

# **The Chimney Sweeper: When my mother died I was very young**

BY WILLIAM BLAKE

"The Chimney Sweeper" is the title of a poem by William Blake, published in two parts in *Songs of Innocence* in 1789 and *Songs of experience* in 1794. The poem "The Chimney Sweeper" is set against the dark background of child labour that was prominent in England in the late 18th and 19th century. At the age of four and five, boys were sold to clean chimneys, due to their small size. These children were oppressed and had a diminutive existence that was socially accepted at the time. Children in this field of work were often unfed and poorly clothed. In most cases, these children died from either falling through the chimneys or from lung damage and other horrible diseases from breathing in the soot. In the earlier poem, a young chimney sweeper recounts a dream by one of his fellows, in which an angel rescues the boys from coffins and takes them to a sunny meadow; in the later poem, an apparently adult speaker encounters a child chimney sweeper abandoned in the snow while his parents are at church or possibly even suffered death where church is referring to being with God.

In 'The Chimney Sweeper' of *Innocence*, Blake can be interpreted to criticise the view of the Church that through work and hardship, reward in the next life would be attained; this results in an acceptance of exploitation observed in the closing lines 'if all do their duty they need not fear harm.' Blake uses this poem to highlight the dangers of an innocent,... naive view, demonstrating how this allows the societal abuse of child labour.

*The Chimney Sweeper* consists of six quatrains, each following the AABB rhyme scheme, with two rhyming couplets per quatrain. Through this poem, the poet sheds light on the pitiable condition of the chimney sweepers who were being exploited by their Masters.

This is a poem which describes the rampant bondage labor, child labor, exploitation of children at tender age, and the pitiable condition of the orphaned children or the poor children who were sold by their poor parents.

In all, this poem sarcastically attacks the advanced societies that keep their eyes shut toward these children, but act as being generous among their near and dear ones by holding or attending some charity shows/functions for the poor and down-trodden people in their country. Moreover, it is surprising to note here that these social evils even today prevail in our society.

I was just a little boy when my mother died. My father then sold me into the chimney sweep profession before I even knew how to speak. Since then, all I've done is sweep chimneys and sleep covered in dirt.

A new boy arrived one day; his name was Tom Dacre. He cried when his curly lamb-like hair was shaved off. I told him not to worry: with a shaven head, his beautiful locks wouldn't have to get dirty from all the chimney dust.

Later that night, Tom fell asleep. He had a vision in a dream. He saw row upon row of dead chimney sweepers in black coffins.

An angel came along with a key and unlocked the coffins, setting the sweeps free. Then they frolic in green fields, bathing in clear water and basking in the sun.

Naked, clean, and without their work implements, the sweeps rise up to heaven on clouds and play in the wind. The angel tells Tom that if he behaves well God will take care of him and make sure he is happy.

The next day, Tom woke up. We got out of bed before dawn and went with our bags and chimney brushes to our work. It was a cold morning but Tom seemed fine. If we all just work hard, nothing bad will happen.

#### Stanza 1

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry “weep! ‘weep! ‘weep! ‘weep!”  
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

In these twenty-four lines of William Blake's poem, *The Chimney Sweeper*, a little boy, is telling the story of his despairing life as well as the sad tales of other chimney's sweeper boys. The little boy narrates that he was very young when his died. He was then sold by his father to a Master Sweeper when his age was so tender that he could not even pronounce the word 'sweep' and cryingly pronounced it 'weep' and wept all the time. The pun intended through the use of word 'weep' three times in the third line of this stanza holds pathetic significance. Most chimney sweepers, like him, were so young that they could not pronounce sweep and lisped 'weep'. Since that tender age the little boy is sweeping chimney and sleeping at night in the soot-smearred body, without washing off the soot (blackness).

#### Stanza 2

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head  
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,  
“Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,  
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.”

In the second stanza, the little narrator tells us the woeful tale of Tom Dacre. This is a very famous character in Blake's many poems. Tom was called 'Dacre' because he belonged to Lady Dacre's Almshouse, which was situated between St. James Street and Buckingham Road. The inmates of the Almshouse were foundling orphans, who were allowed to be adopted by the poor only. It may be a foster father who encased the boy Tom by selling him to a Master Sweeper. Tom wept when his head was shaved, just as the back of a lamb is shaved for wool. The narrator then told Tom not to weep and keep his peace. The narrator told Tom to be calm because lice will not breed in the pate without hair and there will be no risk for hair to catch fire.

### **Stanza 3**

**And so he was quiet, & that very night,  
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!  
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,  
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;**

**The third stanza continues the story of Tom who was calmed by the consoling words of the narrator. That same night while sleeping Tom saw a wonderful vision. He saw in his dream that many Chimney sweepers, who were named Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack, were dead and their bodies were lying in caged coffins, made of black-colored wood.**

### **Stanza 4**

**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.**

**In the fourth stanza, the vision is completed. An Angel, who was carrying a shining key, came near the coffins. The Angel opened the coffins containing the bodies and set all the bodies free from the bondage of coffins. The freed little sweepers of the chimney ran down a green ground, washed themselves in the water of a river and dried themselves in the sunlight to give out a clean shine. This was really a very delightful moment for these chimney sweepers, who got freed from the shackles of bondage labor, exploitation and child labor.**

### **Stanza 5**

**Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,  
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.  
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,**

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

In the fifth stanza, the little boy continues narrating the dream vision of Tom. All the little boys were naked and white after washing. They were naked because their bags of clothes were left behind. They cast off the burden of life along with the bags of soot at the time of death. Now naked and white, the little chimney sweeper boys ride the clouds and play in the wind. The image of clouds floating freely is Blake's metaphor for the freedom from the material boundaries of the body and an important visual symbol. The Angel told Tom that if he would be a good boy he would have God for his father and there would never be lack of happiness for him.

