

Social criticism in william blakes chimney sweeper

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Social Criticism in William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" 'The Chimney Sweeper' by William Blake criticizes child labor and especially society that sees the children's misery but chooses to look away and it reveals the change of the mental state of those children who were forced to do such cruel work at the age of four to nine years. It shows the change from an innocent child that dreams of its rescue to the child that has accepted its fate. Those lives seem to oppose each other and yet if one reads the poems carefully, one can see that they have a lot in common too.

The poem was inspired by the first laws that were supposed to make the chimney sweeper's life better, but since those laws were loosely enforced Blake wanted to draw attention to their horrible situation and wanted society to be aware of this problem to reinforce the existing and make new laws. Blake shows the life of two different chimney sweepers, one very naive child, Tom, that somehow managed to keep some of its childlike innocence and one that he calls 'experienced' that sees his life more realistic and shows who is to blame for this situation.

One can find many phrases that underline Tom's innocence throughout the poem but the symbols of the hair that is compared to a lamb's wool and the 'White hair' confirm that first impression one gets when reading the poem. Little Tom's dream is another symbol of his innocence. He dreams of an angel that comes to rescue him with a 'bright key'. In Gardener's book *Blake's Innocence and Experience Retraced* he comments on the dream but also has a very interesting theory of the black coffin's meaning.

The gowned figure of Christ appears in the illustrations to all these poems, and in 'The Chimney Sweeper' the same gowned figure releases the sys from the coffin " of black", which epitomizes the horizontal flues (the size of a child's coffin) which killed so many infant sweeps (Gardner 66). His theory is that the black coffins symbolize the small chimneys where many children got suck and suffocated. Which is a reasonable theory; chimneys that were built at that time were made very narrow and many children weren't able to get out of them anymore.

Here Blake criticizes that many children had to Jeopardize their life to do their Job. At first there was a poor attempt to regulate this: children were sweeping the chimneys thou clothes so the clothes could not get caught and imprison the children in a chimney but this solution was inhumane as it takes away the child's dignity and another point that had to be called to attention at that time: The children's rights as they did not have any. And it wasn't just about the children's rights but also without clothes the children hurt their knees and elbows very much.

This was even worse because of the infections through the soot as chimney sweepers were washed rarely and were sleeping on the soot they swept during the day and in a black and very narrow room with all the other chimney sweepers. Blake also criticizes that those children are in complete darkness most of their time. They 'rose in the dark (line 21), spend their day sweeping chimneys and when they were done they would walk from door to door asking for more work and then got back into their black rooms to go to sleep.

So this stands in contrast with the life little Tom dreams of where he is being washed, can run free and enjoy his life as children should be able to do. 'And washed in the river, and shine in the sun/ then naked and white, all their bags left behind/ they rise upon the clouds and sport in the wind' (line 6-18). Tom's dream creates a bit of hope in the reader that Tom might be able to be happy and consoled by this dream but this hope is dismissed at the end of the poem.

Though Tom is warm and happy inside, the cold morning shows that in reality the angel's consolation is not much of a consolation and the reader knows that even the older boys help that the hair cannot be spoiled if it is shorn off would not help much either. Also those words like dark and harm create a baleful atmosphere and through the broken rhyme scheme the reader is thrown back into Tom's dark reality. So at the ND the reader does not have a choice but to deal with this reality and think about the boys situation which is what Blake intended The conditions of the places the children slept in were another point that Blake criticizes. He sleeps in soot instead of the early mother's bosom or lap. But just as the mother shields the child from the intense beams of God's love until he is able to bear them alone, so the sweeper's soot is ironically his shield' (Inurn 19). As this quote states the child should sleep on the mothers lap instead of soot that a child is supposed to be loved and taken care of but instead it is sold and surrounded by luckless.

I disagree with the second statement that the mother shields a child from the intense beams of God' and what it is compared to; the reason why I

disagree is that Blake was not a very religious person for his time and I doubt that he meant to draw a connection between the mother's loving shield to an ironic shield of soot. This interpretation is going away too much from the original statement and there is too much imagination in this thought. Blake criticizes that children were so young when they were sold to be chimney sweepers that they couldn't talk properly yet.

