

# [William blake’s somber piece, "the chimney sweeper”](https://assignbuster.com/william-blakes-somber-piece-the-chimney-sweeper/)

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WilliamBlake’s somber piece, “ The Chimney Sweeper” revealed the underlying injustices ofthe 18th century. In the dark streets of London, the exploitation ofchildren is the focus of his piece. The two perspectives reveal how innocenceand experience played a role in each viewpoint. There are two versions of thispiece. One is featured in “ Songs of Innocence,” the other in “ Songs of Experience.” The two variations of the poem portray different viewpoints. One through theeyes of innocence; the other from experience.

By reading both versionscarefully, the reader can fully comprehend Blake’s overall message. Together, the two perspectives drive his message about the manipulation of children, andhow they were forced to serve a system that oppressed them.            Blake opens his poem in the “ Songsof Innocence” by setting up a woeful scene. In the first line, Blake statesthat the speaker’s mother had died. Before he could even mourn her death, he issold to be a chimney sweeper. These were deplorable conditions. The speakerstates, “ while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry ” weep! ‘ weep! ‘ weep! ‘ weep!'”(lines 2-3). Chimney sweepers would typically cry out: “ sweep, sweep, sweep,” through the streets of London, however, this line reveals that in his misery, the speaker can only weep.

He represents thousands of children who aremiserable, because of their unfortunate circumstances. By the fourth line, Blake illustrates the piteous image of the children sweeping through the sootin misery.            Then there is the introduction ofTom Dacre. He is an example of an innocent child enduring the traumatic realityof child labor. Even through his labor, he is filled with innocence.

In thesixth line, the speaker states that Dacre’s hair “ curled like a lamb’s back,” and was shaved off. This is a symbol of Dacre’s innocent life being a sacrificeto a corrupt society. The lamb “ symbolizes the Christian theme of Christ’s purity”(Afrin 28).

Dacre’s purity is like Christ, who is referred to as thesacrificial lamb. The speaker tries to comfort his young friend, Dacre, by seeingthe light in a dark situation. The speaker reminds Tom that if his head isshaved, no one could see the soot in his white hair.

Blake includes his whitehair being shaved, because it is like his playful innocence being removed. Hiswhite purity is being forcibly taken away, and him, and other children, areforced to become chimney sweepers. The children are forced to wear the soot thatsteals their innocence and degrades them.             By the ninth line, Dacre dreams ofhis friends and thousands of chimney sweepers trapped in “ coffins of black.” The coffins of black are metaphors for the soot that traps them in enslavement. He views all of his friends, and thousands of children like himself, trapped inthis dark fate. He mentions “ Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,” in the eleventh line.

The personalization of the children makes their miserable fates even moresaddening. The addition of the characters makes the reader feel sympathy forthe children. Unfortunately for Dacre and his friends, the dream is an accuraterepresentation of their reality. The image of a coffin portrayed the dangerthat lurked from the work they performed. It also hinted that death couldresult from their work.             By the thirteenth line, Dacre’s darkdream shifts to hope.

He imagines a scene that could set him, and all of hisfriends free—a dream of heaven.            And by came an Angel who had abright key, And he opened the coffins & set themall free; Thendown a green plain, leaping, laughing they run, And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.(lines 13-16)Hedreams the angel sets them free from their coffins.

In the dream, the children areinnocent again, and they can finally enjoy being children. They race through thegreen plains and are washed clean.            By the seventeenth line, it states” then naked and white, all their bags left behind.

” The phrase “ naked andwhite” can be related to Adam and Eve. In the book of Genesis, it states, “ Adamand his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame” (New International Version, Genesis 2: 25). This emphasizes the themeof innocence because in heaven there is no shame or immorality. In the sameline, the children leave behind “ all their bags,” their pain, and the strugglesof the Earth (line 17). Tom’s faith immediately brings him joy in the dream, andhe forgets his melancholy situation.

The angel then tells Tom that if he is agood boy he can finally have a loving father, which is God. As a childneglected of love, this promise means everything for Tom and all the abandonedchimney sweeper children. This dream was unrealistic on Earth; however, indeath there was a chance to experience joy and love, which gave him hope.            In the final stanza, Tom awakensfrom his encouraging dream. He begins his work, warm and comforted, knowingpeace awaits him for all eternity in heaven. The last line echoes his strongfaith stating, “ So, if all do their duty they need not fear harm” (line 24). Hebelieved that if everyone did what they were supposed to do, then they shouldnot worry, because heaven awaits them.

This last stanza resonates with thebeliefs of Christianity, that whatever is endured on Earth, there is eternalpeace and joy in heaven. According to Blake, Tom Dacre’s innocence that keepshim oppressed and enslaved to a corrupt society. He innocently believed thatthe injustice he endured was okay as long as he would have peace in heaven. Blakebelieved this mindset made many children vulnerable to the continuous abuse ofchild labor. They were taught they would have joy in heaven, so they shouldobey the rules and sweep cheerfully. Only through death could they be free.

In “ Songs of Experience,” the perspectiveis entirely different. There is no specific character in this version whichmakes it impersonal. The first line starts with “ A little black thing among thesnow.” There is no mention of a child, but a “ thing” covered in black amongsnow. This “ thing” is a chimney sweeper covered in soot, abandoned in the coldsnow. By starting off with the child being a “ thing,” dehumanizes the child.

