing the children's suffering to his (though unlike him their palms are not nailed to the cross).

Unretrievingly (Line 145) - Lacking the ability to retrieve (i.e., to locate or bring back).

Mailed (Line 155) - Armored; in chain-mail.

Palpitation (Line 155) - A rapid pulse or beating.

Tread (Line 156) - To step or walk on or over.

The mart (Line 156) - Short for "the marketplace," a reference to business and capitalism.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Cry of the Children" is not written in a specific verse form, such as a sonnet or villanelle. However, Barrett Browning does employ a fairly consistent set of formal constraints throughout the poem. It consists of 13 stanzas, each of which is 12 lines long. These stanzas can further be broken down into three quatrains, or four-line stanzas, with an ABAB rhyme scheme in each.

The only exception to this is the fourth stanza dedicated to the death of Little Alice, which comes to a total of 16 lines—a deviation that fits its unusual nature; it is the only section of the poem to give a child laborer a name and tell her specific story.

Barrett Browning famously believed that "ethical poetry is the highest of all poetry forms," and this poem clearly subscribes to

that belief. It takes a strong ethical stance, decrying the immorality of child labor. It also takes a political position, explicitly advocating for the end of the exploitation of children as workers. Thus, though it does not adhere to a classical form, "The Cry of the Children" certainly belongs to the same family of politically- and socially-minded poetry as William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, which likewise include poems about child labor; Percy Bysshe Shelley's "The Masque of Anarchy," a poem written in response to the 1819 Peterloo Massacre; and even the poems of John Greenleaf Whittier, an American poet and abolitionist whose work was also widely-known in England during Barrett Browning's time.

METER

"The Cry of the Children" does not follow a consistent metrical pattern. Indeed, a major criticism of the poem at the time of publication was that its meter was difficult if not impossible to follow. (Barrett-Browning herself agreed with this critique, as she admitted later in some of her letters.)

The first indication of this inconsistent metrical pattern is that the lines in "The Cry of the Children" are of all different lengths. Within the first stanza alone, the lines vary from 12 to 7 to 10 syllables long, and in the second stanza 9-syllable lines begin to appear as well ("The old year is ending in the frost"; "The old hope is hardest to be lost."). The third stanza introduces 11-syllable lines ("Ask the old why they weep, and not the children"), which continue to resurface in the stanzas that follow, and the fourth stanza even includes a 6-syllable line ("The shroud, by the kirk-chime"). Though within each stanza, lines of certain lengths tend to be grouped together or to alternate with one another, it is hard to predict when metrical shifts or changes will occur.

Overall, this inconsistent meter lends the poem a feeling of spontaneity and urgency. It feels as though the words are simply spilling out of the speaker (and the children themselves) in an unpremeditated rush. This adds to the emotional quality of the poem, especially the strong sense of outrage and sorrow that both the speaker and the children feel.

RHYME SCHEME

Though "The Cry of the Children" has a highly irregular meter, its rhyme scheme is fairly consistent. Its 12-line stanzas can be broken down further into sets of quatrains (4-line stanzas), each of which has an ABAB rhyme scheme (with new rhyme *sounds* introduced in each quatrain). As such, generally speaking, each stanza *overall* follows this rhyme scheme, as seen clearly in stanza 2 (beginning in line 13):

ABAB CDCD EFEF

The exact end rhyme *sounds* thus change, but the alternating pattern is steady on the whole. This keeps the poem feeling unified and thoughtful. There are some variations, however. In fact, the very first stanza deviates slightly by following the pattern:

ABAB CDCD AEAE

Notice how, while the *pattern* once again alternates end rhyme sounds, it also *repeats* some of those sounds. In other words, after rhyming "brothers" and "mothers" in lines 1 and 3, it also rhymes "brothers" and "others" in lines 9 and 11, rather than introducing a *new* end rhyme sound. These sorts of slight deviations occur throughout the poem. Another example is in the second stanza, which rhymes "brothers" and "mothers" in lines 21 and 23; these lines do not rhyme with any other parts of that stanza, but do rhyme with lines in the *previous* stanza.

