

The Chimney Sweeper



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The Poem

“The Chimney Sweeper,” a poem of six quatrains, accompanied by William Blake’s illustration, appeared in *Songs of Innocence* in 1789, the year of the outbreak of the French Revolution, and expresses Blake’s revolutionary fervor. It exposes the appalling conditions of the boys known as climbing boys, whose lot had been brought to public attention but had been only marginally improved by the 1788 Chimney Sweepers’ Act. Blake published a companion poem in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* in 1794.

The speaker is a young chimney sweeper, presumably six or seven years old, and the style is appropriately simple. Much of the imaginative power of the poem comes from the tension between the child’s naïveté and the subtlety of Blake’s own vision.

In the first stanza, the sweeper recounts how he came to this way of life. His mother—always in Blake’s work the warm, nurturing parent—having died, he was sold as an apprentice by his father, the stern figure of authority. His present life revolves around working, calling through the streets for more work, and at the end of the day sleeping in soot, a realistic detail since the boys did indeed make their beds on bags of the soot they had swept from chimneys.

The second stanza introduces Tom Dacre, who comes to join the workers and is initiated into his new life by a haircut. As Tom cries when his head is shaved, the speaker comforts him with the thought that if his hair is cut it cannot be spoiled by the soot. The consolation is, from any adult point of view, totally inadequate, but for Tom it is effective. He falls asleep and dreams happily.

The next three stanzas give the substance of the dream. Tom dreams that thousands of sweepers locked in coffins are released by an angel. Suddenly, they find themselves in a pastoral landscape, where, freed from their burdens, they bathe in a river and then rise up to the clouds. There, the angel tells Tom, “if he’d be a good boy,/ He’d have God for his father & never want joy.” The dream is an obvious instance of wish fulfillment, and its pathos rests on the fact that while it reveals the child’s longing to escape, the opening and closing of the poem make it clear that his only ways of escape are dreams and death.

The last quatrain opens with a brutal contrast. Having dreamed of playing in the sun, Tom awakes, and the sweepers begin their day’s work, a day to be spent in the total darkness of the cramped chimneys. Yet, restored by his dream, Tom is happy, and the poem ends with the pious moral, akin to the angel’s speech, “So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.”

Forms and Devices

The poem is built around a series of powerful, closely related contrasts. The first, introduced in the second line, is that of bondage and freedom, for the child is literally sold into a state of both servitude and imprisonment within the chimneys. This contrast is reinforced by the parallel contrast between black and

white. Covered in soot, the sweepers are habitually black; Tom's white hair is cut off, and the whiteness of his skin is only regained in the dream, when he, along with the other boys, is able to wash in the river. The color contrast suggests the condition of the African slave, whose plight Blake, an ardent supporter of abolition, describes in "The Little Black Boy." Like that little boy, the blackened chimney sweeper suffers the injustice of a white society that puts commercial values before moral ones and treats him as an outcast from the human condition.

A second group of contrasts juxtaposes work and play, sorrow and joy, tears and laughter. In the streets, the sweeper can only call, "weep weep," and Tom cries when his head is shaved, but in the dream, the scene that is the subject of Blake's illustration, the boys leap, laugh, and play.

The final antithesis is that between death and life, coldness and warmth, darkness and light. The sweepers endure a death-in-life, the literal cold and dark of their days matched by their deprivation and the cold indifference of society. In Tom's dream, however, the washing in the river assumes the significance of a baptism into a better life and counters the ritual head shaving of the entry into prison. The child glimpses a new heaven and a new Earth before he returns to the fallen world.

From these contrasts, certain images acquire symbolic significance. The bags, abandoned in the dream and picked up again with the brushes the next morning, suggest the terrible burden of the child's life; the soot indicates the corruption of a society that uses and abuses him; and the coffins represent both the chimneys in which he works and the actual death to which he will soon come. In contrast, the sun, river, and plain express the joys that should be natural to childhood. Yet, even symbols associated with happiness intensify the harsh facts of existence. The bright key recalls imprisonment; the harmony of the leaping boys emphasizes their isolation in the chimneys; and the lamb, whose curling fleece Tom's hair resembles, is often, as is the sweeper, a helpless victim.

These emotionally charged contrasts and images underscore the ironic understatement. The speaker describes his life plainly, indulging in neither denunciation nor sentimentality. The facts speak for themselves, however, forcefully opposing the three pieces of comfort in the poem, the first provided by the speaker for Tom, the second provided by the angel, and the third offered by the speaker as a final moral. When God the Father, like the father on earth, seems to have turned His face from the child, injunctions for Tom to be good and to do his duty betoken a bitter irony.

Themes and Meanings

While presenting the nonjudgmental viewpoint of the child, Blake makes a passionate indictment of a society that exploits the weak and at the same time hypocritically uses moral platitudes about duty and goodness to further its selfish interests. Moreover, the reader is made aware of his own complicity in social evil when the sweeper addresses him directly with the words "your chimneys I sweep."

Yet, the poem is more than social criticism. In *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Blake contrasts the two states of being. Usually the condition of childhood, innocence is that state in which evil is not known; it is characterized by joy and love, is normally associated with the peaceful harmony of a pastoral background, and is often guarded by the presence of the good mother. Experience, on the other hand, brings awareness of evil; it is accompanied by feelings of outrage and hatred; and it finds its appropriate setting in the city. In Blake's philosophy, passage through experience is necessary before entrance into a final state of vision, a higher innocence in which joy is regained but transformed by deeper spiritual awareness.

Although most poems in *Songs of Innocence* directly reflect the happiness of innocence, a few—notably, "The Chimney Sweeper," "Holy Thursday," and "The Little Black Boy"—place innocent children in a world of

experience. Surrounded by evil, these children still retain their innocence, an innocence marked not so much by their own freedom from guilt as by their unawareness of the guilt of others.

The chimney sweeper is robbed of everything that should be the accompaniment of innocence. Yet, he bears no ill will, accepting without question both his lot and the moral clichés of a corrupt adult world. He transcends circumstances and in a sense re-creates his world. Deprived of his own mother, he becomes Tom's protector as he soothes the sobbing child. Thus comforted, Tom enjoys, in a dream, the light, laughter, and freedom denied him in real life. Significantly, the joy does not dissipate with the start of the day's work, and Tom, secure in his innocence, remains "happy & warm."

The last line, "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm," is then a paradox. On the level of social protest, the moral is deliberately inadequate and ironic. Yet, it also asserts a fundamental truth, since duty implies not the obligation to climb the chimneys or to acquiesce in the social pattern but the need to retain as long as possible an innocence that allows its possessor to triumph over the restrictions of the material world.

"The Chimney Sweeper" juxtaposes two points of view: that of the poet, who attacks society by indirections, and that of the sweeper, who presents directly the mode of perception characteristic of innocence. The interplay of the two gives the poem its unique depth and complexity.

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