The reason for this was that the chimneys were so narrow an older child would not be able to crawl through. This fact is shown very clear in the first line of both poems but the picture gets much more distinct in the second and third line where the child says he could not even pronounce the word 'sweep' and says Weep instead. Those children were too young to be aware of their situation until they were enslaved, and when they did understand it, they would cry like Tom when he gets his hair cut.

The only consolation the other older boys can give is that now his beautiful white hair cannot be spoiled. But if this is a good consolation at all is up to the reader to decide. Blake does not indicate whether he agrees or disagrees.

From the mature or maybe the experienced point of view, it is in fact no consolation at all but little Tom seems to believe it is a good one. When my mother died I was very young, and my father sold me while yet my tongue could scarcely cry N. 'pep! Weep! Weep! " (line 1-3). But the M. 'pep!

Weep! Weep! " does have two meanings. The first one I just explained but it also suggests that even the innocent child is suffering and shows it through weeping. Though he does not consciously realize it yet, subconsciously he is weeping and not warm and happy at all. The nameless second child uses

this sentence again, but here it does not symbolize the child's inability to speak but the experience that is causing the child to weep. Another point of indirect criticism is that chimney sweepers were punished if they disobeyed.

One is not told directly what was to happen to the children if they did not do as they were told one only knows that the child is going to be harmed if the work is not done 'so if all do their duty they need not fear harm' (line 24).

This criticizes the way those children were treated. Some sweepers had to climb up a chimney while the fire was burning in the fire place; if the child refused they were forced 'by fire, slaps, prodding with poles, or by the pricking of the bottoms of their feet with pins' (Inurn 17).

Blake also criticizes the church, God and society. In the Songs of Innocence, little Tom's dream can be seen as a sign from God or from heaven and one can view it as a metaphorical representation of the church. So it implies that the chimney sweepers believe in the church and God's help just as they believe in the dream's message. This means the church's help is compared to the angels' consolation that if Tom was 'a good boy/ he'd have God for his father and never want joy' (line 19-20) which is no consolation.

This is Blake's indirect criticism of the church that does not help those children and of God. He raises the question of how God can be truly good if he sees this injustice and does not act to prevent those children from being harmed. And Punter explains in this book about the Songs that Blake used to '... Associate the angelic with goodness but increasingly as the years went by he connected it with a mind of hypocritical self-righteousness...' (Punter 17)

so the angel in Tom's dream would not be a good sign but a symbol for a hypocritical society.

In the second poem the criticism goes on as the question is raised where the parents of the chimney sweeper are, since it is their duty to take care of their child; but they left the child and went to pray to God instead. And there is more criticism of the parents: The child asks if they sold it because it was happy and if it is its time to suffer now because it has been happy once? This question is meant for the reader to think about if it can be right that a child has been sold because it did not show how much it is suffering. In the second poem, the reader gets to know that the child is not allowed to go to church to pray to God.

Blake criticizes that children were outcasts of society just because of their profession and there are records showing that chimney sweepers were thrown out of church if they tried to participate mass even if they were wearing the right clothes, which only a few chimney sweepers were provided with in the first place. As an instance in what a manner these poor children are treated, I remember an anecdote of a little band of them, who had the fortune to be supplied with Sunday's clothing; their faces, however, proclaimed them chimney-sweepers.

Curiosity, or information that the churches were houses of God, carried them within the gates of a church; but alas! They were driven out by the beadle, with this taunt, What have chimney sweepers to do in a Church? (Inurn 18). Since there were many families that were so poor at the time the poem was written that they could not feed and sold them in order to prevent them from

starvation. This is what Gardner means in this quotation: 'The Gap between the respectable and the non-respectable poor was therefore widening' (Gardner xvii).

