English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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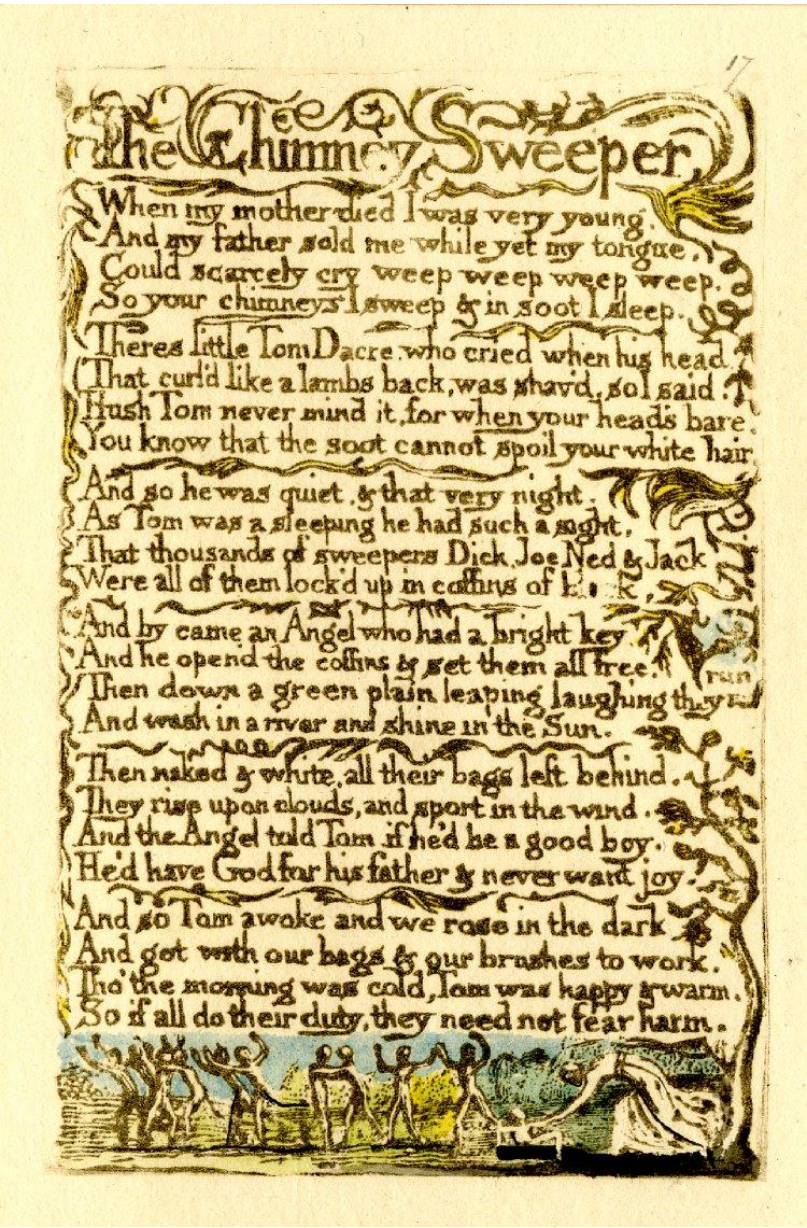
William Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper," from *Songs of Innocence* (1789)



Blake was a Christian visionary, poet, engraver and painter who combined his many artistic talents into a new art-form called "illuminated printing." When Blake wasn't creating engraved images for other people, the work for which he had apprenticed as a child and by which he struggled to make a living, he toiled away on his own art, sometimes painting but often

combining words and images in engravings of the sort that we see in his collection of poems called *Songs of Innocence*. Blake deliberately turns *from* the dominant and growing printing technologies of the day, which standardized texts for mass consumption. Instead, Blake created his work as an artisan. He wrote his poems, engraved them on copper sheets, printed them and then, with the assistance of his wife, Catherine, he coloured them. Each text that he produced in his "printing house in hell"—as he once ironically called his home in London--is unique. His illuminated works, in other words, are hand-made rather than mass-produced. The process that he developed, which is still poorly understood, is labour intensive but it leaves his particular stamp on every work he created. Blake produced his illuminated works only in very limited quantities. Why would that be important to an artist? Is it a way for Blake to connect in more intimate ways to his audience? Notice the ways in which Blake's text—the words making up the title and verses of the poem—is mixed in with lots of images. Images and text compete for space on the same page and are compelled to speak to each other, illuminating each other. Sometimes the letters become something else than letters; they grow into tendrils that roil with life. What images make up the band of pictures running along the bottom of "The Chimney Sweeper"? Once you've read the poem, how does that change how you see and understand that image?

