

LITERATURE

Analysis: The Chimney Sweeper Poem Analysis – Blake

William Blake's innocently heartbreaking poem "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence* and its companion poem of the same title from *Songs of Experience*, both told from the perspectives of young chimney sweeps and sharing many of the same words and phrases; evoke sympathy and consternation from the reader. While the bulk of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* have positive connotations and educe joyous and stirring feelings from the reader which is then underscored by its bitter shadow in *Songs of Experience*; in the case of "The Chimney Sweeper", the *Innocence* poem is just as bleak and morally abhorrent as its companion poem.

The *Innocence* Chimney Sweeper is told in a matter-of-fact tone, devoid of blame or anguish. The voice is that of a child, naturally optimistic and using simple, short words and an upbeat rhyming scheme, reading like a nursery rhyme. The simple structure, rather than being the mark of an inadequate poet, serves to emphasise the sincerity and unawareness of the protagonist. A sad irony is created by the child's naivety and complete obliviousness to the treachery of his circumstances; in contrast to the full awareness of the reader. The poem, which was written in 1789 when children were commonly exploited for their labour, is given new dimension in more recent times; when child labour has been outlawed and considered a human rights abuse, although its existence has still not been completely vitiated.

Blake strongly believes that children have a natural tendency towards joy and playfulness, and in most of his *Innocence* poems featuring children, he has managed to conjure picturesque natural environments in which children can frolic and laugh. The chimney sweep, however, has not been afforded this luxury- the only opportunity he gets to be a child is in the fantastic dream of his friend Tom Dacre. The dream, had it not been prefaced with the child's explanation of how he was sold to be a chimney sweep when his "tongue could scarcely cry", would have perfectly blended in with the majority of the heart-warming *Songs of Innocence*.

"The Chimney Sweeper" shows the child's belief in god- in the dream, and angel says to Tom that if he would be a "good boy", he'd have "god as his father". The last stanza, which describes how the young chimney sweeps set to work so that they "need not fear harm", provokes feelings of rue from the reader as they are aware that this is a blatant fallacy and no matter how hard the young boys work, they are still subject to hideous abuses that no child should endure. However some consolation is found in the certainty that the children are ignorant of their plight. Conversely, the companion poem from *Songs of Experience* depicts a child who is well informed of the hardships he faces and the damage he has been subjected to.

The maturity of the *Experience* child is emphasised by his revelation that he was crying "weep, weep" in the snow, in contrast, the voice of the preceding poem admits that he could "scarcely cry weep, weep" upon his abandonment. This subtle difference illustrates the *Experience* child's aptitude for understanding what the very people who were meant to protect him, have done to pollute him.

Echoing the *Innocence* poem, a link to god is mentioned however in a sinister and bitter manner. Rather than viewing god as a benevolent father, the child speaks of how his parents have deserted him to go "to the church to pray". He also places accountability on god for creating "a heaven of our misery".

The *Experience* child addresses the natural tendency to joy that Blake puts so much emphasis on in his poetry. Instead of revelling in his childish felicity, and indulging in the way that Blake believes every child is entitled to, he censures his previous happiness as the reason why his parents

abandoned him and continued to damage his psyche. In this way the two chimney sweeps are of opposite circumstance; one is in an austere and bleak environment so seeks out merriment, while the other finds himself in an isolated and traumatising state because of his gaiety.

While the two poems are superficially contrasting, they are not so different- the only prominent distinction between the two children is that one is aware of his unfortunate circumstances, whereas the other is not. Both poems are tragic however it is up to the reader to decide which child is in a more damaging position.