The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)

POEM TEXT

A little black thing among the snow,
Crying "weep! weep!" in notes of woe!
"Where are thy father and mother? say?"
"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

"Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

"And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery."

SUMMARY

There is a small black shape in the snow that seems to be crying out in sadness and pain. It is a small child, and when asked where his parents, the child replies that they have gone to pray in church.

The child continues: "Just because I used to play happily in green fields, or frolic in the snow, they punished me and took away my happiness. They made sing this song of sadness.

"Because of my joyful dancing and singing, they think they've done nothing wrong. They're too busy at the Church, praising God, the priest, and the king—the authorities that build their fake heaven out of the pain and suffering of boys like me."

THEMES

ORGANIZED RELIGION AND CHILDHOOD

"The Chimney Sweeper" is a poem about the corrupting influence of organized religion on society. It specifically suggests that the Church encroaches on the freedoms and joys of childhood and, indeed, robs children of their youth.

The poem focuses on a common figure during Blake's time: the chimney sweeper. Chimney sweepers were usually young boys forced to climb and clean chimneys, putting themselves in grave danger in return for little more than a meal and somewhere to sleep. Whereas the chimney sweeps in the *Songs of Innocence* poem of the same title hold on to their religious beliefs as a way of coping with their dire situation, the sweep of this poem knows full well that organized religion is a form of *oppression*, not *salvation*. Put simply, the speaker of "The Chimney Sweeper" has seen through the lies of the Church and isn't afraid to say so. He exposes these hypocrisies and deceptions—outlining how they have affected his life, and society more widely.

The young chimney sweep is first described as a "little back thing" who is weeping "among the snow." When asked where his parents are, the child responds that they've "gone up to the church to pray," suggesting that the Church—a metonym for organized religion—has literally led them astray. His mother and father are too occupied with satisfying their religious authorities to give the young chimney sweep a childhood full of joy and freedom. The Church, the poem thus suggests, is an actively corrupting influence on the sweep and his family. And as the chimney sweeps came from poor families, this perhaps speaks to Blake's belief that organized religion sold false hope to those in poverty.

The chimney sweep then outlines how organized religion—with its rules and limitations—influences the natural progression of childhood. The sweep *was* "happy" singing, smiling, dancing, and playing outside. But the young chimney sweep is forced to sacrifice his childhood in order to become a laborer (to the advantage, of course, to those in positions of power). That's why has been clothed in "clothes of death" and "taught [...] to sing the notes of woe."

Organized religion, the poem then suggests, helps society absolve itself of any guilt for exploiting its children in this way. "They think they have done me no injury," says the sweep. In other words, people think that as long they do what the Church tells them to then they will be rewarded by God (indeed, this is what the sweeps in the *Innocence* poem believe). No one takes responsibility for the children, meaning that nobody steps in to prevent them from leading short, miserable lives. And that's why this society's heaven is no longer a real heaven.

Heaven is supposed to be a place of bliss, beauty, joy, freedom, and communion with God—but organized religion offers only a "heaven of our misery." It is a corrupt place literally built on the labor and exploitation—the "misery"—of the young and impoverished (this mirrors the way that sweeps would have to clean the chimneys of the middle and upper classes). Ultimately, then, the poem is scathing about organized religion—implying it that it is something separate from spirituality, faith, and the true meaning of a relationship with God.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-12

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-2

A little black thing among the snow,
Crying "weep! weep!" in notes of woe!

"The Chimney Sweeper" begins on a mysterious note. The first sighting of the young chimney sweep is a kind of grim vision, the boy made initially unrecognizable by the sheer amount of soot that covers him. Instead, he is just "a little black thing among the snow." This vague description has a kind of distancing and dehumanizing effect, showing the way that the boy has been made literally and metaphorically unidentifiable—as though he is no longer a child, but a mere black shape, a dark mark on the conscience of society.

This first line uses also delicate consonance:

A little black thing among the snow,

The gentleness of this reminds the reader that, though the child speaker is world-weary and *experienced*, he is still small and vulnerable.

The second line points out that the "little black thing" is crying and weeping. Consider who is the observer here; most likely, Blake intends to put the *reader* in that position as part of an argument that *everyone* bears some responsibility for the way society works (or, indeed, doesn't work). That is, the reader becomes a spectator to this small child's suffering.