In "The Chimney Sweeper," two children, both "climbing boys" (as they were called then) inhabit the world of the poem: 1) the speaker whose mother died when he was very young, and 2) a younger boy named Tom Dacre, to whom the speaker offers a lesson in being "good" and "dutiful." The speaker schools Tom into how to be a passive and obedient slave. But notice how Blake's poem doesn't condemn the speaker but observes that both are victims of the same culture that is murderously indifferent to the lives of its most vulnerable members, the homeless children. One of the keys to understanding the poem and engaging it on its own terms is to determine what to make of Tom Dacre's dream. It looks and feels lovely: the child slaves are liberated from their "coffins of black," free to play not in the crowded and predatory streets of London but in the "Sun" by a refreshing "river," near "a green plain." This is a happy world of nature that seems the complete opposite of the urban world in which the children are forced to do sickening and dangerous work. But it is a dream. Dreams and the capacity to dream are important, as we saw in Justice's sonnet, "The Wall." But Blake's poem reminds us that dreams can also be stolen from us and scripted differently. Tom dreams of freedom but the reality is that he can't live in that dream and *has no prospect of acting on that dream, no way to realize it, make it into a reality.* As the poem says, "we rose in the dark," meaning, not only literally that the two boys get up before dawn to work as slaves but also that they start a new day "in the dark," i.e., without being able to do anything else, without the vision needed to see anything else. Their world is a world where it is always dark. The reality is that Tom remains a slave and that the dream, far from saving him, only pacifies him, makes him a "fitter" slave. In the dream the "Angel" tells him that this paradise is his . . . but only if he is "a good boy,"

meaning only if he continues to be compliant. So Blake's use of the word "good" is terribly *ironic* here. As a poet, Blake is uniquely sensitive to the use and abuse of words and to the power—for good and for ill—that words have over us. The angel uses the word "good" as a kind of weapon with which to administer and control the boy, compelling him to believe that the wretched life he lives is right and normal, even praiseworthy, i.e., "good." Blake cannot believe his ears, and so he throws that kind of misused moralizing language back at those who would use it to wage war on the country's youth. Angels are sometimes imagined to be protectors and immortal creatures of light but Blake always thought of them as instruments of mortal power. Angels make the exercise of power and violence seem like "goodness" when it is not. The angels in our everyday lives cause us to confuse submission with goodness and duty. Blake's poem is asking you to ask yourselves: Do such angels accompany you in your own lives? At what cost? What kind of culture is so afraid of its youth that it would rather see them sacrificed than thrive?

As I said in class, one of the several contexts for this text is the explosion of "children's literature" that emerges in the eighteenth-century, especially books of nursery rhymes. At the time, literature written for children was almost exclusively fables and poems designed to teach boys and girls to be "good." I wonder if things are much different today? One of the most famous examples of this kind of educational material was Isaac Watts's (1674-1748) book, *Divine Songs for Children* (1720). Watts's book was widely printed and reprinted through the 18th century and well into the 19th century, long after Watts died. The book is composed of dozens of nursery rhymes designed to shape the conduct of children, ensuring that they will grow up to be submissive adults, adults who will observe the rules without ever asking where those rules came from and in whose interest, exactly, they are applied. Blake adopts all the elements that go into nursery rhymes of the sort that Watts wrote, repurposing this form of literature for visionary ends. What are those elements?

--Simple and straightforward words and word choice (diction), words that are easy to listen to and digest;

--Simple and straightforward rhyming scheme (rhyming couplets, i.e., the verses are organized in rhyming pairs), giving the poems a kind of sing-song sound, pleasing to the innocent ear.

--Lots of *alliteration*, meaning certain sounds get repeated in the poems.

--Repeated words and phrases

"The Chimney Sweeper" is no ordinary nursery rhyme but it does faithfully adopt the elements of nursery rhymes of the sort that Watts wrote. Look carefully at the poem, underlining the

places in which you see and hear *alliteration*, simple rhymes (like rhyming couplets or pairs), repeated words and simple diction.

Pause and consider the ways in which Blake exploits and creates certain ambiguities in the poem. For example, Tom is told that if he is "good," if he does his "duty," he will "never *want* joy." "Want" here means "lack," so the phrase in this verse seems at first to mean "Tom will never lack for joy" . . . if he does his slave labour well. But it could also mean something very different: he will "never want joy" can also mean "Tom will never be a creature who wants to be joyful." The angel means one thing but we hear him or her saying something else, as if inadvertently admitting to what his or her job is….murdering children, coercing them into living lives that will lead to their deaths. If you do your duty, the Angel seems to be saying, you will be a creature who will never hope, never strive for joy, never really be alive. What other ambiguities can you find at work in the poem?

