

Making a Heaven of the Innocents' Misery: William Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" Poems

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Abstract

Throughout modern history, an unfortunate characteristic of rapid technological growth has been that it oftentimes outpaces the rate of social maturation. This disconnection between capability and maturity can have tragic consequences for persons living on the margins of a society. Industrializing nations, such as Britain in the late 18th and 19th centuries, provide the most dramatic examples of this trend. In two poems, both entitled "The Chimney Sweeper," William Blake describes the deplorable circumstances working class children endured during Britain's greatest period of intensive urbanization. Blake utilizes the contrary perspectives in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* to explore how differently children may perceive and react to being exploited by mainstream society.

Throughout modern history, an unfortunate characteristic of rapid technological growth has been that it oftentimes outpaces the rate of social maturation. This disconnection between capability and maturity can have tragic consequences for persons living on the margins of a society. Industrializing nations, such as Britain in the late 18th and 19th centuries, provide the most dramatic examples of this trend. In agrarian Britain, the majority of citizens, both adults and children, engaged in agriculture. Then, during the transition from an agrarian system into an urbanized manufacturing economy, masses of workers were needed to operate the new large-scale production facilities located in the cities. Intensive urbanization ensued, and children who had once worked on family farms were now forced to compete with adults for employment. As a result, children frequently received only the more dreadful and dangerous vocations. Still, occupational safety received little attention during this time. In fact, not a single labor law, meant to protect the laborers, existed. The mainstream considered workplace hazards to be inherent and unavoidable features of its new economic system. Decades would pass before any major movement formed to help protect workers.

Quite often, it seems artists become aware of certain social issues well before the general public does. The virtual absence of official interest in children's working conditions during the 18th century contrasts starkly with the rich artistic record left behind of such interest. One of the most prominent artists to dedicate attention to this matter was the Romantic poet William Blake. In two of his poems, both entitled "The Chimney Sweeper," Blake describes the deplorable treatment that working class children received during Britain's largest period of intensive urbanization. He deliberately focuses on the most exploited group of these youths—chimneysweepers—and uses his poetic mastery to write in their voices. With this clever approach, he effectively demonstrates that putting children to work in unsafe and unnurturing environments unfairly ages their souls and warps their individual thinking.

According to accepted Western legal tradition, children lack the ability to make appropriate judgments or speak about their own best interests. Children, therefore, have no recognized voice in determining the policies and customs of the world around them. This legal status notwithstanding, speaking in the voice of a child allows an artist to approach a topic from a unique perspective. While most adults can approximate how something would appear to their peers, a child's eyes tend to perceive things differently. Furthermore, addressing matters from an innocent minor's perspective makes communicating themes on social injustice easier and more sympathetic. For the artist, it can be like holding up the proverbial mirror to society. Works written in this mode provide readers with glimpses into ways of life that few may ever have a chance to observe directly.

Blake's decision to focus specifically on chimneysweepers was particularly apt for communicating his message on child exploitation. It also shows his intention to write a plausible narrative depicting real life conditions. As already noted, artistic awareness often precedes widespread public awareness, and this trend may be seen in the case of chimneysweepers. While Blake had published both of these poems, as part of his collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, by 1794, it took until 1848 before the topics he had addressed came to the official attention of the British Parliament. Of course, once these horrific realities became known, Parliament responded immediately by enacting the first public health laws in European history. The legislative body was persuaded to act by Sir Edwin Chadwick's report, *Inquiry into the Condition of the Poor*, which documents the working class's abysmal living conditions and daily struggles to survive (Kishlansky 127). In concluding his report, Chadwick makes many recommendations for improvement. Placing the most emphasis on helping the impoverished, working youth, he boldly demands

the appointment of special agents to protect young children engaged in certain classes of manufactures from mental deterioration from the privation of the advantages of education, and from permanent bodily deterioration from an excess of labour beyond their strength... [T]o put an end to one description of employment which was deemed afflicting and degrading, *i.e.*, that of climbing-boys for sweeping chimneys, and to force a better means of performing by machinery the same work. (Chadwick 130-131)

Chadwick's valiant work helped to change British society, yet these changes came well after many had suffered in miserable squalor. The conclusion of *Conditions of the Poor* mentions only one vocation specifically, and in doing so, calls for an outright ban on chimney sweeping. In his two poems, William Blake diligently describes the same type of circumstances endured by Britain's chimneysweepers that had disturbed Chadwick to such an extreme degree. For both men, the physical harm was perhaps less troubling than the intellectual and spiritual deterioration they saw occurring within these indigent youth. Chadwick observed that chimneysweepers suffered the most of all child laborers, and, therefore, he became their champion. Blake, on the other hand, uses the chimneysweeper as a representative of any cruelly exploited and marginalized child.

