



# Chimney Sweepers



# Becoming a Chimney Sweeper

- During the Industrial Revolution thousands of desperate people came to the cities of the North seeking work.
- Despite hard work and long shifts they still led a poor and miserable life.
- **Justices** were given **authority over the children of poor families**, and began to **assign** them to **apprenticeships** to provide them with work, food and shelter.
- For master chimney sweeps, these small, defenceless children of powerless or absent parents were the perfect victims to be **exploited** in their business.





## Chimney Sweeper (1st stanza)

*“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 boy must be very young as he can barely speak
- Children's apprenticeships lasted seven years or even more.
- Once the papers were signed, the children were completely left under the power of their masters and their families often didn't see them any longer.
- That is why the speaking voice has the feeling of having being **“sold”**
- A Master was paid a fee to clothe, keep and teach the child his trade.
- There were also many girls who climbed chimneys.





## Chimney Sweeper (2nd stanza)

*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**.”*





- After the Great Fire of London in 1666 new fire codes were necessarily put in place.
- Chimneys became smaller to burn coal and the number of turns and corners in the flues increased.
- As they were smaller, they needed cleaning more often.
- The chimney flues were pitch black, claustrophobic, potentially full of suffocating soot and confusing to navigate in the dark.
- Sweepers propelled themselves by their knees and elbows brushing the flues as they went.
- This, of course, was a scary job for these children and they were often unwilling to perform it.
- Therefore, once the child was forced up the flue and the master lit a fire so that the boy couldn't come down.
- That is why children's hair needed to be shaved.





## Chimney Sweeper (3rd stanza)

*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**;*



Tom dreams that his fellow mates and himself are locked up in **coffins of black**...

..what do these black coffins represent?

How does the litte boy feel, since he dreams of being **locked up**?





# Dying from Claustrophobia

- If the apprentice climbed the whole chimney and exited a row of chimneys, he could forget which chimney he came out of.
- When that happened, he could go back down the wrong one
- Children could suffocate or burn to death by getting lost on the way down.
- These children lived in deplorable conditions.
- They carried a large sack with them, into which they dumped the soot they swept from the chimneys.
- They used this same sack as a blanket to sleep in at night, and only bathed infrequently.
- They were often sick, and learned to beg food and clothing from their customers as all **the money they earned went to their masters.**





## Chimney Sweeper (4th stanza)

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 your opinion, what does the Angel with the bright key represent?





# The Privilege of Being Bathed

- Even if some children actually received the weekly bath outlined in the apprenticeship agreement, the majority of them **was never bathed** or followed a more common custom of **3 baths per year**:
  1. at Whitsuntide (shortly after Easter),
  2. Goose Fair (early October)
  3. Christmas.

In London, many sweeper apprentices used to wash on their own in a local river, the Serpentine, till one of them drowned. Since then the children were discouraged from bathing in rivers.





## Chimney Sweeper (5th stanza)



*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.*



Hence, if Tom behaves well, he will have God himself as father and will lead a happy life. It sounds really good, but.....

..what did the Angel mean with being «a good boy», what should Tom and his friends have done to achieve such a reward?





## Chimney Sweeper (6th stanza)

*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 Sweepers' Innocence

- In this poem there is all the disarming beauty of children's naivety, who keep on being confident in a better future, despite the appalling condition of their lives.

**Why should Tom be happy and warm in such a dark and cold morning?**

- Because he trusts the angel and he believes in the words the had said: he would have God as father and happiness, if he did his duty.

**Hence, what is his duty?**

Working and being exploited . As, he is just doing the right thing, he is happy and sees no evil in his condition.







# Being Innocent

- This poem belongs to William Blake's collection: **«Songs of Innocence»**(1788)
- Innocence is a transient state of human soul characterized by purity and freedom from corruption or sin.
- It is often associated with childhood.
- Children are confident about their present and future, as they can see no evil in the world that surrounds them
- Hence, trust and hope encompass this state





## From Innocence to Experience

- According to William Blake *Innocence* and *Experience* are the two opposite states of human soul.
- Unfortunately “Innocence” is a transient state and as time goes by, we drift towards “Experience”, that is, the age when our eyes, now opened wide, are no longer dimmed by the enchanting powers of Imagination.
- The more we become aware and overwhelmed by loads of responsibilities, the more we grow pessimistic and distrustful about our future.





## «The Songs of Experience» (1793)

- In order to mark this passage from Innocence to Experience, Blake **rewrote** some poems belonging to his early collection “Songs of Innocence” and included them in the “Songs of Experience“, which was published five years later.



# «The Chimney Sweeper « (1793)

*A little black thing among 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 smil'd among the winter's snow,*

*They clothed me in the clothes of death,*

*And taught me to sing the notes of woe.*





- The first lines of the first stanza sound like and echo of the past.
- His being a little black thing in an ocean of snow emphasizes his loneliness.
- His family is not with him
- The tone of the passer-by is rude and shows no compassion.
- In the second stanza the boy appears to be fully aware of his condition





## **The Chimney Sweeper (S.E. 3rd stanza)**

*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,*

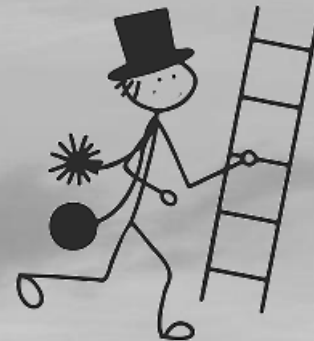
*Who make up a heaven of our misery."*





The child is now fully aware of the system which enslaves him:

1. the whole **society**,
2. the **church**
3. his **family**



are part of a scheme whose main concern is the making of profit .

The boy bitterly says : *“and because I am happy and dance and sing, they think they have done me no injury”*, but they have.

They have stolen his youth, happiness and faith in the world and in the future. They have taught him to sing *“the notes of woe”* and this is **irreversible**.





## In Conclusion

- William Blake rewrote some poems from “the Songs of Innocence” in “the Songs of Experience” to provide a **contrast** between the **purity** and **simplicity** of childhood innocence and the **corrupting influences** of **experience** and **adulthood**.
- By exploring these contrasting themes, Blake was able to delve deeper into the complexities of human nature and the dualities of good and evil, innocence and experience.
- He believed that by examining these themes from both perspectives, a fuller and richer understanding of the human condition could be achieved.





