The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Innocence)

POEM TEXT

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.

SUMMARY

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.

THEMES

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-4
- Lines 5-8
- Lines 11-16
- Lines 21-24

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.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-24

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

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.

"The Chimney Sweeper" doesn't waste any time in launching into the bleak world of its central characters—two poor young boys living in 18th century London, where they work cleaning people's chimneys. One of the remarkable aspects of the poem is the tone of the first-person speaker, who presents the tragic circumstances of his life in a way that is shockingly matter-of fact. The speaker explains how his mother died when he was "very young" (and he is still very young), while his father sold him into the life that he now leads.

The speaker explains that he became a chimney sweep before he could even really talk properly, before he knew how to "cry 'weep! weep! weep! weep!'" The epizeuxis here—the immediate repetition of the word "weep"—emphasizes the speaker's poverty and hardship. This line captures the extent to which the sweep's situation is worthy of weeping. Additionally, the fact that the speaker had hardly learned to "weep" when he was forced to work captures how his childhood was robbed

from him. That is, crying—a perfectly normal activity for a child—is something that the speaker has barely had time to do, because he was forced into the world of work at such a young age.

In line 4, the poem makes a significant word choice, opting to describe the chimneys as "your chimneys." It's as if the speaker is sweeping the *reader's* chimney. This makes the reader complicit in the exploitation that causes the chimney sweeps' suffering, suggesting that everyone has some degree of responsibility for the society in which they live. Chimney sweeps were sometimes as young as four, forced to climb dirty chimneys in cramped and suffocating conditions. Their labor was usually rewarded only with meals and somewhere extremely basic to sleep—they weren't paid.

Indeed, the sibilance (a form of consonance that employs /s/ sounds) in this line helps convey the dustiness of the sweeps' working environment: "So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep." This /s/ sound, which links closely with the word "sweep" itself, occurs throughout the poem.

LINES 5-8

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."

The second stanza introduces the poem's key character (other than the speaker himself): Tom Dacre. The stanza recounts what happens when Tom, implied to be a new recruit, is introduced into the world of chimney sweeping. The adjective "little" emphasizes his youthfulness and powerlessness, while the caesurae throughout the stanza build a sense of tentativeness and fear by disrupting the poem's flow.

To further underline Tom's innocence, the speaker compares his pre-shaven head to "a lamb's back" through simile. Blake often treats the lamb as a symbol of innocence because of its small size and vulnerability (see his poem "The Lamb"). The shaving of Tom's hair symbolically shears him of his innocence, casting him into the grim and exploitative world of chimney sweeping. The /l/ consonance in "curled like a lamb's back" is gentle, quiet, and even fearful. But the /k/ sounds in this phrase are loud and bright by comparison, signaling a kind of sudden nakedness or exposure: "curled like a lamb's back."

Here, the speaker uses his experience as a chimney sweep to try and comfort "little Tom Dacre." He tells the new boy not to worry about losing his hair, because at least now the soot can't spoil it. The poem is full of tension here. On the one hand, the speaker is being sincere and empathetic—indeed, the horrors of his and Tom's situation are no fault of his own.

However, the speaker's words in lines 7 and 8 foreshadow how religion is used later in the poem to get the boys to accept hardship and suffering. The speaker might well be right—there is no use in Tom crying about his hair—but the fact that this is true shows the deep and systemic oppression that exerts pressure on the young boys.

LINES 9-12

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 works as a transition between Tom's arrival into the group of chimney sweepers and Tom's dream later that night. The shift from reality to dreams is aided by the sibilance in the stanza's first and second lines:

> And so he was quiet, & that very night,
> As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!

The /s/ sound has already been linked with the sooty world of chimney sweeping, but here it also has a gentle, almost hypnotic quality as though the sound itself is luring Tom to sleep. This shows how much his new fate is weighing on his mind as he tries to get some rest. (Note that the /z/ sound is also often considered sibilant, and certainly supports the poem's tone here; as such, we have highlighted those sounds above as well.)

Lines 11 and 12 mark the start of Tom's dream, which lasts all the way up until line 21. It's an unrelentingly bleak vision at first:

> [...] thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,
> Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

This is a vision of death, with Tom's unconscious mind developing an image to match the horrors of the sweeps' reality. Indeed, sweeps often got suffocated by fumes or trapped in narrow chimney flutes, so fatalities were not uncommon. Notice how this vision of death is represented by the consonant hard /c/ sound. To make the hard /c/ sound, the mouth has to stop all airflow (try it!) before voicing the consonant. This means that the reader, without even knowing it, has to perform the line by stopping their own breath—which fits the macabre and claustrophobic vision of asphyxiation inside a chimney.