Blake's first version, "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence*, is a narrative poem spoken by an unnamed sweeper. In the autobiographical first stanza, the young speaker provides some facts about how he was orphaned and then indentured. Through the first two lines, readers quickly learn that this chimneysweeper has no one to nurture or guide him. The details of this boy's life are heart wrenching, but Blake exaggerates nothing. He describes a scenario that Chadwick found to be commonplace. Squalid living conditions, poor nutrition, and the inadequacies of pre-scientific medicine are among several of the factors that left vast numbers of children orphaned. Adding to the tragedy of his mother's death, the narrator of this poem has also suffered from the indignity of being "sold" by his father into servitude (line 2). These were very real possibilities for poor children, and this realism is the key to the poem's powerful pathos. In his explication, James Harrison emphasizes this point. He writes, "It is crucial to the poem's success...that the reader's absolute belief in the authenticity and integrity of the speaker be maintained" (Harrison 3). Without trusting that the speaker's world exists, readers would fail to appreciate the harm it causes to the chimneysweepers. Part of Blake's purpose in writing these two poems, after all, is to advocate on such children's behalf.

In a dramatic contrast to its counterpart in *Experience*, the poem from *Innocence* contains only two uses of direct quotations. Each time, Blake focuses the reader's attention on the exact words spoken by his unnamed narrator. This device first appears in the third line to encapsulate the young speaker's street cry. Modern readers are probably more familiar with the street-corner cry of a newspaper boy: "Newspaper! Newspaper! Get your newspapers!" However, at the time *Songs of Innocence* was published, readers would have more readily recognized the chimneysweeper's cry, "Sweep! Sweep!" Blake takes advantage of this familiar urban sight and builds upon it, giving readers a plausible story about how a young child can become involved in such a lowly job. Leading into the direct quote, the speaker recalls being put on the street to work "while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'" (lines 2-3). Still impeded by a child's lisp, he became a chimneysweeper. He did not go to school to learn. He did not go to an orphanage where someone might care for him. The pathos established through these autobiographical facts helps to drive the sympathetic mood of what follows. Moreover, the lisping of his words dramatically emphasizes the youth of its speaker. Hearing his piteous voice brings readers emotionally closer to the boy. In a way, this young chimneysweeper transforms in the minds of readers from an unidentified laborer into potentially any of the downtrodden youth that they may see on any street corner.

The fourth and final line of this stanza begins with a transitional adverb, signaling a shift in topic to the speaker's present life: "So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep." With readers already emotionally invested, that statement provides an extremely piteous image. At the same time, however, it also courteously calls its readers' ethos into question. Although subtly, the narrator uses the second person possessive pronoun "your" to indicate his audience. This happens only once and is easy to overlook. Nonetheless, it is significant to understanding Blake's message. Anyone who uses cheap child laborers to clean his or her chimney propagates this bleak standard of living for chimneysweepers. By paying so little compensation, those who employ children help to ensure they cannot afford proper housing. Furthermore, as the poem

progresses it becomes clearer that the young narrator believes society condones his circumstances. His experiences are teaching him that it is normal. In the end, he even comes to call chimney sweeping his “duty” (line 24). Blake’s argument, therefore, is not being fully presented by the characters in this poem. After all, they ultimately seem to accept their positions. Therefore, Blake relies on the reader’s emotional response and personal values to help him or her recognize the injustice. Recall that no minor has a recognized voice in speaking about matters of the world. While it may be easier to forget this legal status when a child seems content, one must remember minors are known to enjoy some other destructive behaviors as well.

The second stanza shows that living as these chimneysweepers do affects them negatively. This section of the poem centers on the speaker’s interaction with a new sweeping boy, Tom Dacre. Sounding as if the speaker himself were already grown up, he refers to Tom as being “little” (line 5). This adjective probably has less to do with age than it does with emotional hardness. Tom is crying because he must shave his head, which chimneysweeps did to prevent soot from caking their hair. The simile used to describe Tom’s white hair reinforces the notion of his innocence: it is “curl’d like a lamb’s back” (line 6). In other poems, like “The Lamb,” Blake uses this particular animal as a symbol of youth, innocence, and purity. Here, the poet is showing readers the symbolic sheering of an innocent, and thus, this scene reads like a cruel induction ceremony. The contrast between Tom’s curly, white hair and the greasy, black soot seems unnatural and is unsettling.