The poem here also uses epizeuxis in the repetition of "weep! 'weep!" This is an echo of the other "The Chimney Sweeper" poem, which is found in *Songs of Innocence* (this poem comes from *Songs of Experience*). It's an important link because this poem essentially *undoes* the false moralizing of the first poem. In the first poem, the terrified young chimney sweeps also "weep" but find (temporary) comfort in the idea that God will grant them happiness if they only work obediently and dutifully.

Soon after, though, comes this poem's picture of abject misery—with the quick repetition of "weep" implying it might even be one of the boys in the first poem—with the key difference that now he is wise to the lies and deceptions of organized religion. The assonance of "notes of woe" is also an important factor here, making the line itself sound like a kind of depressing song. The alliteration of "weep" with "woe" links further the action of crying to the sweep's life of misery.

LINES 3-4

"Where are thy father and mother? say?"
"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Line 3 sets the rest of the poem up as a question followed by an answer. The unidentified first speaker asks the sweep about the whereabouts of his parents: "Where are thy father and mother?" This also establishes the poem's concerns about authority and responsibility—that is, who to blame for the sweep's misery and impoverishment. Initially, it will be the parents who are to blame, but ultimately it's organized religion. Blake views the corruption and exploitation of childhood as both a familial and societal problem.

Line 4 answers the question in line 3 and introduces the poem's second voice, the sweep himself, the "little black thing," who will speak for the rest of the poem. (It's worth noting that not *all* chimney sweeps were boys—some girls were used too, but far less frequently.) The sweep explains that his parents have gone "to the church to pray." Though this seems like a fairly typical—and moral—activity for the time, it's clear that the sweep has been neglected. Because the parents are at church, they've left their child "among the snow." Organized religion makes them avoid their responsibilities and duties as parents, while at the same time absolving them of their guilt. The church, in a way, has subtly kidnapped the parents—and thereby created the conditions in which child exploitation is allowed to thrive.

/Th/ consonance (both voiced and not) runs throughout both lines:

"Where are thy father and mother? say?"
"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

The gentleness of this sound suggests the physical weakness of the chimney sweep. Additionally, the fact that this sound is linked directly to the father and mother helps highlight the fact that they aren't around.

These two lines solidify the rhyme scheme for the stanza as AABB (though it will change in the next two stanzas). They also continue the poem's tetrameter (four stressed beats per line) in a mix of trochees (DUM-da), anapests (da-da-DUM), and iambs (da-DUM):

"Where are | thy fa- | ther and mo- | ther? say?"
"They are both | gone up | to the church | to pray.

While this might sound complicated, in practice it creates an intuitive sound for the poem. Additionally, it allows the poem to be flexible, so that the rhythm of the first speaker's voice contrasts with the rhythm of the child's voice. Here, the initial stress in the speakers question, "Where," captures the forceful inquiry of a concerned adult. Meanwhile, the two unstressed syllables in first anapest of the child's response captures both his weakness and his innocence.

LINES 5-8

"Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

From the second stanza onwards, the chimney sweep explains the situation in which he finds himself. He explains it in frank and pessimistic terms. This and the following stanza are the evidence of *experience*—which is why this poem is in *Songs of Experience* and not *Songs of Innocence*. The sweep directly links his exploitation to the fact that he was "happy upon the heath." It's as if he was sold into child labor because he was caught being happy.

Really, though, it's because child labor is useful to people with authority in society, so they willingly exploit the children of the poor—effectively stealing their childhoods from them. As a result, society suppresses the natural happiness of children. The mention of a "heath"—which alliterates playfully with "happy"—links childhood joy to nature and the outdoors (a *heath* is a kind of field). This is a common theme in Blake's poetry and in the works of the Romantic poets more generally.

Line 6 essentially restates line 5, but changes "heath" to "winter's snow." The poem implies that children can be happy in all seasons, as long they're allowed to play outdoors. Alliteration between "smil'd" and "snow" again links instinctive happiness to the freedom of being in nature. It's ironic here that the sweep describes how he "smil'd among the winter's snow," when in the previous stanza he was "among the snow / Crying 'weep! weep!' in notes of woe." In other words, the sweep was once happy to be out in the snow, but no longer. The whiteness of snow, suggesting purity, contrasts with the way that the sweep is now disfigured by his covering of soot and ash.

