

The Chimney Sweeper

- William Blake

'The Chimney Sweeper' is one of William Blake's most outspoken poems set in the dark backdrop of the raging child labour in the late 18th and 19th century England. The use of the anecdote, the tone and tenor, and the biblical allusions in the poem contribute significantly to the central theme of innocence in Blake's 'Songs of Innocence'.

Scholars have suggested that 'The Chimney Sweeper' was inspired by the agitation which had long been trying to pass laws against the use of children as chimney sweeps. Britain's Act for the Better Regulation of Chimney Sweepers and their Apprentices stipulated that sweepers should not be made to begin work until they were eight, and that they should be washed once a week. The Act also observed that children should not be compelled to climb chimneys with fires in them. But, this law was not effectively enforced. Blake therefore felt that greater emphasis should be laid on the safety of these helpless sweepers.

With this focus on children's rights in mind, Blake devotes his poem to exposing the dangers of the job of chimney sweeping and the exploitation of children in this line of work. The very first stanza of the poem reveals that children at a very tender age were apprenticed by their parents to master sweepers. This amounted to both child labour and involuntary servitude. Throughout the first three stanzas, Blake uses powerful imagery to illustrate the terrible conditions in which the children worked. The soot in which the narrator sleeps is not metaphorical, but literal. This is because climbing boys did indeed sleep on the layers of soot that they had to. Moreover, the 'coffins of black' mentioned in the poem speaks of the narrow chimneys in which children sometimes got stuck and suffocated.

Blake attempts to draw our empathy with the chimney sweepers by the use of an anecdote. The poem makes the reader see through the perspective of a chimney sweeper who was so young that he could not pronounce the word 'weep'. The speaker's inability to voice a word of protest exposes the grave injustice of putting young children in such a dangerous line of work.

The second part of the poem focuses on a vision that Tom Dacre, a chimney sweeper, has in which he finds himself locked up in 'coffins of black' along with Dick, Joe, Ned, Jack and thousands of others. Then an angel appears to 'set them all free' from their oppressive conditions of chimney sweeping. Tom dreams of the freedom to have fun in nature. The angel reassures Tom saying:

...if he'd be a good boy,

He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

In fact, Tom's dream is the epitome of a child's innocence. It shows that a child can still be optimistic even in the worst of situations of life. But, this innocence can be both imaginative and pathetic at the same time – imaginative because the innocent boy can imagine beyond his harsh circumstances of life and pathetic because in reality he cannot get out of it.