Blake then returns focus to the changes occurring inside the speaker. It is unclear how much time has passed since the narrator began his sweeping career. However, he must still be a preadolescent because historically persons tended to work in factories during their teenaged years. Physical age aside, it seems there is little youth left in his soul. Direct quotations are used for the second time to quote the speaker again. He calms Tom down by saying, “‘Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head’s bare, / You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair’” (lines 7-8). Comparing this quote with the earlier, lisping one reveals the speaker’s voice has changed. No longer burdened by a speech impediment, these words make him seem more like an adult.

In addition, the second direct quote almost sounds like some sort of proverb told among the child-sweepers. Having been treated by society as if he were already grown up, the speaker has learned to survive alone on the streets. Like a wise elder, he has begun advising the next generation. According to literary scholar Wallace Jackson, these mature characteristics are prime examples of why one should not assume all the speakers in *Songs of Innocence* are themselves voices of the innocent. Jackson argues this version of “The Chimney Sweeper” centers on Tom’s innocence, and the speaker is actually describing it from the perspective of experience (393). The voice captured within the second quotation certainly sounds like a voice of experience speaking to an inferior. Nevertheless, it is clear the narrator is still a child in terms of age. That he speaks with the authority of an adult helps demonstrate the mental neglect and outright abuse these boys suffer.

The next three stanzas recount a dream Tom has during the night. In it, he sees “That thousands of sweepers... / Were all of them lock’d up in coffins of black” (lines 11-12). While part of a dream, this vision touches on a very real threat that chimneysweepers face. The soot they work in is a very fine, deep black material. After a cleaning, sweepers climb out of chimneys stained with it. Because the particles are so tiny, they readily form an aerosol, which coats the lining of the lungs with a highly carcinogenic substance. Thus, their jobs, which keep them stained black, are symbolically like coffins. The dream continues, and in the fourth stanza, Blake reveals his Romantic tendencies. Tom sees an angel freeing chimneysweepers from their coffins (lines 13-14). In a tragic way, this portion of his vision implies that Tom views death as a release from the life of suffering that looms ahead of him. Once freed, Tom dreams, “down a green plain, leaping, laughing [the boys] run, / And wash in a river and shine in the Sun” (lines 15-16). Although pleasant, this image contrasts violently with the preceding images, emphasizing how far removed these boys are from nature. They can only dream of being in it and washing themselves clean. The river is an icon of power in a natural landscape. Likewise, a smokestack is a symbol of urbanization and industrialization. Before the skyscraper, these tall chimneys defined a city’s skyline. Once industrialization began taking its toll on the environment, the chimney also came to represent the smoke, soot, and pollution that plague urban areas. Blake utilizes these massive symbols and uses them in a way that emphasizes the smallness of the chimney-sweeping children and how caught up they are in Britain’s economic transition.

Blake’s purpose in this poem is to call attention to the plight of these children, yet two comments in the poem’s final section seem to endorse the system that is causing them harm. The first comes at the end of Tom’s dream: “And the Angel told Tom, if he’d be a good boy, / He’d have God for his father & never want joy” (lines 19-20). To Tom, being a good boy means being obedient. As a result, he thinks going to work and confining himself in soot will get him into Heaven. This belief is reiterated in the closing line: “So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm” (line 24). In interpreting these lines, one must remember this version of the poem comes from *Songs of Innocence*, and the innocent tend to have a more literal belief system. They lack the ability for truly abstract thought; they see their duty as being whatever someone tells them it is. This poem describes unfortunate circumstances that are intended to show readers some of the injustices within society. Then, to reinforce that psychological harm is being done, Blake describes how even some victims can come to believe in blind obedience to the system that oppresses them. Ultimately, such a belief robs individuals of their personality and stifles their chances of achieving self-actualization.

The version of “The Chimney Sweeper” published in *Songs of Experience* is half the length of its predecessor, and the individual lines of the poem appear much sparser, visually filling less of the printed page. While these may seem like insignificant consequences of typesetting, Blake was a gifted engraver as well as the illustrator of *Songs*. One can also see these differences mirror some of the contrasts between the contents of the poems. The writing style used in the *Experience* version is much more direct, and the literary devices employed are significantly more concrete. For example, the absence of a flowery, figurative style is filled by very particular diction in this poem from *Experience*. Moreover, the narrator of the latter work

seems much more objective than his predecessor. Although he is clearly an entity interacting with the chimneysweeper, this narrator never appears as an active character within this version. Instead, the text focuses solely on its namesake, and the plot develops from a single occurrence—an experience—that the narrator has upon encountering a chimneysweeper on the street. Finally, whereas the song from *Innocence* is in large part a recollection of a dream, three-quarters of the second work is dialogue rendered in direct quotations, which makes the latter poem feel more like a documentary.