Additionally, the rapid-fire list of first names in line 11 suggests how these kinds of deaths were commonplace in industrialized London. These monosyllabic names were all typical names for English boys—there could have been hundreds of Joes and Neds who died from working in the chimneys in the 1700s. This list of typical names thus captures how anonymous these boys actually were, how unnoticed their deaths went.

LINES 13-16

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.

The fourth stanza expands on Tom Dacre's dream, which was begun in lines 11 and 12. This dream offers a vision of freedom that contrasts with the oppressive reality faced by the chimney sweeps.

An angel sent by God arrives to open the sweeps' coffins, and sets them free. This imagery suggests that religion offers salvation from real life. It's worth remembering that this poem appears in Blake's book *Songs of Innocence*—not *Songs of Experience*. This means that, while the poem is spoken by an innocent speaker, it doesn't necessarily have to be *interpreted* innocently by readers who have more life experience. In other words, readers don't have to take the poem at face value.

Based on Blake's other poems, it's fair to see this poem both as a song of praise to the Christian faith *and* as a criticism of the way that Christian institutions exploited people and their beliefs. With that in mind, then, the poem seems to purposefully lead the reader to see Tom Dacre's dream as somewhat naive and simplistic. But the poem *also* offers a vision of what Blake thought childhood *ought* to be like—free, joyful, and not limited to an urban industrial environment.

Accordingly, Dacre's dream is distinctly pastoral. It presents an idyllic, natural scene—"a green plain," rivers, and sunshine—which contrasts with the black, sooty environment that chimney sweeps have to put up with. The caesurae in line 15 give the line a bouncy feel in keeping with the image of children playing outside:

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

The /n/ consonance in this line, also highlighted above, has a playful sound to it too.

This is picked up in the next line (line 16) as well, which also adds some /sh/ consonance and sibilance:

> And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

This is a vision of purity and joy, but still an earthly one. Although this vision features an angel, and eventually depicts an ascent into heaven, at this point it still represents something could be become a reality on earth without God's intervention. That is, if society were different, and valued childhood innocence more highly (something Blake felt strongly about), then this vision could easily be made real.

LINES 17-20

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.

The fifth stanza continues with Tom Dacre's dream, bringing it to its conclusion. Essentially, the chimney sweeps, having been liberated from earthly life (after getting to play cheerfully on the "green plain"), ascend to heaven. They are "naked & white" because they are made pure again, literally and metaphorically shaking off the work clothes and sooty complexions that came with their earthly work. It's worth noting that sometimes sweeps were made to climb the chimneys in the nude if the flues were especially narrow. While this would have made the children extremely dirty, their ascent to heaven makes them extremely clean.

In the dream, the sweeps leave behind "their bags," those in which the children would collect the soot from the chimney. They also leave behind the emotional and psychological *baggage* of their earthly lives. Indeed, the typical image of heaven as a place above the clouds also furthers Blake's critique of the chimney sweep profession. The job exists because of the Industrial Revolution, which filled English cities with black smoke—clouds. Rising above them in the dream, then, represents freedom from the society that prioritizes industry over child wellbeing.

Lines 19 to 20 are key and can be interpreted in two different (but not exclusive) ways. Here, the angel gives Tom a message. Essentially, his instructions are that Tom should be dutiful and obedient—"a good boy." In return, he will have God's love and always be happy ("never want joy"). Indeed, God will be "his father"—which plays tragically on the fact that sweeps were often orphans. This advice could be taken at face value—maybe what the angel tells Tom is true.

On the other hand, this could be Blake's implicit criticism of the Church, which was closely linked to the workhouses of the Victorian era. Obedience and duty from the children just so happen to be attributes that best serve the masters of the chimney sweeps, so preaching these qualities was good for business. Lines 19-20 thus could be showing the way that the Church manipulated young children, exploiting their innocence. Blake frequently criticizes organized religion elsewhere in his poems, so it's not surprising that he'd be doing it here too.

The end-stop at the end of line 20 means that the word "joy" receives special emphasis. At heart, this is Blake's message—he consistently argues for joy, love, and freedom throughout his poems. This is the last word of the dream section (Tom Dacre wakes up in line 21), making the contrast between the world of dreams and reality extremely stark.

LINES 21-24

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 final stanza deals with the morning after Tom Dacre's dream. The caesura after the word "awoke" signals the abrupt way in which the dream ends—probably because Tom doesn't just wake up on his own, but is *woken up*, as it's time to go work the chimneys.

Interestingly, lines 21 and 22 revive some of the prominent consonance from earlier in the poem:

> And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark
> And got with our bags & our brushes to work.