Lines 6 and 7 take the poem in a more ambiguous and darkly mysterious direction, explaining the consequences suffered by the chimney sweep because of his inherent, youthful joyfulness:

> They clothed me in the clothes of death,
> And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

The pronoun here is intentionally vague: "They" could mean the sweep's parents, the church authorities, society as a whole, or *all* of these. The way that "clothed" morphs into "clothes" is the device polyptoton. It suggests that whoever put the sweep in "clothes of death" did so intentionally—that people exploit children with full knowledge of what they are doing.

Additionally, the soft /th/ consonance in "They clothed me in the clothes of death," recalls the unknown whereabouts of "thy father and mother" in line 3. This links the "clothes of death" to the absence of parental figures (and the way that the church co-opts them for its own gains).

Also notice how this stanza repeats two of the end phrases from the first stanza: "among the [...] snow" and "notes of woe." These phrases act as a kind of refrain, much like in a song—which is in keeping with the sweep's act of singing "the notes of woe." The assonance of this phrase also adds to the songlike quality.

The phrase "clothes of death" can be interpreted as referring to the child's blackened clothes and sooty skin—results of a job that will probably eventually kill him. More generally, the phrase helps draw out competing forces at work in society: life and joy vs. death and misery. While the child wants to live joyfully, society forces him towards death and misery.

As with the sweeps in the poem's companion in *Songs of Innocence*, the child is "taught" to believe that society is a certain way, and that its harshness and brutality is just a fact of life. Indeed, that's where the church steps in, convincing people that if they don't complain in this life, they will be rewarded by God in the next. This is turn prevents people from striving for improvements in *this* world.

Misery and suffering, then, are things that the child *has to learn*—not innate characteristics of life itself. In fact, the poem argues that institutions such as the Church actively suppress the more joyful elements of life. Furthermore, the repeated use of "and" in this stanza and the next is an example of polysyndeton, which subtly mimics the language and tone of the King James Version of the Bible. In harnessing some the Bible's tone, the poem seems to mock the Church, arguing that the Church has lost the true spirit of Christianity.

LINES 9-12

"And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery."

Line 9 picks up where the second stanza left off, again drawing a link between the child's instinctive happiness and his subsequent exploitation by society (in particular, the institution of the Church). The poem argues that this initial youthful behavior causes some in society to mistakenly think that they haven't done the children any harm. But the child in this poem "dance[s] and sing[s]" in *spite* of his ill treatment, not because of it. And though this singing is misread by the adult world as a sign that the sweep is happy, he actually sings "the notes of woe."

Line 9 uses polysyndenton—the repeated use of "and"—to give the line a playful, jumpy feel that fits with the image of a happy child. These "and[s]" also subtly evoke the sound of the King James Version of the Bible (a particular version of the bible that is full of polysyndeton). In doing do, the poem seems to pit its own vision of Christianity against the corrupted vision of the

Church.

Line 10 simply spells out the way that nobody takes responsibility for the suffering of the young chimney sweeps. The gentleness of the /th/ alliteration in "They think they" echoes the consonance in line 3, linking the "they" to the "father and mother" figures. More generally speaking, the repeated pronoun "They" has an accusative tone, the sweep making it clear that he knows—from *experience*—who is to blame for his miserable existence. The sweep seems to implore the reader also to think about who this "They" might be.

Lines 11 and 12 make the disconnect between the Church and the impoverished young crystal clear. Those who *should* be looking after the sweeps are instead praising "God and his Priest and King" (a phrase which also uses polysyndeton). Additionally, the alliteration between "gone" and "God" emphasizes the link between societal neglect and organized religion. In other words, people who praise "God" are "gone" from their responsibilities, such as taking care of children. Finally, Blake links religious authority—the "Priest"—to political authority—the "King"—in order to draw the full picture of blame.

Line 12 uses paradox to wonderful effect by subverting the usual associations of heaven. Heaven is supposed to be a place of bliss, joy, and freedom—but this so-called heaven is built out of the "misery" of the young chimney sweepers. In other words, the chimney sweepers are an emblem of the way that the powerful in society create their comfort and luxury by exploiting others, in this case the young and the poor. The chimney sweeps literally die so that the middle and upper classes can have warm, cosy homes to live in.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is used throughout "The Chimney Sweeper." The first example is in line 2:

> Crying "weep! weep!" in notes of woe!

