

# "the chimney sweeper" by william blake essay sample

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## **“ The Chimney Sweeper” by William Blake Essay Sample**

A Literary Analysis of Themes within “ The Chimney Sweeper” In modern times childhood is perceived as moments of fun and happiness, being carefree and joyous, with little responsibility or struggle. William Blake was born during the Industrial Revolution which, in part, helped to shape the Romantic Era that is the foundation of his literary works. Through his writings you see a vast contrast in modern day childhood reality versus the reality of childhood set in the Romantic Era and Industrial Revolution. One of Blake’s literary works that fully illustrates this contrast is “ The Chimney Sweeper”, penned in 1789 during the height of the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of the Romantic Era. In “ The Chimney Sweeper” Blake uses imagery, symbolism, and biblical illusion to depict a childhood not common to modern-day illusions, but that of the reality of a childhood in the Industrial Revolution. Through these literary techniques Blake shows the true oppressive nature of the life of a chimney sweep child.

From the beginning of this poem Blake uses imagery rampantly. Colors are used to give the reader a mental image of what a chimney sweep child might look like. In line 8, for example, the color white is used to depict the color of the boy’s hair after a day of work. “ You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair”. Here, Blake gives the idea that this is a child with blonde hair that has been made to look black, like soot. In lines 5 through 7 Blake had already depicted that these children were shaved bald to keep the soot from gathering in their hair, therefore, throughout these four lines of passage we are given a clear picture of what these boys would have looked like. Another

form of imagery used by Blake shows us an idea of why a child might be subjected to this type of labor. In the first passage Blake writes " When my mother died I was very young, / And my father sold me while yet my tongue" (1-2). Children were often sold into lives of labor due to such issues as poverty and in this case, the death of one, or both parents. We are given the image of how sad this boy must have been to learn that his father had made this decision for him, as Blake writes " Could scarcely cry ' weep! ' weep! ' weep! / So your chimneys I sweep and in soot I sleep" (3-4).

Another literary technique used by Blake within this poem is symbolism. After the boy goes to sleep he is bombarded by his dreams. We read that in his dream he sees " That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack, / Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;" (11-12). Blake is using symbolism here to express how the boy perceives his own life now that he lives this daily struggle. He sees his life as a " dead-end" with no way out, much like a deceased person placed in a coffin. Symbolism is also used in this passage in the color of the coffins, using black to suggest that death is the only perceived way out of the horrendous life lead by chimney sweep children. In the next passage we are told that " And by came an Angel who had a bright key, / And he opened the coffins & set them all free;" (13-14) symbolizing that death was the only way out, and that heaven would be the reward in the end. This concept is also analyzed further in Blake's use of biblical illusion.

Within lines 13 through 20 Blake relies on the biblical and religious beliefs of persons during this time period. This biblical allusion is first seen in lines 13

and 14, as aforementioned. Lines 15 and 16 speak of the sweepers running and leaping in fields of green, washing in a river, and then basking in the light of the sun. For the believing Christian child of this era the green fields could represent being set free in Heaven, to run and play like a child should, the washing in the river representative of being washed clean and made whole again, and the light of the sun as the ultimate light that is the promise that God gives. Being left "naked and white, all their bags left behind" (17) is another biblical reference to being washed clean of all their sins and struggles, and then leaving it all of that behind as they ascend into heaven. Lastly, the angel tells Tom "... if he'd be a good boy / He'd have God for his father & never want joy" (19-20), which exhibits the basic, almost childlike, foundation of Christianity that if you are good and do all you are supposed to do in this life by God, you will be rewarded by everlasting life in Heaven.

William Blake's depiction of children who were subjected to a dismal life imposed upon them during the Industrial Revolution and Romantic Era is clearly defined throughout "The Chimney Sweeper". He accomplished this by his use of imagery, symbolism, and biblical allusion. In contrast to today's modern-day perception of what childhood entails, William Blake paints an unobstructed view of the harsh reality of the depicted characters. This also holds true for all child laborers from his era. Blake used this writing to be a voice for these unfortunate children whereas, in contrast to modern-day culture, most adults during his time would have stayed silent.

#### Works Cited

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