The two Songs show some contrast but as one can see in the criticism there are many symbols that show up in both poems. Little Tom's white hair that is shorn off shows his innocence that is being taken away from him yet the nameless child in the second poem is referred to as a 'little black thing, the nameless child is almost seems black among the whitesnow, which shows that his innocence already is lost and that experience has given him the black color that makes him stand out from civilization. Nowadays one could also compare this to black people being outcasts of society in America that were sold just like the chimney sweepers.

And the word sold is meant to stand out in the second line. Just like the black slaves in America those children were sold to a master to be sweeps. This would have been criticized a lot more nowadays as slavery still was quite common back then when the poem was written. The child in the second poem does not have a name and there are several reasons for that: Blake did not want to focus on one child and its situation but show that in fact there are many children and therefore the child doesn't have a gender so it doesn't represent just boys or just girls as they were treated the same.

This is a contrast to the first chimney sweeper Tom, who has a name, emotions and feelings so one can sympathize with him. The second child's experience is not presented as clearly as Tom's innocence but through its unveiled vision of its destiny and the way it accepts its fate. The child knows

it has been wronged by its parent's who were supposed to take good care of it and sold it like an object but it also has been wronged by '... God and the priest and the King who make up a heaven of our misery (line 11). They try to pretend it's a perfect world and do not look at those children too closely, but since they make up a heaven... (line 13) - a better world, they clearly must be aware of the misery around them. Also Blake is playing with the reader's conscience in the Songs of Innocence; the child says that he is sweeping your' chimney. The reader is included and addressed directly this 'implicates the reader in the circle of exploration' (Seasick 53). This is also shown in Garner's book: Alone among all the voices of Innocence, the chimney sweeper speaks from unrelieved destitution and an enforced self-reliance; his counterpart in Experience speaks from familiar exploration.

The two sweeps state a condition, the difference being in relationships, as the illustrations signify (52). Blake does not speak for himself in his poems, he creates a narrator that states his thoughts; this way Blake can show two different states of mind or point of views without disagreeing with his previous statement and does not become unbelievable through those contradictions that may result from this. Blake believes that one can't separate those states (innocence and experience) from each other, they just show the same world from a different perspective.

Blake's poems present a contradiction between the states of innocence and experience, two phases through which all people must pass. It shows the untainted world of an innocent child against the mature world of experience and corruption. Tom is both innocent and yet somehow experienced too

because of his hard work. When he is conscious he is innocent but in his dreams - even though they are very good and innocent, he still knows that it is not the right way he is being treated, because he is dreaming of a better life; '... The child must indulge in symbolic compensations for his real lot...' (Adams 261). One can also see this in the contrast in the sentence that '... If he'd be a good boy....' (line 19). Being a good boy means doing his duty here. The contrast in this sentence is that actually people are supposed to be good and do their duty, but in this case to do his duty would mean that he hurts himself and maybe dies trying to 'be good'. Blake does not ally with one particular point of view since all humans have to go through both states.

In the Songs of Innocence life is seen through the child's eyes thus showing the innocence but in the Songs of Experience it almost appears as if it is seen through the eyes of an adult, showing that children can't stay innocent in those conditions. It shows that sooner or later the child can't believe in those promises the angel gives in the Songs of Innocence and that it will lose its innocence. This innocence '... Can be both imaginative and pathetic at the same time - imaginative because the innocent child can transcend his outer environment... ND pathetic because the child so obviously suffers from that outward existence' Adams 206 This quotation will underline my statement that even though the child seems innocent, it is affected by the horrible things that are happening to the child. It also shows the conflict that the reader has to deal with: does he believe in Tom's innocence and hopes everything will work out for Tom so he can stay happy and warm or does the reader believe that the child cannot be this naive and even try to believe the

angel. In my opinion the reader cannot believe in Tom's happy ending as he knows too much.

As we read the poem, sitting beneath the chimney newly swept in Golden Square, our discomfort arises not from the necessity of chimney-sweeping, but from the sense that a child may belong so little to the living that he is driven for necessary solace to a posthumous exploration (Gardner 52).

Gardner shows that the reader will have to decide what he believes in the end. Works Cited Primary Sources Beer, John. Romanticism, Revolution and Language. The Fate of the Word from Samuel Johnson to George Eliot.

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