This hard /k/ sound was used earlier in the phrase "locked up in coffins of black" (line 12), which association the sound with death and darkness. This definitely still feels at play in the final stanza. This moment also reminds the reader that, contrary to the contents of the dream line 17, the chimney sweeps are *not* free from their "bags."

The last two lines are more complex than they might first appear. The boys *seem* to have found temporary solace through the promise of a better existence in the afterlife. Yet part of Blake's skill is in the way that this both does and doesn't ring true. On the one hand, Blake *does* believe in the glory of God and in the way that religion offers salvation. But, on the other hand, Blake's beliefs often diverged with the organization and structure of the religious institutions of the day—children "do[ing] their duty" by working in horrible conditions is *not* part of Blake's argument for the way that human society should treat its young.

In a way, then, Tom Dacre and the young speaker might still be saved by God and angels in the end—but it will be *in spite of* the Church, not because of it.

SYMBOLS

TOM DACRE'S HAIR

Tom Dacre's lamb-like hair is a symbol for youthful innocence. When he's forced to join the chimney sweep gang, Tom Dacre has his hair shaved off. This hair is compared through simile to the curls on a "lamb's back." This helps emphasize Tom Dacre's youthfulness and innocence—like a lamb, he is young and defenseless. The act of shaving off his hair thus represents a loss of innocence, as well as the general demeaning of children that took place in industrialized London.

The specific mention of a lamb also has religious connotations. Jesus, for example, is also known as the *Agnus Dei* (the Lamb of God), and the lamb is a traditional symbol for Christ. In Blake's own poetry, the lamb is an important figure for spirituality, Godliness, and natural beauty (see "The Lamb" which also appears in *Songs of Innocence*).

The act of shaving additionally could also be seen as an allusion to the Biblical story of Samson. In the Book of Judges, Samson loses his immense strength when his hair is chopped off while he is sleeping. Similarly, Tom Dacre loses his youthful joy when his hair gets cut off.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head / That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved,"

POETIC DEVICES

ASSONANCE

Assonance is used throughout "The Chimney Sweeper." The poem, generally speaking, uses simple language that fits with the speaker being a young sweep himself. The assonance has a gently playful sound to it, which helps support the poem's focus on issues of childhood.

An early example of assonance is in line 4: "So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep." The /ee/ sound chimes with "weep" from the line before, linking the act of crying to the enforced labor of chimney sweeping. As a repeated sound, the /ee/ also suggests the way that chimney sweeping is a repetitive task.

In line 12, which is part of Tom Dacre's dream, assonance and consonance are used to create an image of dead chimney sweeps all "locked up in coffins of black." The uniformity of the vowel sounds suggests the way that so many young children have suffered the same fate.

Lines 15 and 16 are also part of Tom Dacre's dream, and use subtle assonance to suggest the playfulness of childhood:

> Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,
> And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

These /ee/ and /i/ vowels have a bouncy, frolicking kind of sound. In contrast to the examples discussed above, these lines capture a sense of joy—joy that is starkly different from the boys' daily lives.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When my mother died I was very young"
- **Line 2:** "my," "while," "my"
- **Line 3:** "cry," "weep! weep! weep! weep!"
- **Line 4:** "chimneys," "sweep," "sleep"
- **Line 5:** "when," "head"
- **Line 6:** "lamb's back"
- **Line 7:** "for when your head's"
- **Line 9:** "quiet," "night"
- **Line 10:** "was a-sleeping he," "such a"
- **Line 12:** "all," "locked," "coffins"

- **Line 13:** “by came,” “Angel,” “ bright key”
- **Line 14:** “he,” “coffins,” “set them all free”
- **Lines 15-15:** “gr / n”
- **Line 15:** “ee,” “ea,” “i,” “i”
- **Lines 15-15:** “l / p / ng”
- **Lines 15-15:** “laugh / ng”
- **Line 16:** “i,” “n,” “i,” “i,” “n”
- **Lines 16-16:** “r / ver”
- **Line 17:** “white,” “behind”
- **Line 18:** “rise”
- **Line 19:** “he'd be”
- **Line 20:** “He'd,” “God,” “father,” “want”
- **Line 21:** “so,” “awoke,” “rose”
- **Line 23:** “Though,” “cold”
- **Line 24:** “do,” “duty,” “need,” “fear”

CAESURA

As is typical of Blake's poetry, caesura is used throughout "The Chimney Sweeper." In line 3, for example, exclamation marks are used as caesura to add extra emphasis to the repeated word: "weep! weep! weep! weep!" These caesurae speak to the desperate situation that the speaker found himself in as a motherless child with an unloving father, doubling down on the way that the poem's opening sets up an atmosphere of tragedy. (Note that sometimes the poem is printed *without* these marks; in either case, the epizeuxis of this line supports the desperate tone.)