## **Stanza 6**

**And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark**

**And got with our bags & our brushes to work.**

**Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;**

**So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.**

In the last stanza of Blake's poem, *The Chimney Sweeper*, the narrator tells that Tom woke up and his dream vision broke up. Tom and other little sweeper boys rose up from their beds in the dark. They made themselves ready to work taking their bags for soot and the brushes to clean chimney. The morning was cold, but Tom, after the dream, was feeling warm and happy.

In the last line of the poem, a moral has been thrown to us: **If all do their duty, they need not fear any harm.** The last stanza shows the reality of the sweepers' life. The antithesis between the vision of summer sunshine and this dark, cold reality is deeply ironic. Even though the victims have been mollified, the readers know that innocent trust is abused.

---

## **The Theme of Childhood and Hardships of Life**

"The Chimney Sweeper" is a bleak poem told from the perspective of a chimney sweep, a young boy living in 1700s London who has to earn a living doing the dangerous work of cleaning soot from people's chimneys. The poem makes no efforts to romanticize this life, portraying it as intensely impoverished and tough. Indeed, the poem argues that this is a kind of exploitation that effectively robs the children of their childhood, stealing their freedom and joy.

---

Early on, the poem establishes a sense of the hardship in the lives of young poor boys in 18th century London. This isn't a task that requires much imagination—chimney sweeping was terrible, dangerous, and exhausting work for children. The reader quickly learns that the speaker's mother is dead, and that he was sold by his father into labor. Tom Dacre probably had a similar upbringing. Now, he's had his head forcibly shaved to improve his effectiveness as a sweep. Both children, then, are forced into a miserable world. Indeed, chimney sweeping makes up pretty much the entirety of the boys' existence. They sweep all day, and sleep "in soot"—both in terms of being dirty when they go to bed, and in the way their daily hardship affects their dreams.

In fact, it's in one of these dreams that Tom Dacre has the vision that contains the poem's key message. This dream, however, starts bleakly. He imagines "That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack / Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black." The young sweep, then, is fully aware of the realities of his life—it's going to be short, brutish, and nasty.

This section of the poem is effectively a pastoral—a representation of idyllic nature. The kind of instinctive behavior depicted here, the poem implies, is what the boys should be occupied with—not getting stuck in people's chimneys, working all day just to be able to eat. This vision seems to emerge from Tom's imagination instinctively, as though Tom knows deep down what childhood *should* be like.

All in all, then, the boys' hardships, combined with the innocence of this part of the dream, casts doubt on the truthfulness of the poem's conclusion—that the sweeps only need to "do their duty" in order for God to take care of them and make them happy.

## The Theme of Religion and Salvation

On the surface of it, "The Chimney Sweep" is a poem about salvation from a life of hardship. Young boys, forced into working London's chimneys, look to religion as a way of finding hope amid the misery. This hope, they seem to think, comes from the Christian religion. No matter the suffering in earthly life, each "good boy" who is well-behaved and dutiful will be rewarded with "joy" and "God for his father." However, the poem questions whether this is actually true—and suggests it might just be a convenient way of making those boys into obedient little workers.

On a surface level, Tom's vision undoubtedly *does* offer a brief glimpse of hope and salvation. An angel visits him, bringing a message from God. This angel frees the dead boys, and they are allowed to frolic freely in nature before ascending to heaven. This part of the dream seems legitimate and rings true to Blake's ideas about childhood—that it should be free, imaginative, and joyful. Up there, in heaven, the children get to play, to be kids again—they "sport in the wind." Religion, then, appears to provide solace in this life through the promise of joy and freedom in the next.

This religious fulfillment is linked to being a "good boy," and here it's possible to interpret the poem's message in two ways. The poem could be taken at face value: being good results

in access to heaven. But the poem *also* implicitly considers how religious belief is useful for getting people to accept the hardships in life. After all, what opportunity do the boys actually have to be “good,” considering all they really do is sweep chimneys and sleep? Perhaps being good means approaching this work with a sense of duty and attentiveness that masks how horrendous the work is. In fact, the poem seems to suggest that religion makes the boys *accept* the miserable conditions of their lives.

The poem thus concludes with a sense of uneasy resolution, as though Tom’s suffering is somehow solved by the angel’s visit. Both he and the speaker wake up the next morning, pick up their tools, and head out to work (almost as if they are adults going about their daily business). “[I]f all do their duty, they need not fear harm”—so the poem concludes. But it’s not difficult to detect a note of sadness in this moment, as though the truthfulness of this hope—and Tom’s dream—is only temporary, or even entirely false.

The poem’s ending can also be seen as a *lack* of resolution, then. It’s unclear how long the promise of religious salvation can stave off the realities of suffering and hardship. Indeed, if read side-by-side with Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Experience* (the poem here is from *Songs of Innocence*), the idea that the boys have been misled is pretty much impossible to avoid.

## Questions:

- 1- What is the theme of the poem "The Chimney Sweeper" by William Blake?
- 2-Discuss the theme of exploitation of children in "The Chimney Sweeper"?
- 3- What were the living conditions of children at the time of "The Chimney Sweeper" like?
- 4- How are the ill effects of industrialization explored in the poem "The Chimney Sweeper"?
- 5-In Blake's time, it was common practice in London to use small boys for cleaning chimneys, which was dangerous and often fatal work. Discuss
- 6-How do you know that the children in the poem do not like the work they do?