You'll remember from my lecture notes about "The Wall" that poems bring themselves to their own conclusion in a process called *closure*. How does this poem achieve its closure? Note how the last line sounds flatly formulaic: it's a moralizing claim, a pearl of proverbial wisdom that the speaker, who is himself a slave, seems to believe to be true. It provides a pat and simplifying answer to life when what is really needed is a complex analysis of that life! Blake hated the power that clichés have over our lives and insisted until his last day that life called for art---for poetry, for engraving, for painting, and above all for the sustained, exhausting work of a critical imagination. In the case of this poem, what is the moral that the speaker applies to his situation and that of his charge, Tom Dacre? *Do your duty, be the obedient child slave, and no harm will come to you*. The terrible irony is that it is precisely by doing what is called their "duty"—cleaning chimneys--that the child slaves face nothing but harm. The speaker of the poem, the older boy who lost his mom and who was sold by his dad, earnestly spouts nonsense like this as if it were true. He has, as it were, drunk the Kool-Aid that his own masters, including the Church of England, have offered him. But the poem tells us that this advice is not only false but also dangerous. As I said in my notes about "The Wall," poems *prepare* themselves for their endings. Look back at earlier parts of this poem. How does the poem prepare us to read this last verse or line ironically? How does the poem help us see how bitterly sardonic this last line is? Remember: just because the boy thinks what he says is right and true doesn't make it right and true. The test the poem performs is to see if we can sense that difference. One of the "laws of literature" is: *Trust the tale, not the teller*. That is to say, read what is being said, being careful not to take who is speaking at his or her word. Speakers in literature are notoriously untrustworthy. They will say things that you shouldn't take at face value.

Blake affirms children for their uniquely robust powers of the imagination. In the imagination of children, in their extraordinary ability to create and recreate worlds, he sees what each of us

once were, before we all succumbed to the numbing words of all those angels with the bright keys. But children are also terribly vulnerable to the needs and demands of adults. The saddest irony of this poem is that it is precisely Tom's imagination that creates his dream of paradise. But his imagination has already being co-opted by the culture into which he has been born. As one of that culture's most vulnerable denizens, he cannot protect his imagination from being overtaken by cruel authority. His dream sustains him in the sense that it is all that enables him to rise "in the dark" and to survive one more day. But at what horrendous cost?

Blake is a visionary. In other words, he sees things as they really are. As he once said in another illuminated text called *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, his objective was to "burn apparent surfaces away" to reveal "what was hid." He was a devout Christian but reserved some of his sharpest criticism for Christendom, i.e., for what the faith had become in England at the end of the 18th-century—i.e., a conservative and pious institution that jealously guarded its power and that aligned with the monarchy and with England's business interests. The repulsive fate of the child slaves made the results of that alignment of those in authority bitterly evident. Or evident at least to Blake. For one of the reasons why he engraved the poem was that he saw so few fellow Britons even taking notice of the homicidal violence taking place across the cities of England. Blake lived in a predominantly Christian culture that *preached* love, forgiveness, and respect based on the writings of the New Testament. But did it actually *practice* these things? That same testament taught Blake that, properly speaking, all human beings have fundamental obligations or *duties* to each other and to all living things. "Every thing that lives is holy," Blake once wrote. And yet British culture seemed only to pay lip-service to the virtues that it professed. How had this happened, Blake asks? The New Testament makes a particular point of welcoming children. It is hardly alone among the world's sacred texts to do so. But Blake asks what kind of welcome British Christians offered its own youth.

"The Chimney Sweeper" in only one of a fascinating group of 19 or so poems gathered together in Blake's collection of poems called *Songs of Innocence.* Almost of these illuminated poems explore a world youths living amid natural beauty, peacefulness and possibility. In another poem, Blake called this world "England's green and pleasant land." Blake saw this world in the eyes of children and in the ever-renewing capacity of human beings to imagine new and better worlds. But he also saw that "innocence" was dangerously exposed to the predatory violence of adults who lived in what Blake calls the world of "experience." Both worlds exist side by side although more often than not, Blake reminds us, all that we see is the tortured world of experience. The fact that there are artists like Blake, fearlessly committed to creating beautiful and meaningful objects, objects that are inexhaustibly difficult and illuminating, never giving up all their secrets, puts to you and me that "innocence" survives the predations of "experience." The fact that he placed "The Chimney Sweeper" in the *Songs of Innocence* reminds us that Blake was not naïve about the world of innocence. Innocence is a necessary and important

world. But it is not without its own dangers. Several years later, in 1794, Blake will combine another collection of poems, *Songs of* Experience, with *Songs of Experience.* In that illuminated text, Blake looks unsparingly at the fearful, impoverished, sorrowful world of "experience." "London," the other poem we take up in class. Blake never published *Songs of Experience* on its own though, always combining it with *Songs of Innocence* in an illuminated text he titled, simply, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. What do you make of that decision? Why was he willing to look so deeply and frankly at the terrorized life of late 18th-century London in *Songs of* Experience, but never willing to circulate those poems unless they were bound together with the *Songs of Innocence*?

"*Every angel is terrifying*" [*Jeder Engel is schrecklich*], the great German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), once wrote.