The second stanza uses caesurae in all but the last line (line 8). This gives this stanza a real sense of tentativeness, as though it is not sure exactly where it is going or what to do. This relates to the fact that Tom Dacre, a new recruit into the chimney sweep gang, is scared and uncertain about what will happen to him.

The next significant caesurae come in line 11:

> That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,

These caesurae allow the speaker to list four monosyllabic first names, which were all typical for the time. This helps the sweepers—who appear as corpses in Tom Dacre's dream—seem numerous and macabrely replaceable.

The next caesurae, in line 15, contrast greatly with the previous example:

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

These caesurae make the line sound joyful, as though it is bounding from one side of the page to the other (like children running across a field). This is part of Tom Dacre's vision about the chimney sweeps.

The following stanza—stanza 5—uses caesura in three of its four lines. These are all placed pretty much half-way through the lines, which gives this section a stately, authoritative feel. It reads with a measured tone, which makes sense given that the children—in this part of the dream—are under the care of an angel. The last two lines seem to echo this use of caesura. However, given the way that they express the controversial idea that the children should simply "do their duty" (work hard) in order to acquire their heavenly reward, these caesurae *also* sound suspiciously like the kind of hollow proverb that the sweeps might hear from their masters or in Church.

Where Caesura appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** “!,” “!,” “!”
- **Line 5:** “,”
- **Line 6:** “,” “,”
- **Line 7:** “,” “!,” “,”
- **Line 9:** “,”
- **Line 11:** “,” “,” “,” “,” “,”
- **Line 15:** “,” “,”
- **Line 17:** “,”
- **Line 18:** “,”
- **Line 19:** “,”
- **Line 21:** “;”
- **Line 23:** “,”
- **Line 24:** “,”

CONSONANCE

Consonance is an important part of "The Chimney Sweep." The poem uses /s/ sounds throughout, a technique also known as sibilance—this is covered in its own section.

An early, important example comes in lines 5 and 6:

> There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
> That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said

Notice the gentleness of these three /l/ sounds. This mirrors the innocence of Tom Dacre, whose curly hair is shaved off as a kind of ritual to mark that he has a new—and horrible—life as a chimney sweep. The sharp /k/ sounds stick out by contrast, suggesting the shock and horror Tom feels upon having his head shaved.

The next key example is in lines 11 and 12, which are part of Tom Dacre's dream on the night of his arrival:

> That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,
> Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

These harsh /k/ sounds have an ominous quality and dominate this part of the poem. To make the /k/ sound, a reader has to momentarily stop the airflow from their mouth. Cleverly, then, these lines force the reader to *perform* a part of the poem for

themselves. That is, the reader mimics the macabre feeling of choking in a coffin. The sound comes to signify the way that "thousands of sweepers" have already drawn their last breaths.

Next up is lines 15 and 16:

> Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,
> And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Almost every word in these two lines contains an /n/ or /ng/ sound. This gives the lines a playful quality that matches with their vision of childhood freedom, innocence, and play (contrasting with the image of "coffins of black" in line 12).

At the end of the poem, the /k/ consonance is revived:

> 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

Perhaps this signals that, beneath the immediate appeal of Tom Dacre's heavenly vision, reality is still best captured by the /k/ sound of "dark," "cold," and "coffins of black." That is, *real life* as a chimney sweep is much more like the bleak vision in lines 11 and 12 than the salvation offered by lines 15 and 16.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "When my mother," "was," "young"
- **Line 2:** "sold," "yet," "tongue"
- **Line 3:** "scarcely," "weep! weep! weep! weep!"
- **Line 4:** "So," "chimneys," "sweep," "soot," "sleep"
- **Line 5:** "Dacre," "cried," "his head"
- **Line 6:** "curled like," "lamb's," "back," "shaved, so," "said"
- **Line 7:** "Hush," "your," "bare"
- **Line 8:** " know," "soot cannot spoil," "white"
- **Line 9:** "quiet," "that," "night"
- **Line 10:** "As," "was a-sleeping he had such," "sight"
- **Line 11:** "thousands," "sweepers, Dick," "Jack"
- **Line 12:** "all," "l," "ocked," "coffins," "black"
- **Line 13:** "by came an Angel who had," "bright key"
- **Line 14:** "opened," "coffins &"
- **Line 15:** "Then down," "green plain, leaping, laughing," "run"
- **Line 16:** "And," "in," "and shine in," "Sun"
- **Line 17:** "Then naked &," "all," "bags left behind"
- **Line 18:** "rise," "clouds," "sport in," "wind"
- **Line 19:** "And," "Angel told Tom," "be," "boy"
- **Line 20:** "He'd have God for," "father & never want"
- **Line 21:** "awoke," "rose," " dark"
- **Line 22:** "got," "bags," "our brushes," "work"
- **Line 23:** "morning," "cold," "warm"
- **Line 24:** "do," "duty," "need not fear harm"

END-STOPPED LINE

End-stops are used throughout "The Chimney Sweeper." In fact, only lines 2, 5, and 21 don't feature some kind of punctuation at the end.

