

William Blake and Child Labor

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William Blake was a late eighteenth-century poet who was deeply concerned with the plight of the poor in England. He wrote many poems dealing with the social injustices that were present in his time period. His 1789 poem, "The Chimney Sweeper," addresses the difficult existence of young children who are forced into a life of labor. Blake's poem describes the dream of a young chimney sweeper, Tom Dacre. Through the incredible contrast between Tom's dream and his life, the poem convinces the reader of the immoral nature of child labor.

The poem's speaker is another young boy. We learn that he was sold into his profession before he could even speak properly: "And my father sold me while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'" (Blake, 2016, lines 2-3). The idea of a father willing to sell his son and the incredible age at which the boy begins to work immediately produces sympathy on the part of the reader. The boy has been abandoned by his only family and forced to assume a position in the working world of adults. His inability to pronounce the "s" of sweep attests to his age, but also creates the repetition " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'" (Blake, 2016, line 3) that hints at his sorrow.

The poem presents the reader with a number of images that work together to create an idea of life in London for the young chimney sweepers. We are told the boys sleep in soot. Filth is so common a part of their lives that their hair is shaved off in an effort to keep them somewhat clean. Additionally, we are told that they are cold, in the dark, and often crying. Combined with the image of the black soot, all of these details work together to produce an understanding of the dismal nature of their lives.

The imagery of Tom's dream is in absolute contrast to the reader's perception of London. The first image of the dream is "an Angel who had a bright key, / And he opened the coffins & set them all free;" (Blake, 2016, lines 16-17). The concept of a guardian Angel that cares for the children reminds us of the father who did nothing to protect his son. The coffin is certainly an image of death, but it might also call to mind the black chimneys in which the boys work. Unlike London, the dream is filled with a green landscape, sunshine and laughter (Blake, 2016). The image of children playing in a natural landscape more closely matches the reader's own understanding of childhood and therefore condemns the city of London where the children actually live.

The positive images of the dream continue as the boys wash in a river and are left "naked & white, all their bags left behind, / They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind." (Blake, 2016, lines 20-21). The whiteness of the boys stands opposite to the blackness of soot. The absence of bags or clothes, gives the idea of complete innocence as all the aspects of the world are left behind. This is further emphasized as the boy's float up into the air on clouds, completely abandoning the realities of the world. This entire section of the poem radiates joy and happiness, which was not present prior to the dream.

Although the dream provides a sense of comfort and hope for Tom when he wakes up, the reader cannot help but realize that the green field full of laughing and fun is where these boys belong and not the coffin like chimneys. We can appreciate the boy's strength of character that allows him to find happiness in the worst conditions: "Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;" (Blake, 2016, line 26). Even so, we cannot tolerate the adults that have placed him in such a situation. Blake's poem produces a powerful idea of the injustice of child labor

and by extension a condemnation of the society that was willing to tolerate it. It also forces us as readers to consider the injustice within our own society.

References

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