Theblack symbolizes that the child is impure, meaning the child has lost itsinnocent nature. The snow symbolizes “ bleakness and death surrounding the child” and illustrates “ the cold, uncaring world in which he lives” (Afrin 28). In thesecond line, the child is crying “ weep! weep! in notes of woe!” This line issimilar to the first poem with the repetition of “ weep;” however, in thisversion, the child weeps in notes of sadness, like weeping is a familiar song.

He has become used to his miserable situation. A bystander asks where thechild’s parents are, wondering why a child would be alone and abandoned. Thechild responds, “ they are both gone up to the church to pray.” Ironically, theparents have gone to pray while their child is abandoned.

The parents wouldrather find love in the church, instead of loving their own son. Blake uses thisironic scene to portray how the children were being forgotten, while their sinfulparents and authoritative figures prayed.            In the fifth line, the speaker istelling the curious bystander how he used to be happy and smile among the snow. However, he says “ they clothed me in clothes of death / and taught me to singnotes of woe” (lines 7-8). The child is stating that he was filled with joy, but then they clothed him in clothes of death. The parent’s forcing the childto become a chimney sweeper was like putting clothes of death on the child. Theclothes of death could also be the frail, unprotective clothing the parentsgave their child in the freezing weather.

He says they taught him to sing notesof woe, which means they took away his happiness and gave him misery. He oncewas happy; however, his own parents brought him sorrow. Blake uses this stanza, not only blames his parents, but moves on to blame, “ the rich and powerful whoexploit the poor and weak,” (Afrin 28).            In the last stanza, the child statesthe parents think they have not damaged him because he is still laughing andcan find joy; but he knows they have hurt him. And not just his parents areresponsible, but the government itself.

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 Priestand King, Who make up a heaven of our misery.”(lines 9-12)Thisstanza explains how exploiting children spiritually and psychologically can damagethem. Although at times the child seems happy, it does not excuse them for thetrauma and abuse the parents put their child through.

Blake uses the last twolines as an attack on the government and the church. The child mentions hisparents have gone to praise “ God and his Priest and King,” even though thechild feels they are responsible for his enslavement (line 11). These authoritieswere supposed to bring encouragement, hope, and peace; however, for him, they onlybrought despair.

The child feels robbed of his purity to serve people of supremacywho make a “ heaven out of his misery,”(line 12). Blake included this to show, that the child is abused by his parents, and he is also abused by a system that was created against him. God, the Priestand the King, allowed these injustices to plague thousands of children acrossLondon. In this piece, Blake reveals children are robbed of innocence and achildhood. According to the speaker, the parents go out to praise God, honorthe Priest, and serve the King; however, they make their own heaven out of thechildren’s misery.            Understanding both perspectives isimperative to understand Blake’s overall message—the exploitation of thepowerless.

The children are miserable but have no authority, making them vulnerable. The two perspectives reveal how a powerless child may react to these unjustconditions. In “ Songs of Innocence,” the speakers attitude reveals howinnocence in a child can create an optimistic outlook. However, in “ Songs ofExperience,” Blake shows how corruption in society can destroy this childlike optimism.

Pairing the two perspectives is important because it “ helps readers see Blake’smessage more clearly,” and both poems offer “ multiple perspectives on the sameissue.” (McClard 7). Blake wanted to reveal a system that exploited childrenfor selfish gain. The children are innocent and trusting by nature. Thisadmirable quality was manipulated against them. The endings are also different and Blakeused this contrast to distinguish innocence from experience.

In “ Songs ofInnocence,” the line ends with: “ So if all do their duty, they need not fearharm” (line 24). This ending reveals that children are submissive to society. The child believes that if he does not cause trouble, he will have peace in heaven.

This is dangerous thinking, but the child is submissive by nature. The childrenlack the “ ability for abstract thought” and “ they see their duty as beingwhatever someone tells them it is.” (McClard 14).

This is true, Tom Dacrebelieved that if he did what his authorities told him, he would be right byGod. However, in “ Songs of Experience,” the ending is more accusing. Theclosing lines of this piece is: “ And are gone to praise God and his Priest andKing / Who make up a heaven of our misery,” (lines 11-12). In these lines, it seems he is not only accusing his parents, but he is blaming the church andgovernment.

The different endings reveal Blakes viewson the church and government exploiting children for their own gain. Hebelieved these high authority figures were manipulating children for their owngain. Blake believed that these children were powerless against a corruptsystem and needed “ to advocate on the children’s behalf” (McClard 2). It isimportant to read “ Songs of Innocence” to understand this. In this perspective, the child is naively trusting the church and government.

It is thisunconditional trust that keeps the children imprisoned. In “ Songs of Experience,” the child knows his youth has been manipulated. He understands that theseauthorities are making their lives easier, because of the misery the childrenmust endure. One ending is compliant with a broken system, unaware of theabuse. The other is fully aware and full of resentment.

Blake uses both to showhow the innocent is being taken advantage of, and how the experienced isplacing blame on a broken system. Reading both versions is imperative tounderstand Blakes overall message. He wanted his readers to understand themagnitude of the abuse these children faced. The children were not only used, but Blake describes how the children were in blind obedience to a system thatoppressed them. They were the most powerless in society, and exploited by themost powerful.  The children are supposedto enjoy a “ naturalistic world of childhood” however they were forced to endurea “ world of corruption” (Afrin 29).

The different perspectives show Blakes realmeaning behind the poems. He believed the church and government had a corruptsystem that abused the children. Understanding both versions helps the readersee Blakes underlying message.

He sought to unveil a corrupted system that wouldno longer make a heaven out of a child’s misery.