The repetition of "weep" (technically known as epizeuxis) chimes with the /w/ sound of "woe" to link the *act* of crying with the chimney sweeper's *state* of misery. This helps establish the poem's air of tragedy, a tragedy that seems easily preventable—yet, for the sweepers themselves, painfully inevitable. Without the help of adult authorities, there is little they can do to change their fate.

The next big example is in line 5, which is part of the chimney sweeper's explanation for the causes of his pain and impoverishment:

> "Because I was happy upon the heath,

These two /h/ sounds ring together playfully, fitting the image of a happy child frolicking on the heath (a kind of field). It links happiness with the outdoors, contrasting the open and free space of the heath with the claustrophobic, hellish interior of the chimneys. The following line echoes this alliteration in "smil'd" and "snow," again drawing a link between joy and the natural world.

There is gentle /th/ alliteration at the start of line 10:

> They think they have done me no injury,

The gentleness of the sound subtly evokes the line's sentiment—that, from the adults's perspective, nothing wrong has been done (because they are dutiful Christians). The sound also echoes the consonance in line 3—"thy father and mother"—which helps to group together all the different *failures* in authority that create the horrible conditions of the chimney sweeper's life. (Note that the /th/ of "think" sounds a bit different from that of "they," because the former is *unvoiced* while the latter is *voiced*. Some might not mark this technically as alliterative, but the sounds are similar enough to create a gentle effect altogether here.)

Finally, line 11 uses alliteration in "gone" and "God." This subtly emphasizes the poem's main message, which again is about the failure and corruption of authority. This /g/ sound links "God"—specifically organized religion—with the state of being "gone" (absent and neglectful). It therefore helps the poem point a finger at the Church as the cause behind the impoverishment and exploitation of the young.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "'weep! weep!'", "woe"
- **Line 3:** "Where"
- **Line 5:** "happy upon," "heath"
- **Line 6:** "smil'd among," "snow"
- **Line 7:** "clothed," "clothes"
- **Line 9:** "And," "am," "and," "and"
- **Line 10:** "They think they"
- **Line 11:** "gone," "praise God," "Priest"
- **Line 12:** "Who make," "heaven," "misery"

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used subtly in "The Chimney Sweeper." One key example is in line 2:

> Crying "weep! weep!" in notes of woe!

The two long /o/ sounds ring together harmoniously, suggesting a kind of music. That's exactly how the unspecified speaker at the beginning—as well as the chimney sweep himself—describe the chimney sweep's crying: as a kind of

music. This contrasts ironically with the absent churchgoers, who should be taking responsibility for society's children. They are too busy singing hymns at church, a practice which makes them feel like they are living moral lives and thereby have done nothing wrong. The "notes of woe" recur in line 8, with the sweep making clear that he *learned* them from his adult authority figures.

In line 5, the assonance is very subtle:

> "Because I was happy upon the heath,

This sound has a lightness to it that fits with the image of a happy child at play—and the gentle assonance supports this. A similar effect is achieved in line 9, when the sweep is also discussing times when he feels a kind of youthful joy:

> "And because I am happy and dance and sing,

This line has a kind of carefree sound that evokes its sense of freedom and happiness.

In line 11 "gone" rings out with "God," both in the vowel sounds and through /g/ alliteration. This links "God"—specifically organized religion—to the abandonment of children, making it clear where the poem places its blame for the misery and suffering of society's young.

Finally, line 12, the poem's last line, is notable for its *lack* of assonance. The line's absence of musicality captures the pessimistic note the speaker ends on—a cynical summary of organized religion.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "snow"
- **Line 2:** ""weep! weep!"," "notes," "woe"
- **Line 3:** "are," "father," "say"
- **Line 4:** "They," "pray"
- **Line 5:** "happy upon," "heath"
- **Line 6:** "among," "snow"
- **Line 7:** "clothed," "clothes"
- **Line 8:** "me," "sing," "notes," "woe"
- **Line 9:** "And," "am happy and dance and sing"
- **Line 10:** "They think they," "me," "injury"
- **Line 11:** "gone," "God," "Priest," "King"

CONSONANCE

Consonance is used throughout "The Chimney Sweeper." It is first used in line 1:

> A little black thing among the snow,

The consonants here are delicate. This subtly positions the "little black thing" as something weak and vulnerable (a child), and also helps with the way that the poem initially keeps the chimney sweep at a kind of distance—calling him "a little black thing" as though he has been made unrecognizable by his miserable work.