Similarly, in the fourth stanza, which adds four extra lines for a total of 16, the poem repeats the ABAB sounds of the first four lines, rather than establish a new set of alternating end rhyme sounds:

> "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.
> [...]
> 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."

It is also important to note that *many* of the rhymes that contribute to this overall scheme are not perfect rhymes. Instead, the poem often uses slant rhymes, such as "meadows" and "shadows" in lines 5 and 7 and "faces" and "presses" in lines 26 and 27.

Overall, then, poem creates a sense of unity through rhyme yet does not hesitate to bend or manipulate its rhyme scheme when necessary. This allows the poem to include images or turns of phrase that capture child labor as vividly and dramatically as possible, even if it means sacrificing the precision of an exact rhyme from line to line.

SPEAKER

The speaker in "The Cry of the Children" is anonymous—readers don't learn the speaker's age, gender, occupation, etc. The first line of the poem does hint at the speaker's class, however, when the speaker directly addresses the poem's readers as "my brothers." Over the course of the poem, it becomes clear that "my brothers" refers to the middle and upper classes of 19th-century English society: people who may not know or care about industrial child labor, or even people who benefit from its existence. Readers can therefore deduce that the speaker is also a member of the middle or upper class, someone who sees these members of society as

"brothers."

Though the speaker shares a background with the poem's assumed audience, the speaker has decidedly different perspectives on child labor than these people do. The speaker is knowledgeable about the practice, outraged over the exploitation and mistreatment of these children, and explicitly condemns child labor as immoral.

At the same time, the speaker understands that the poem's audience is powerful—either as factory owners, mine owners, and members of society linked to the governmental institutions responsible for labor laws, or merely as upper-class citizens whose moral outrage could potentially sway those institutions to change. The speaker therefore dedicates the poem to persuading (and sometimes shaming) this audience, pointing out how other members of society are complicit in the injustices being described, and advocating for them to put an end to the practice of exploiting children as workers.

The speaker's identity as a middle- or upper-class person is confirmed by the children of the poem, who scoff at the speaker's own ignorance when the speaker suggests they simply leave their jobs to go pick flowers. Despite the speaker's concern and compassion for child laborers, the speaker is a newcomer to their world, a do-gooder trying to make a difference but nevertheless an outsider. Fittingly, therefore, apart from the moments when the speaker seeks to directly address and persuade the poem's audience, the speaker spends the majority of the poem elevating the children's voices, essentially working to "give voice to the voiceless."

The children are not technically "speakers" in the poem because their lines are always in quotation marks. Nevertheless, much of the poem, including entire stanzas, is written in their voices, and their perspective is key to the poem's message and themes. Always speaking in the plural, the children are reminiscent of a Greek chorus, whose purpose in ancient plays was to guide the audience through the story, and often serve as a moral compass. Here, too, the children's testimonies serve to shed light on and explain the circumstances of their lives and labor, as well as to move readers emotionally and goad them into advocating on their behalf.

SETTING

The setting of "The Cry of the Children" is the industrial landscape where child laborers work, as well as 19th-century England more broadly. Alternating between imagery of coal mines and factories, the poem dedicates many lines to describing the hellish places where exploited children work, perhaps most vividly in the seventh stanza:

> "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 drops adown 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,' moaning breaking out in a mad
> 'Stop! be silent for to-day!'"

There are also small snippets in the poem that describe natural landscapes as an alternative to the industrial spaces where the children work. These fit into the framework of the poem's larger setting, which is England in the mid-1800s, when the British Industrial Revolution was at its height. This was a time in which the country was changing rapidly, shifting from an agriculturally-based economy to one more centered on mining and manufacturing. This shift provides important context for the poem; it became a topic of enormous societal and political debate, including controversy around child labor in particular, to which this very poem contributed.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was one of the most famous poets in England during her lifetime, deeply admired for her poetry's morality and depth of feeling, as well as for her passionate engagement with social and political issues. Unusually well-educated for a woman of the Victorian era, Barrett Browning established herself as a prominent poet and writer in her youth, but lived in almost total isolation with her tyrannical father for nearly 40 years. He had forbid all his children to wed, but Barrett Browning defied his orders and eloped with fellow poet Robert Browning at the age of 39.