There are a few key examples, the first being line 4:

> So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

The full-stop after "sleep" here represents the speaker's rest when, after a hard day of forced labor, he can finally fall asleep. (On a side note, sleeping "in soot" was known as "sleeping black.") But the full-stop also creates tension, disrupting the poem's flow and suggesting that this is not truly restful sleep.

The full-stop at the end of line 8 has a similar effect. Here, the speaker tries to reassure Tom Dacre, a new recruit, that everything will be fine. The full-stop seems to question the accuracy of the speaker's advice.

The next key example is in line 16, also at the end of a stanza (quoted with line 15):

> Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,
> And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

This is part of Tom Dacre's vision on the night that he arrives in the chimney sweeping gang. These lines offer an imagined childhood as a contrast to the sweeps' reality, and the full-stop seems to make this vision seem all the more pure and beautiful. But it also makes it seem fleeting, as though in the brief silence that follows the full-stop the vision melts away.

A similar effect is achieved in lines 20 and 24, with both full-stops coming soon after advice for the sweeps (that they should be "good boy[s]" and, "do their duty"). These end-stops *also* seem to question the validity of what is being said, as though the reader is tasked with filling in the gaps between what the boys are being told to do.

It should be noted that some of these end-stops can also be interpreted as enjambment. That is, even though these lines have punctuation at the end, they still need the following line to complete their grammatical meaning. For instance, here are lines 6 to 8:

> [...] so I said,
> "Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,
> You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."

Here, the line breaks interrupt grammatical phrases, so the speaker's sentences bleed across lines. This creates a sense of tension as the reader reads ahead, eager to see how the speaker calms Tom Dacre.

Similar moments occur at the ends of lines 9, 11 and 19. These

instances create suspense, emphasizing the discrepancy between the boys' miserable lives and the lives they wish they could live.

Where End-Stopped Line appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "young,"
- **Line 3:** "weep!""
- **Line 4:** "sleep."
- **Line 6:** "said,"
- **Line 7:** "bare,"
- **Line 8:** "hair.""
- **Line 9:** "night,"
- **Line 10:** "sight!"
- **Line 11:** "Jack,"
- **Line 12:** "black;"
- **Line 13:** "key,"
- **Line 14:** "free;"
- **Line 15:** "run,"
- **Line 16:** "Sun."
- **Line 17:** "behind,"
- **Line 18:** "wind."
- **Line 19:** "boy,"
- **Line 20:** "joy."
- **Line 21:** "dark"
- **Line 22:** "work."
- **Line 23:** "warm;"
- **Line 24:** "harm."

EPIZEUXIS

Epizeuxis is used only once in "The Chimney Sweeper," but it's a significant moment. This occurs in line 3:

> Could scarcely cry "weep! weep! weep! weep!"

The main function of these "weep[s]" is to emphasize the sheer tragedy of the speaker's life. His mother is dead and his father preferred to sell him into labor rather than look after him. No wonder he can't seem to stop crying! The speaker's situation is full of sorrow—and deserving of "weep[ing]."

As the speaker says, though, he hardly had *time* to weep before he was put to work as a chimney sweep. Crying, of course, is a perfectly natural part of childhood, but the speaker has had his childhood robbed from him and, accordingly, barely had time to take note of his own tragic circumstances. The epizeuxis, then, also emphasizes the way that the chimney sweep profession corrupts the innocence of childhood.

Where Epizeuxis appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** ""weep! weep! weep! weep!""

SIBILANCE

Sibilance is used throughout "The Chimney Sweeper." It is associated with the sound of sweeping itself, and so having a strong sibilant presence in the poem mirrors the way that chimney sweeping is pretty much all that happens in the life of the speaker and his friend Tom Dacre. The poem also features many /z/ and /sh/ sounds, which are also often considered a form of sibilance and certainly support the more obvious sibilance throughout the poem. As such, we've highlighted such sounds in this guide.