In lines 3 and 4, the poem uses another subtle form of consonance through both voiced and unvoiced /th/ sounds:

> "Where are thy father and mother? say?"
> "They are both gone up to the church to pray.

These again might suggest the physical weakness of the boy—but in their subtly tender sound, they also evoke the way the boy longs to be looked after and have a happy childhood. The fact that this sound is linked directly to the father and mother helps highlight the fact that they aren't around.

This voiced /th/ sound is then recalled in line 7 (and echoed by the softer, unvoiced /th/ of "death"):

> They clothed me in the clothes of death,

The consonance, then, becomes a way for the poem to subtly reinforce the chimney sweeper's argument—that the absence of authority is to blame for the misery of his existence. Ultimately, this absence is the fault of the church, which is supposed to administer the moral and social practices of the day—and allows for the exploitation of children.

Elsewhere, the /n/ consonance in line 9 gives it a kind of bouncy, jaunty sound:

> "And because I am happy and dance and sing

This helps build an image of a happy child at play. So, throughout the poem, consonance helps capture the poem's main opposing concepts—youth, freedom, and happiness on one hand, and death, exploitation, and misery on the other.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- Line 1
- Line 2
- Line 3
- Line 4
- Line 5
- Line 6
- Line 7
- Line 8
- Line 9
- Line 10
- Line 11
- Line 12

PARADOX

"The Chimney Sweeper" contains one main paradox, which occurs in the last line. Before looking at that, though, it's worth noting the way that everything in the chimney sweep's life seems to have been a kind of paradox. That is, his instinctual way of being—wanting to be happy, free, playful—has been met only with misery and punishment. The natural state of childhood, as Blake sees it, has been turned into an unnatural state of suffering and misery.

This actually sets up the logic behind the poem's main paradox, quoted with the rest of the last stanza for context:

> "And because I am happy and dance and sing,
> They think they have done me no injury,
> And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,
> Who make up **a heaven of our misery**."

Here, the paradox is that a "heaven," traditionally thought of as a realm of bliss and joy, can be built out of "misery."

In a society that exploits its children for convenience and to save money, the "heaven" that the churchgoers praise is metaphorically built out of the "misery" of the chimney sweeps. Indeed, the sweeps literally die (through being trapped in chimneys or breathing in fumes) so that the middle and upper classes can live in warm houses. In this way, those in warm houses have achieved a kind of earthly heaven, one which relies on the hellish existence of chimney sweeps.

The "They" in this stanza is not clearly specified. Grammatically, it links back to the "father and mother" of line 3, but *thematically* it widens out to include all of society, and especially the authority of the Church (organized religion). Whereas humanity's natural state should be joy, freedom, and love, the poor of society are denied these by those with the power. Ultimately, the paradox in this final line captures that dynamic, how authorities have used religion to trick people into accepting a miserable state of existence.

Where Paradox appears in the poem:

- **Line 12:** "a heaven of our misery"

REPETITION

Repetition is used in various forms in "The Chimney Sweeper." Perhaps most obviously it appears in the epizeuxis of line 2 when the reader first meets the chimney sweeper:

> Crying "**weep! weep!**" in notes of woe!

The repeated "weep[s]" first of all emphasize the uncontrollable crying of the little boy. He is so covered in soot—the physical sign of his dirty labor—that he stands out in the pure whiteness of the snow. This is also part of a wider repetition between this poem (from *Songs of Experience*) and its predecessor in *Songs of Innocence*, which also uses epizeuxis with the word "weep." Interestingly, the first poem repeats the word four times. This poem repeats the word half as many times, making it a kind of trimmed down version of the first. This suggests a kind of increased weakness, as though the boy gets closer to death from one poem to the next.

The poem has two refrains that appear in lines 1 and 2 and then in lines 6 and 8. The phrase "among the snow" repeats, slightly modified, in line 6: "among the winter's snow." And "notes of woe" repeats in line 8. This phrase describes the sound made by the chimney sweeper. Together, these phrases form a kind of tragic song of the sweep's cries, a song which tells of his misery. The repetition helps show the way that crying is part of the sweep's daily existence.

