

6th- Lecture

William Blake's (Songs of Experience) Chimney Sweeper

Summary

The narrator introduces the boy chimney sweep as no more than a 'little black thing'. The child is so young that he cannot even pronounce the traditional cry of 'sweep, sweep' which the chimney sweeps of Blake's time called out to advertise their presence as they walked through the streets. When the narrator asks him where his parents are, he simply replies that they have 'both gone up to the church to pray'. He then tells how they sold him to be a chimney sweep but still refuse to accept that they have done him any wrong. In the final two lines he attacks the church and the king for pretending that all is right with the world and for closing their eyes to 'our misery'.

Analysis

In both of the first two verses Blake employs basic colour imagery to contrast the 'little black thing' with the white of the snow, which represents the purity of the childhood that the sweep has had taken away from him. The sweep's clothes are 'clothes of death' not just because the soot has turned them black, the colour of mourning, but also because the soot will soon kill the child. The greatest shock of the poem comes in the second verse, where the boy says it was 'Because I was happy' that his parents condemned him to this early death. Blake has deliberately given us a sentence which doesn't make sense in order to show us how totally wrong it is to violate the purity of the child. The rhythm of the last verse becomes quicker and lighter as the sweep describes how his parents 'praise God' that everything is fine, but slows right down as the biting last line exposes the hypocrisy at the heart of state religion. The law passed by Parliament in 1788 to protect child sweeps had failed to make any difference by the time Blake published *Songs of Experience* in 1794. The poet's anger at society's indifference blazes out as never before.

Introduction

The poem The Chimney Sweeper (from Songs of Experience) by William Blake brings into light the animal-like condition of children during the 17th and 18th-century era. It was the time when the Industrial Revolution took place. It led to urbanisation and thus slums, child labour, poverty, depression etc were quite common.

William Blake, as a human and poet, was against these atrocities. Not only this, but he is also critical of religious people (of Church) who were equally responsible for atrocities on poor and particularly the children.

Here in the poem, the poet tells the readers about a child who is Chimney Sweeper and happens to meet and talk to him. The poet asks the young boy about his parents and the young boy tells the poet his sorrowful story.

The poem has been divided into three stanzas having 4 lines each. The rhyme scheme is AABB. As a part of *Songs of Experience*, the poem discusses dark themes of [life](#).

The Chimney Sweeper Summary

Stanza 1

The poet says that one day, he happens to see *a little black thing among the snow*. Let us try to understand this line. The boy is described as little, black and a thing.

‘Little’ because he is young, ‘black’ either because he is from Black Race or because he is covered with soot (of Chimney) and third he is called ‘thing’ because in those days humans worked like animals and condition of children was more pitiful. They were paid less and forced to work more.

Finally, the poet tells that he (the young boy) was in the snow, meaning that it was chilling cold. To make the complete sentence, a young boy who was dirty with soot was working in the chimney in the chilling cold.

Another thing worth noticing here is that there is the juxtaposition of black and snow (white). Black symbolises doom and death while snow or winter symbolises solitude. Another meaning of these two symbols could be the life of a young boy which was white and black (lacking the colours of life).

The child is *crying “weep! ‘weep!’ in the notes of woe!* Weep weep is either used for poetic effect or it means that he was weeping or that he was trying to say sweep sweep but because of chilling cold and grief, he yelled out these words. “Notes of woe” means his words expressed his deep grief.

The poet goes to him and asks, *“Where are thy (your) father and mother?”* and encourages him to answer by adding *“say?”*. The young chimney sweeper replies that *“they are both gone up to the church to pray”*.

Though going to church and praying is something which everybody appreciates. But here in the poem, the child does not appreciate their praying and rather is angry over them.

Stanza 2

The child continues saying that his parents saw him being *happy* (enjoying) in *the heath* (green grass or park) and also smiling (playing and enjoying) in *the winter's snow* and didn't like that.

Thus *they* put on him *the clothes of death and taught him to sing the notes of woe*. They mean his parents, clothes [of death](#) refer to the torn and dirty clothes and notes of woe means “weep! weep!” or “sweep! sweep!” which he describes in stanza 1. In other words, his parents forced him to work in the chimney – child labour.

Stanza 3

The child continues his story. He tells the poet that now that he is working, he poses to be happy, dances and sings in front of his parents to avoid expresses his misery, his parents think that they haven't done anything wrong to him and rather for them it was a good step for the young child.

Ironically they are wrong and have done a lot of harm to him like made his life black and white and made him sing “notes of woe” etc. The child further says that his parents have gone to praise God and his Priest and King. God, Priest and King here symbolise the government, religious leaders and the upper-class people.

It must be noted that during the time of Blake, there was taxation (for the government), religious donations (for priests) and loan (paid by poor to the rich people). Nobody cared for poor children. This is why the child sorrowfully says that the Church has made up a heaven of their misery.

Heaven of poor's misery here means that the lower class people were subjected to suppression, taxation, and forced labour. The upper class which included priests, rich people and royal family enjoyed their lives.