Sibilance is first noticeable in the fourth line:

> So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

This is so dominated by sibilance that it almost becomes onomatopoeic—that is, it *sounds* like the thing it describes (think of the sound of a coarse brush rubbing against brick). It also associates the sound with "sleep," showing the way that soot remains on the clothes and skin of the sweeps during the night—and stays in their minds during their dreams (as in Tom Dacre's dream later in the poem).

This same sound is picked up in line 6 ("lamb's back, was shaved, so I said") and line 8 ("soot cannot spoil"), before recurring again in line 10 ("As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!") and 11 ("thousands of sweepers"). These help keep the sound of sweeping running throughout the poem. Meanwhile, in line 16, sibilance briefly helps bring Tom Dacre's pastoral dream to life, evoking the sound of water: "And wash in a river and shine in the Sun."

Later in the poem, though, sibilance helps re-impose the harsh realities of chimney sweep life. When Tom wakes up in the last stanza, he and the speaker have to head out to work "with our bags & our brushes." Sibilance is once again a strong presence in the poem, reminding the reader that sweeping—the sound linked to the /s/ and /sh/ throughout—is pretty much all these children are allowed to do.

Where Sibilance appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "So," "chimneys," "sweep," "soot," "sleep"
- **Line 6:** "lamb's," "was shaved, so," "said"
- **Line 8:** "soot," "spoil"
- **Line 9:** "so," "was"
- **Line 10:** "As," "was a-sleeping," "such," "sight"
- **Line 11:** "thousands," "sweepers"
- **Line 16:** "wash," "shine," "Sun"
- **Line 18:** "rise," "clouds," "sport"
- **Line 21:** "so," "rose"
- **Line 22:** "bags," "brushes"

SIMILE

There is one simile in "The Chimney Sweeper." It's found in line

6, and compares the hair of Tom Dacre, a new member of the chimney sweeping gang, to a lamb's fur:

> There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
> That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved

First of all, this simile is used to build a clear visual picture of the young Tom, who has pale, curly hair, like a lamb's. But it also helps build a sense of his youthful innocence. The fact that he's crying shows that he is being forced into having his head shaved against his will—and it's worth remembering that the reason he's being shaved is so he can clean chimneys more efficiently.

In addition to this, the comparison to a lamb is significant. Lambs are, of course, young creatures, so the comparison helps emphasize Tom Dacre's age. Lambs are vulnerable, pretty much defenseless. Lambs are also symbolically associated with innocence and spirituality, particularly in the Christian faith. Jesus, for example, is known as the Lamb of God—and Blake used the animal in his poem "The Lamb," which focuses on religious joy, natural beauty, freedom, and innocence, all of which are being taken away from "little Tom Dacre."

Ultimately, then, the comparison between Tom Dacre's hair and lamb's fur definitively establishes that this is a "Song of Innocence"—part of Blake's larger project of depicting moral lessons from the perspectives of innocent narrators.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head / That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved,"

VOCABULARY

Soot (Line 4, Line 8) - The black ashy dust found in chimneys.

Tom Dacre (Line 5) - This is the name given by Blake to one of the chimney sweeps in this poem. It's possible that he is named after the Lady Dacre Almshouse, an establishment that was supposed to look after poor children.

Sport (Line 18) - Play joyfully.

Want (Line 20) - To lack. In other words, the boys will never lack joy in heaven.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Chimney Sweeper" is made up of six quatrains, or four-line stanzas. This kind of format is typical of Blake's poems, especially those in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The simplicity and regularity of the form supports the discussion of childhood, almost as if it's a nursery rhyme or childhood fable. The poem flows easily, mimicking the voice of a child.

There are four distinct sections to the poem. The first stanza is essentially the speaker's introduction to the misery and hardship of the life of a chimney sweep. The second stanza is Tom Dacre's arrival into the chimney sweep gang, followed by the shaving of his head.

The third, fourth, and fifth stanzas all deal with Tom Dacre's dream—which has elements of pastoral poetry (idyllic representations of nature). It also smuggles in what could be interpreted as a kind of brainwashing. That is, the dream reinforces the message Tom Dacre will have been hearing from the adults in charge of him, such as the master sweep and the Church administrators: that he should be a "good boy" and get on with his work. The final stanza takes place after the dream, with Tom and the speaker setting off for work the next morning.

METER

Broadly speaking, the poem's meter is both anapestic (da-da-DUM) and iambic (da-DUM). It mixes these two feet to achieve a flexible, song-like effect throughout. The lines are in tetrameter for the most part, meaning there are four stressed beats per line—a rhythm which is also common for songs. Overall, then, the poem flows easily. Blake's poems often do this, using a simple metrical sound to discuss complicated ideas and arguments. This poem sounds almost like a nursery rhyme, in fact, which reflects ironically on one of the poem's main themes: the corruption and exploitation of childhood.