The final instance of repetition is in line 7:

> They **clothed** me in the **clothes** of death,

This is known as polyptoton—when two words are used from the same root word. This is an important moment in the poem because it shows that the "clothes of death" are placed on the chimney sweeps *deliberately*—the sweep is "clothed" by death. This highlights the way that the chimney sweep's misery is the result of mistreatment by those in positions of power and authority, namely the figures of organized religion.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "among the snow"
- **Line 2:** ""weep! weep!"," "notes of woe"
- **Line 6:** "among the winter's snow"
- **Line 7:** "clothed," "clothes"
- **Line 8:** "notes of woe"

POLYSYNDETON

Polysyndeton in "The Chimney Sweeper" from the second stanza onwards, as the word "and" repeats in lines 6, 8, 9 and 10. Partly, this helps the poem with its forward momentum, supporting the meter. Many of these repetitions are instances of anaphora as well, further adding to the poem's momentum. But the polysyndeton also subtly evokes something very specific: the *sound* of the King James Version of the Bible. The KJV Bible is one of the best-known and most familiar-sounding translations of the Bible into English, and is full of polysydenton through the repeated use of "and."

This example from the book of Genesis demonstrates the effect of polysyndeton:

> And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven;

> and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark.

Blake uses this frequently in his poetry, subtly building his case *against* organized religion by borrowing some of its tone and expression. It's especially poignant in this poem because the authorities that *should* be taking care of the young sweep—his parents—are too distracted by organized religion. Indeed, they're probably reading the KJV as he speaks!

Polysyndeton is also used to a slightly different effect in line 9:

> "And because I am happy and dance and sing,

These "ands" give the line a playful lightness, which helps evoke the image of a happy child dancing and singing. All in all, then, polysyndeton in the poem works to undermine the authority of organized religion.

Where Polysyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Line 6:** "And"
- **Line 8:** "And"
- **Line 9:** "And," "and," "and"
- **Line 11:** "And"

VOCABULARY

Woe (Line 2) - Misery and sadness.

Thy (Line 3) - Archaic form of "your."

Heath (Line 5) - A field with wild grasses and flowers.

Smil'd (Line 6) - An abbreviation of "smiled" (to make it clear that it should be pronounced as one syllable).

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Chimney Sweeper" consists of three quatrains, or four-line stanzas. The form is typical of Blake, the simplicity of its appearance on the page masking the complexity of the ideas contained within.

Essentially, the poem has two main sections. The first of these is the initial sighting of the "little black thing"—the chimney sweep—in the snow. An unspecified initial speaker hears the boy crying and asks him for the whereabouts of his parents (who should be looking after him). This sets up the second and main section of the poem: the child's reply. This allows the young boy to demonstrate his knowledge of his own position, using his *experience* (as the collection's title, *Songs of Experience*, suggests) to explain how he finds himself in such misery and suffering.

What follows is a series of contrasts, and it's worth remembering that the full title of Blake's most famous collection was *Songs of Innocence and of Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. The poem thus contrasts the joy, freedom, and happiness that are the natural state of childhood with the oppression and exploitation of contemporary society.

One other thing worth noting is the way that the form of this poem compares with the poem of the same title in *Songs of Innocence* (this is from *Songs of Experience*). This poem is half as long as that first poem, perhaps suggesting the weakening life-force (or even death) of the chimney sweep from one poem to the next.

It's also worth noting that most modern-day texts—including this one—simplify Blake's original punctuation, which can seem a little confusing to contemporary readers. Check out this link to the engraved poem (how it was originally published) to see Blake's own choice of full stops, commas, and so on.

METER

"The Chimney Sweeper" is a metrical poem, but its meter is fairly loose. Most feet in the poem are either iambic (da-DUM) or anapaestic (da-da-DUM). There are often four of these feet per line, making the poem, very loosely speaking, iambic tetrameter. Generally speaking the poem has a sing-song feel to it, like a nursery rhyme. This makes sense, because not only is the chimney sweep a child (making childish rhythms appropriate), but he is also *singing* the "notes of woe." This poem, after all, is take from the *Songs of Experience*—it becomes a song of the child's misery.