No musings about angelic intervention comfort the experienced chimneysweeper. In fact, he explicitly communicates his feelings of “misery” (line 12). He refers to his uniform as “the clothes of death” and the sweeper’s street cry as “the notes of woe” (lines 7-8), making obvious his disdain for his current vocation and his awareness of the harm caused by it. There is no room for mistaking his feelings. Interestingly, however, these emotions do not quell his naturally cheerful disposition. When referring to life before becoming a chimneysweeper, he says, “I was happy” (line 5). This, of course, is good grammar since the boy is referring to past events. Later, the present tense is used to describe his current disposition: “I am happy & dance & sing” (line 9). Despite all his occupational misery, this boy’s own personal happiness remains solid. Rather than slipping into total despair, the experienced chimneysweeper controls his emotions and places blame directly on those he feels are responsible: the ecclesiastical and governmental establishments. His words are harsh, explaining to the narrator that his parents have gone “to praise God & his Priest & King, / Who make up a heaven of our misery” (lines 11-12). With the boy making such a seditious statement, Blake is able to show the psychological and spiritual impact of viciously exploiting children. Innocent Tom Dacre came to accept his situation, but the chimneysweeper from *Experience* has come to blame God, the Church, and the monarchy for permitting such abuses.

Causing another to lose faith is considered a high sin in Christianity. Therefore, one might read this statement as Blake accusing mainstream British society of committing some major spiritual transgressions. Samuel Taylor Coleridge apparently did read it this way. After reviewing *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Coleridge made a list of the seven poems that “pleased” him “in the lowest degree” (qtd. in McElderry 299). “The Chimney Sweeper” appears twice on this blacklist. According to B. R. McElderry, Coleridge was offended by the tones of rebelliousness and impiety that he believed ran through these works by Blake (299-300). Nevertheless, one must realize such feelings, as the experienced chimneysweeper expresses, often arise among the downtrodden in response to oppressive circumstances that seem inescapable. Someone who is suffering and believes members of the clergy are ignoring or, even worse, condoning his or her plight would naturally have a tendency to turn away from that religion. Though unsettling, the process is quite real. Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes this a major point in her advocacy poem, *The Cry of the Children*. Like Blake, she argues that widespread exploitation of children leads them to feel like they are cut off from God. Barrett Browning equates this to a type of spiritual abuse.

When most people think about the sweat shops found in today’s world, they immediately recognize the physical exploitation of child labor. Certainly, everyone would

rather see such children attending school instead of sewing seams. Still, the exploited suffer much more than physical pains and intellectual deprivation. The emotional and spiritual abuse that these children experience receives less discussion. Whereas a bruise is an outward manifestation of physical abuse that others can easily see, a bruised spirit is not as tangible for others. Writing in the voice of the experienced chimneysweeper allows Blake to take a unique and effective approach to detailing the psychological damage inflicted on these children. In this mode, he shows readers how certain circumstances may skew a child's perception or lead to a souring of his or her faith.

Whereas the poem from *Experience* explicitly criticizes certain social institutions, Blake is more covert in "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence*. Little Tom Dacre finds strength and contentment through the Christian faith. Despite their different endings, however, pairing these poems helps readers to see Blake's message more clearly, because together the poems offer multiple perspectives on the same issues. This is in keeping with the overarching theme of Blake's book, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. Exploited children are at the center of each poem. In one, the child is content yet naïve. In the other, the young chimneysweeper is bitter but cognizant of the larger entities at work. Indeed, quite a list could be compiled about the differences between these children. No matter how contrary those elements would appear, however, all of them are plausible ways children might react to the circumstances described in each version of "The Chimney Sweeper."

It seems agreeable enough: all children need nurturing and safe environments to flourish. Still, the exploitation of minors remains a real problem. As Blake's poems show, different children react to mistreatment differently. Although the experienced chimneysweeper outrightly protests, the version from *Innocence* places the reader into the position of having to object to the situation despite the victims' acceptance. Blake shows readers that children are not the most reliable barometers in determining their best interests. Ultimately, changing society is the responsibility of adults. This fact remains as true now as it was during the 18th century.

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Biographical Sketch

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