A number of the lines use an iamb in the opening foot and anapests thereafter. For example, here's line 9:

> And so | he was qui- | et, & that | very night,

The first foot here ("And so") is an iamb, and the rest are all anapests. The bouncy sound is easy to feel in the above line, as with elsewhere in the poem. It has both the galloping energy and calming naivety of childhood.

But one line has even more spring in its step than all the others—line 14:

> And he op- | ened the cof- | fins & set | them all free;

This is a pure line of anapestic tetrameter, and its jaunty sound coincides with the moment that the angel sets the chimney sweeps free (in Tom Dacre's dream). The meter is thus liberated at the same time as the children are (albeit only in Tom's imagination).

As further evidence of this liberation, the next line features an extra stress:

> Then down | a green plain, | leaping, | laughing | they

run,

The extra stress added by "leaping," coming directly after the stressed word "plain," captures an exuberant sense of freedom, as if the line is metrically leaping with joy. (This third foot, with its DUM-da sound, is something called a trochee.)

RHYME SCHEME

"The Chimney Sweeper" is written in quatrains that can be further broken down into two rhymed couplets, giving each stanza the rhyme scheme:

AABB

Overall, this regular scheme helps with the easy flow of the poem, which again is common to Blake's sound—a simplicity that holds complex ideas in place.

Sometimes, the rhymes come as a kind of conceptual pair. For example, the "bare"/"hair" rhyme in lines 7 and 8 contrasts Tom *before* and *after* he is shaved. Likewise, in lines 9 and 10, it's in the "night" that Tom's vision comes along (his "sight"). Of all of these, perhaps the most poignant is "boy" with "joy" in lines 19 and 20. This seems to highlight the *lack* of joy in the life of the young chimney sweeps.

The last stanza is worth close attention. "Dark" and "work" are not a perfect rhyme, suggesting that something is off. It's like a minor chord or moment of dissonance in the poem's otherwise easygoing melody. This also happens with the rhyme between "behind" and "wind" in the previous stanza. In both cases, the slant rhyme might be part of the way Blake hints that the boy's conclusion—that he needs only to be well-behaved and dutiful to receive happiness and joy—is sadly mistaken.

In support of this idea, notice how in the last couplet "warm" is replaced by "harm," which ends the poem. This replacement captures the way that authority figures manipulate the boys' desire for comfort, getting them to accept the harm that is continually done to them.

SPEAKER

The speaker of the poem is a young chimney sweep. The poem opens with some autobiographical information, with the speaker explaining how his mother is dead. He was sold into child labor as a chimney sweep before he could even speak properly. From the start of the poem, he's a tragic figure.

The speaker narrates the story of a new arrival into the chimney sweep gang, Tom Dacre, and indeed offers Tom support when he cries out of fear. It's also this same speaker who acts as the mouthpiece for Tom Dacre's dream, during which the boys are told to be "good" and to "do their duty" in order to receive God's love (and, in turn, happiness, joy, and freedom).

But there's a real sense of (understandable) naivety to the speaker's perspective, suggesting the way that childhood innocence can be exploited. The speaker's concluding sentiment—that God will protect chimney sweeps from all harm—is patently untrue. Chimney sweeping was horrifically dangerous, and Blake's point seems to be to highlight the way that the Church played a significant role in the exploitation of the young.

SETTING

The poem is set in London, during the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s. This London, as Blake describes it here and in other poems, is full of pollution, corruption, and poverty. The poem itself is primarily set over the course of one night, telling the story of Tom Dacre, a new arrival in a chimney sweeping gang (of which the speaker is also a member). Told in the past tense, there is something dark and inevitable about the way the poem unfolds—as though the chimney sweepers' fate has already been decided.

The most significant aspect of the poem's setting is the way that it contrasts dreams with reality. The poem starts and ends with a picture of genuine and realistic hardship (stanzas 1 and 6). The sweeps begin the poem in misery and end it there too (though they do hold onto some kind of hope).

Meanwhile Stanzas 3-5 are set in Tom Dacre's imagination. They portray his longing for a more free and joyful childhood. Briefly, then, the setting becomes almost pastoral—a depiction of idyllic nature, the kind that children would love to play in. Industrial London gives way to a vision of green fields, clean rivers, and a divine ride "upon clouds." This vision can be interpreted as ending in heaven itself, as the children "sport in the wind" of the sky, and the angel promises Tom that "He'd have God for this father."

In general, however, the poem takes place in an unforgiving, industrialized urban landscape. Though the vision of the middle stanzas represents an escape from that landscape, the poem seems to hint that this escape may only be an illusion—that the boys will only leave London "in coffins of black."