There are a couple of interesting metrical effects to note at individual points in the poem. First of all, there is the double stress of "weep! weep!" that emphasizes the uncontrollable crying of the little boy (and other sweeps like him) in line 2. Then there is the solemn iambic momentum in line 7:

> They clothed | me in | the clothes | of death

This has a very serious tone, fitting with the darkness and sadness of the subject. Its meter is steady and predictable, reflecting this solemn tone. Contrast this with line 9, when the speaker talks about his natural state of youthful joy and happiness:

> "And because | I am hap- | py and dance | and sing

This line is mostly anapaestic, except for its final foot, and has a light, almost dance-like quality. This helps the poem draw out the distinction between these two contrary states: youth and freedom on the one hand, organized religion, exploitation and restriction on the other.

The poem also employs contrasting meters in lines 3 and 4.

"Where are | thy fa- | ther and mo- | ther? say?"
"They are both | gone up | to the church | to pray.

Here, the initial speaker's question starts off immediately with a stress, capturing how concerned the speaker is. Meanwhile, the sweep responds with an anapest, its singsong rhythm immediately conveying that a child is speaking. Additionally, the two unstressed syllables that begin this foot capture the weakness of the child.

So, throughout the poem, meter captures the opposing states of innocence and experience, happiness and exploitation.

RHYME SCHEME

"The Chimney Sweeper" has a rhyme scheme that runs:

AABB CACA EFEF

The first stanza, then, is a quatrain made of two rhyming couplets, whereas the following two stanzas feature alternating rhyme sounds. The change in the rhyme scheme from stanza one to stanza two captures the change in speakers. The sweep starts speaking in line 4, and the different pattern of rhymes reflects that a new voice has entered the poem. And generally speaking, the rhymes help give the poem a childlike feel—it's almost like a nursery rhyme. This, of course, makes sense, because childhood—and the exploitation of childhood—is the poem's main subject.

There are a couple of Individually interesting moments to note. The "heath"/"death" rhyme between lines 5 and 7 is only a partial rhyme, suggesting that something is not quite right. This speaks to the way that the chimney sweep's natural enjoyment of being outdoors has been replaced by a kind of death—the death of his childhood. Instead, he has to put himself in harm's way, climbing dangerous chimneys full of toxic fumes. The heath, then, is replaced by death.

Notice, too, how the rhymes in lines 6 and 8 are taken from lines 1 and 2. This makes them like a kind of refrain, making the poem more song-like—and, through the repetition of "woe," even more tragic.

SPEAKER

The main speaker of the poem is a chimney sweep—the "little black thing among the snow." But he doesn't actually take over until line 4.The first three lines, then, belong to some other speaker. This speaker is deliberately anonymous—only present long enough to set up the chimney sweeper's speech. This initial speaker could be thought of as Blake, or as the reader—or merely a stranger. Whoever they are, they are clearly an adult and are aware that the boy is suffering in a state of neglect.

After the first three lines, the chimney sweep is able to tell his tale, continuing all the way till the end of the poem. (It's worth noting that though most chimney sweeps were boys, there were some female sweeps too.)This should be contrasted with the first "The Chimney Sweeper" poem from *Songs of Innocence*. Whereas in that poem, the sweep comes across as sadly indoctrinated by what the authorities tell him, this sweep talks from *experience* (which makes sense, as the poem appears specifically in *Songs of Experience*). This sweep, then, has perspective and understanding on why he finds himself in such a dire situation.

He knows that his parents and, more widely, organized religion are to blame for his exploitation. He talks wisely, and is able to neatly sum up the hypocrisy of the age through the paradox in the final line: "Who make up a heaven of our misery." That is, the Church and society thrive on exploitation. One interesting thing to consider is whether this sweep might be a kind of ghost or visitation—in line 7 he states that he wears the "clothes of death," hinting that he is possibly speaking from beyond earthly experience itself. Whatever the case, it's clear that society has doomed him to a short and difficult existence.

SETTING

The poem appears to be set on a winter's day. It has been snowing, which makes the boy's sooty appearance stand out starkly against the pure white backdrop. After that, though, the poem doesn't develop its setting much—nor does it need to. The setting is mainly used just to set up the encounter with the sweep, and from line 4 he takes over to tell his tale of misery and oppression.

That said, the poem does certainly feel like it is set around the time of its writing—the late 1700s. Taken in the context of *Songs of Innocence and Experience* as a whole, the poem could be imagined as taking place in industrial London at the end of the 18th century, an environment characterized by poverty and pollution. The fact that the poem is about a chimney sweep, a common profession for children at this time, contributes to this sense of the setting. Additionally, the mention of a King could possibly refer to King George III, who was the British monarch at the time the poem was written and first published.

