

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

BY WILLIAM BLAKE

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.

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."

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;

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.

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.

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.

The Chimney Sweeper

"The Chimney Sweeper" is a poem by William Blake, published in his 1789 collection *Songs of Innocence*. The poem is told from the perspective of a young chimney sweep, a boy who has been sold into labor by his father. The sweep meets a new recruit to the chimney sweeping gang named Tom Dacre, who arrives terrified. After the speaker tries to reassure Tom, Tom dreams of an angel who sets the chimney sweeps free, allowing them to play in green fields and then ascend to heaven. This dream seems to suggest that if the boys are obedient workers, they'll get into heaven. Implicitly, though, the poem takes issue with this idea, suggesting that it's a form of indoctrination for the Church. The companion poem of the same title, published in *Songs of Experience*, makes this position—that promises of heavenly salvation are simply a means to exploit child labor—crystal clear.

The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)" Themes

A. Theme of Hardship and Childhood

Hardship and Childhood

"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.

The poem then offers a brief glimpse of what childhood should actually be like, which is full of freedom, joy, and nature:

Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,

And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,

They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.

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.

B. Theme Religion and Redemption

Religion and Redemption

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.