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"The Chimney Sweeper" was published as part of the *Innocence* section of William Blake's best-known work, *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (first published in 1794, though *The Songs of Innocence* was also published individually a few years prior). This book of poems is essentially designed to express specific morals, though Blake resists oversimplifying difficult situations. As in "The Chimney Sweeper," there is often a great deal of

ambiguity and suggestive imagery in these poems. Blake's work is also generally full of opposites and juxtapositions: childhood vs. adulthood, life vs. death, freedom vs. oppression (all of which apply to the chimney sweepers).

A key poetic influence on Blake was John Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* also creatively examined humankind's relationship to God. But Blake was also a wide reader of religious scholarship, which undoubtedly played a formative role in his poetry. For example, the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish Lutheran theologian, can be seen in the way Blake depicts the fundamental spirituality of humanity.

Blake was not well-known as a poet in his time, and many of his contemporaries considered him to be a madman. He worked primarily as a painter, printmaker, and engraver, and he felt that his poetry was misunderstood in his era. He did not enjoy the success of some of the other poets associated with the same time period, such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge. This sense of isolation gives Blake's poetry a radical and prophetic quality; his poems often seem like small acts of rebellion against the status quo of the day.

Also important to Blake's work is the idea of the *visionary*—that is, art that radically reimagines the world. There are many accounts of Blake witnessing angels or other spiritual phenomena, and these experiences play into the prophetic quality of his writing. He is often grouped together with the Romantic poets (such as Wordsworth and Coleridge), and his work does share certain common ground with the ideals of Romanticism that dominated the late 17th and early 18th centuries. These ideals include the importance of childhood, the imagination, and the power of nature. However, his life and writings are distinct enough that it may make more sense to regard him as a singular entity in English literature, rather than as a solely Romantic poet.

Perhaps the most essential element of this particular poem's literary context is its partner poem in *Songs of Experience*. This other poem has the same title, "The Chimney Sweeper," showing that they effectively come as a pair. If there was any doubt that the conclusion in this poem *isn't* meant to be taken at face value, the *Experience* poem makes this abundantly clear. It's also worth taking a look at "The Lamb" another poem from the *Songs of Innocence*, which shows the way Blake links godliness, joy, freedom, and nature with the figure of the lamb.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Chimney sweeping was a horrific form of work mostly inflicted on children. Roughly speaking, this forced labor was most prominent between the Great Fire of London (1666) and its abolition in 1875. Ironically, it was regulations after the Great Fire that made England's chimneys more angular and narrow—making children pretty much the only people small enough to get inside them to clean them. This was terrible work—the soot was carcinogenic, and sweeps were sometimes burned, trapped, or asphyxiated.

The speaker and Tom Dacre are probably what was technically known as *climbing boys*. A gang of chimney sweepers would be led by a master sweep—an adult—who would get paid by the state authorities to take on children for work. These master sweeps had to provide lodgings and meals to their group, but this was highly unregulated and, as the poem suggests, a pretty miserable existence.

It's notable that in this deeply religious poem there is no mention of the official Church. Instead, the reader is presented with a close communion between nature, humanity, and God—which is how Blake felt religion *should* be. Blake's rebellious streak also owed something to the American and French Revolutions, which gave thinkers opportunities to dream of better forms of society (though the revolutions didn't necessarily fulfill those promises).

Blake was also writing during the accelerating Industrial Revolution, and he saw its economic, social, and environmental changes as threats to humankind. For Blake, the factories of the Industrial Revolution represented a form of physical and mental enslavement—the "mind-forg'd manacles" mentioned in his poem "London." Indeed, it was during this period that the use of chimney sweeps increased greatly.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of "The Chimney Sweeper" — The poem read by Toby Jones. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JC4Dq2scQDI)
- Illustrations and Other Poems — A resource from the Tate organization, which holds a large collection of Blake originals. (https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/william-blake-39/blakes-songs-innocence-experience)
- Full Text of Songs of Innocence and Experience — The full text in which "The Chimney Sweeper" is collected. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1934/1934-h/1934-h.htm)
- Blake's Visions — An excerpt from a documentary in which writer Iain Sinclair discusses Blake's religious visions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8hcQ_jPIZA)
- Blake's Radicalism — Another excerpt from Sinclair, this time on Blake's radicalism. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fl0yBrI24XM&t=1s)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER WILLIAM BLAKE POEMS

- A Poison Tree
- London
- The Chimney Sweeper (Songs of Experience)

- The Garden of Love
- The Lamb
- The Tyger

HOW TO CITE

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