



SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

by

WILLIAM BLAKE

THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER

A little black thing in the snow,
Crying "weep! weep!" in notes of woe!
"Where are thy father and mother? Say!"--
"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

"Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smiled among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

"And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and his priest and king,
Who make up a heaven of our misery."

William Blake's poems both entitled "The Chimney Sweeper" address a political issue publicized during the time he was writing. In *Songs of Innocence*, the boy in "The Chimney Sweeper" sees his situation through the eyes of innocence and does not understand the social injustice. In *Songs of Experience*, the boy in the poem sees the injustice and speaks against the establishments that left him where he is. Different aspects of one poem illuminate opposing aspects of the other poem. Ideas addressed in *Innocence* contrast the different views of *Experience*, as *Experience* does for *Innocence*, emphasizing the need for a balance of the two. The fact that these poems can influence the reader's interpretation of one another confirms Blake's notion that neither innocence nor experience is a correct view and that one completes the other.

The poem "The Chimney Sweeper," in both *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, protests the living conditions, working conditions, and the overall treatment of young chimney sweeps in the cities of England. Martin Nurmi discusses the plight of the chimney sweep extensively in his essay "Fact and Symbol in 'The Chimney Sweeper.'" In 1788, there was an attempt to pass an act to improve the treatment and working conditions of these young children. This would have made many people, including Blake, aware of the lives that these chimney sweeps would live. For instance, they slept in cellars on bags of the soot that they had swept (Nurmi 17), and they were poorly fed and clothed. They would sweep the chimneys naked so their masters would not have to replace clothing that would have been ruined in the chimneys, and they were rarely bathed. Those who were not killed by fires in chimneys usually died early anyway of either respiratory problems or cancer of the scrotum. Sweeping chimneys also left children with ankles and spines deformed and twisted kneecaps from climbing up chimneys that were about nine inches in diameter (Nurmi 16). Many people viewed them as subhuman creatures and not a part of human society.