

William Blake's somber piece, "the chimney sweeper"

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William Blake's somber piece, "The Chimney Sweeper" revealed the underlying injustices of the 18th century. In the dark streets of London, the exploitation of children is the focus of his piece. The two perspectives reveal how innocence and experience played a role in each viewpoint. There are two versions of this piece. One is featured in "Songs of Innocence," the other in "Songs of Experience." The two variations of the poem portray different viewpoints. One through the eyes of innocence; the other from experience.

By reading both versions carefully, the reader can fully comprehend Blake's overall message. Together, the two perspectives drive his message about the manipulation of children, and how they were forced to serve a system that oppressed them.

Blake opens his poem in the "Songs of Innocence" by setting up a woeful scene. In the first line, Blake states that the speaker's mother had died. Before he could even mourn her death, he is sold to be a chimney sweeper. These were deplorable conditions. The speaker states, "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 are miserable, because of their unfortunate circumstances. By the fourth line, Blake illustrates the piteous image of the children sweeping through the soot in misery. Then there is the introduction of Tom Dacre. He is an example of an innocent child enduring the traumatic reality of child labor. Even through his labor, he is filled with innocence.

In the sixth 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 sacrifice to 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 the sacrificial lamb. The speaker tries to comfort his young friend, Dacre, by seeing the light in a dark situation. The speaker reminds Tom that if his head is shaved, no one could see the soot in his white hair.

Blake includes his white hair being shaved, because it is like his playful innocence being removed. His white purity is being forcibly taken away, and him, and other children, are forced to become chimney sweepers. The children are forced to wear the soot that steals their innocence and degrades them. By the ninth line, Dacre dreams of his 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 in this dark fate. He mentions "Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack," in the eleventh line.

The personalization of the children makes their miserable fates even more saddening. The addition of the characters makes the reader feel sympathy for the children. Unfortunately for Dacre and his friends, the dream is an accurate representation of their reality. The image of a coffin portrayed the danger that lurked from the work they performed. It also hinted that death could result from their work. By the thirteenth line, Dacre's dark dream shifts to hope.

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

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

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

The angel then tells Tom that if he is a good boy he can finally have a loving father, which is God. As a child neglected of love, this promise means everything for Tom and all the abandoned chimney sweeper children. This dream was unrealistic on Earth; however, in death there was a chance to experience joy and love, which gave him hope. In the final stanza, Tom awakens from his encouraging dream. He begins his work, warm and comforted, knowing peace awaits him for all eternity in heaven. The last line echoes his strong faith stating, "So, if all do their duty they need not fear

harm" (line 24). He believed that if everyone did what they were supposed to do, then they should not worry, because heaven awaits them.

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

In "Songs of Experience," the perspective is entirely different. There is no specific character in this version which makes it impersonal. The first line starts with "A little black thing among the snow." There is no mention of a child, but a "thing" covered in black among snow. This "thing" is a chimney sweeper covered in soot, abandoned in the cold snow. By starting off with the child being a "thing," dehumanizes the child.

The black symbolizes that the child is impure, meaning the child has lost its innocent nature. The snow symbolizes "bleakness and death surrounding the child" and illustrates "the cold, uncaring world in which he lives" (Afrin 28). In the second line, the child is crying "weep! weep! in notes of woe!" This line is similar to the first poem with the repetition of "weep;" however, in this version, 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 the child's parents are, wondering why a child would be alone and abandoned. The child responds, " they are both gone up to the church to pray." Ironically, the parents have gone to pray while their child is abandoned.

The parents would rather find love in the church, instead of loving their own son. Blake uses this ironic scene to portray how the children were being forgotten, while their sinful parents and authoritative figures prayed.

In the fifth line, the speaker is telling 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 sing notes 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 child to become a chimney sweeper was like putting clothes of death on the child. The clothes of death could also be the frail, unprotective clothing the parents gave their child in the freezing weather.

He says they taught him to sing notes of woe, which means they took away his happiness and gave him misery. He once was 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 who exploit the poor and weak," (Afrin 28). In the last stanza, the child states the parents think they have not damaged him because he is still laughing and can find joy; but he knows they have hurt him. And not just his parents are responsible, 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 Priest and King, Who make up a heaven of our misery." (lines 9-12) This stanza explains how exploiting children spiritually and psychologically can damage them. Although at times the child seems happy, it does not excuse them for the trauma and abuse the parents put their child through.

Blake uses the last two lines as an attack on the government and the church. The child mentions his parents have gone to praise "God and his Priest and King," even though the child feels they are responsible for his enslavement (line 11). These authorities were supposed to bring encouragement, hope, and peace; however, for him, they only brought despair.

The child feels robbed of his purity to serve people of supremacy who 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 Priest and the King, allowed these injustices to plague thousands of children across London. In this piece, Blake reveals children are robbed of innocence and a childhood. According to the speaker, the parents go out to praise God, honor the Priest, and serve the King; however, they make their own heaven out of the children's misery.

Understanding both perspectives is imperative to understand Blake's overall message—the exploitation of the powerless.

The children are miserable but have no authority, making them vulnerable. The two perspectives reveal how a powerless child may react to these unjust conditions. In "Songs of Innocence," the speaker's attitude reveals

how innocence in a child can create an optimistic outlook. However, in "Songs of Experience," Blake shows how corruption in society can destroy this childlike optimism.

Pairing the two perspectives is important because it "helps readers see Blake's message more clearly," and both poems offer "multiple perspectives on the same issue." (McClard 7). Blake wanted to reveal a system that exploited children for selfish gain. The children are innocent and trusting by nature. This admirable quality was manipulated against them. The endings are also different and Blake used this contrast to distinguish innocence from experience.

In "Songs of Innocence," the line ends with: "So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm" (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 children lack the "ability for abstract thought" and "they see their duty as being whatever someone tells them it is." (McClard 14).

This is true, Tom Dacre believed that if he did what his authorities told him, he would be right by God. However, in "Songs of Experience," the ending is more accusing. The closing lines of this piece is: "And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King / 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 and government.

The different endings reveal Blake's views on the church and government exploiting children for their own gain. He believed these high authority figures were manipulating children for their own gain. Blake believed that these children were powerless against a corrupt system and needed "to advocate on the children's behalf" (McClard 2). It is important to read "Songs of Innocence" to understand this. In this perspective, the child is naively trusting the church and government.

It is this unconditional trust that keeps the children imprisoned. In "Songs of Experience," the child knows his youth has been manipulated. He understands that these authorities are making their lives easier, because of the misery the children must endure. One ending is compliant with a broken system, unaware of the abuse. The other is fully aware and full of resentment.

Blake uses both to show how the innocent is being taken advantage of, and how the experienced is placing blame on a broken system. Reading both versions is imperative to understand Blake's overall message. He wanted his readers to understand the magnitude 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 that oppressed them. They were the most powerless in society, and exploited by the most powerful. The children are supposed to enjoy a "naturalistic world of childhood" however they were forced to endure a "world of corruption" (Afrin 29).

The different perspectives show Blake's real meaning behind the poems. He believed the church and government had a corrupt system that abused the

children. Understanding both versions helps the reader see Blake's underlying message.

He sought to unveil a corrupted system that would no longer make a heaven out of a child's misery.