Barrett Browning's early poetry resembles the Romantic tradition of William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Lord Byron in which she was schooled. Over the course of her career, however, Barrett Browning became an increasingly experimental and innovative writer, helping to define the Victorian style of poetry. She engaged with a wide variety of poetic forms (including lyric, ballad, and narrative), while also tackling history, religion, and social and political issues.

World-renowned for her innovative and challenging verse, Barrett Browning was seriously considered as the successor to William Wordsworth's Poet Laureate when he died in 1850, but passed over for Alfred, Lord Tennyson. (No woman became poet laureate of England until Carol Ann Duffy in 2009.)

"The Cry of the Children" was first published in 1843, though it

was tweaked and revised by Barrett Browning several times over the following years (the version included in this guide is based on her final edits). Like many of her poems, it is marked by a strong moral sensibility, and engages fiercely with a hot political debate of her time. It is also stylistically daring, tackling a complex topic while pushing poetic boundaries and norms.

Unsurprisingly, critical response to the poem was mixed. Some critics admired Barrett Browning's bold stance, while others disparaged her for daring to speak out on an issue considered off-limits to women. However, Barrett Browning refused to be silenced. She continued to write fiercely opinionated and politically-engaged poetry for the rest of her life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Cry of the Children" was published just a few years into what is considered the Victorian era in England, a period that lasted from 1837 to 1901. Named after Queen Victoria, who ruled Great Britain's ever-expanding empire during this time, it was a historical period marked by enormous change.

Britain's way of life, once based on the ownership or cultivation of land, shifted to a modern urban economy based in trade and manufacturing. The invention of the steam engine resulted in new infrastructure like railroads, steamships, and factories. The telegraph and photograph were both invented in this era. Walter Besant, a late Victorian novelist, once observed that the era had "so completely changed the mind and habits of the ordinary Englishman, that he would not, could he see him, recognize his own grandfather."

Indeed, England was the first country in the world to undergo an Industrial Revolution, and the transformation was often chaotic and painful. Social problems, like the child labor decried in "The Cry of the Children," flourished as a result of rapid and unregulated industrialization. At the same time, the nation also became incredibly wealthy, dominating world markets and affairs, as well as colonizing more than a quarter of all land on earth. Near the end of Queen Victoria's reign, one out of every four people in the world were her subjects.

"The Cry of the Children" was written in the early and fractious years of the Victorian era, shortly after Barrett Browning read official parliamentary reports documenting the horrific conditions of child labor in British mines and factories. The poem explicitly condemns child labor as a practice, speaking directly to some of the most hot-button issues of the day. It was first published in the August 1843 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh*, a magazine which enjoyed a large and (unusually, given Barrett Browning's work and politics) conservative readership. Nevertheless, this conservative audience was generally opposed to factories and mines and strongly in favor of traditional agriculture, which made them a ripe audience for the political opinions in "The Cry of the Children."

Though criticized at the time for its sentimentality, the poem was also an immensely popular success, and has been credited with rousing greater public support for child labor reform. Indeed, within 10 years of the poem's publication, legislation passed restricting the employment of children in mines and factories.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- The Poem Out Load — Listen to the poem read aloud by Christie Nowak for LibriVox. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRmzLDCSGRQ)
- More About Elizabeth Barrett Browning — A biography of the poet at the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-barrett-browning)
- Social and Political Issues in Barrett Browning's Poetry — An article at the British Library on the social and political issues that fed Elizabeth Barrett Browning's work. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/elizabeth-barrett-browning-social-and-political-issues)
- "Cry of the Children" Exhibition — An academic virtual exhibition on "The Cry of the Children," in honor of its 175th anniversary. (https://editions.covecollective.org/course/cry-children-exhibition)
- More on Child Labor — An encyclopedia article on child labor during the British Industrial Revolution. (https://eh.net/encyclopedia/child-labor-during-the-british-industrial-revolution/)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING POEMS

- How do I love thee? Let me count the ways (Sonnets from the Portugese 43)

HOW TO CITE

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