Lines 5 and 6 do briefly refer to nature, which is part of what the young sweep describes as his natural state—joy, playfulness, being outdoors, essentially just being a kid. The mention of a "heath" mirrors the "green plain" in its partner poem in *Songs of Innocence*. This brief mention helps contrast the poem's bleak environment with the idea of a happier coexistence with nature.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Chimney Sweeper" was published as part of the *Experience* section of William Blake's best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (first published in 1794). This book of poems expresses specific morals, though these morals are often full of ambiguity. The book is divided into two sections, *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*. Poems are paired across sections, so that one poem is spoken from an "innocent" perspective and one poem from the more cynical perspective of "experience."

Blake was also influenced by John Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* examined humankind's relationship to God in the form of epic poems. Beyond poetry, religious scholarship also had a profound influence on Blake, particularly the work of Emanuel Swedenborg. Swedenborg was a Swedish Lutheran theologian who, like Blake, experienced powerful spiritual visions.

Blake worked and supported himself as a painter, printmaker, and engraver (in fact, he produced fully illustrated, color etchings of all his own books). However, he wasn't well-known as a poet, and most who knew his poetry considered him a madman. As a result, there's a very individualistic, even isolated quality to Blake's work—it is radical, prophetic, and rebellious.

Blake was a *visionary* poet in all senses of the term. Not only did he propose a highly unique spiritual vision of reality, but he also literally had a vision of angels and other spiritual phenomena. These visions in turn feed into the prophetic quality of his writing. Historically, Blake has been associated with Romanticism, a movement that included Blake's more famous contemporaries William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. Like Blake, the Romantic poets held childhood, the imagination, and the power of nature in high esteem. Yet Blake's work is so strange and unique that calling him a Romantic doesn't do full justice to his work. It may be best to think of him as a singular entity in English literature.

Perhaps the most essential element of the poem's literary context is its partner poem in *Songs of Innocence* (this other poem has the same title, showing that they effectively come as a pair). This poem of "Innocence" essentially says that young, exploited chimney sweeps need to be "good" and "dutiful" in exchange for God's love. Meanwhile, the *Experience* poem (the one that this guide covers) makes it abundantly clear that the conclusion in the first poem *isn't* meant to be taken at face value.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The period during which children were forced into chimney sweeping lasted, roughly, from the Great Fire of London (1666) to the abolition of the practice in 1875. After the Great Fire, regulations made chimneys more narrow and angular, so that only children could fit in them to clean. It was a horrific form of work. The soot was carcinogenic, and sweeps were sometimes burned, trapped, or asphyxiated.

The speaker in this poem has probably been working as a *climbing boy*. He'd have been part of a gang of chimney sweepers led by a master sweep—an adult—who was in turn paid by the state authorities to take on children for work. Although this master sweep had to provide lodgings and meals to their group, he didn't have to pay them, and there was little oversight. Again, it was a pretty miserable existence.

During the time Blake was writing, Industrial Revolution was accelerating, leading to increased pollution and to the exploitation both of the poor and the natural world. Blake saw these changes as threats to humankind. In his poem "London," he describes industrial society as a form of physical and mental enslavement—as "mind-forg'd manacles." As evidence of this sentiment, it was during this time that the use of chimneys and chimney sweeps increased greatly.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Blake's Visions — Writer Iain Sinclair on Blake's religious visions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA)
- Full Text of Songs of Innocence and Experience — Full text in which "The Chimney Sweeper" is collected, from Project Gutenberg. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm)
- "The Chimney Sweeper" Illustrated — How the poem looked when Blake originally published it—produced through the process of illuminated printing. (https://thechimneysweeperillustration.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/songs_of_innocence_and_of_experience_copy_I_1795_yale_cent
- The Two Chimney Sweepers — An interesting comparison of this poem with its partner in Songs of Innocence. (https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/william-blakes-chimney-sweeper-poems-a-close-reading)
- Blake's Radicalism — Here Sinclair discusses Blake's radicalism. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl0yBrI24XM&t=1s)
- Blake's Illustrations and Other Poems — A closer look at some of Blake's poems, featuring their original illustrated pages, from the Tate organization, which holds a large collection of Blake originals. (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/william-blake-39/blakes-songs-innocence-experience)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Poison Tree
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)
- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Tyger

HOW TO CITE

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