The Chimney Sweeper

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, and in soot I sleep.

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."

And so he was quiet; and that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight,-
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins and set them all free;
Then down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run,
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

Then naked and 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, and never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,
And got with our bags and our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;
So if all do their duty they need not fear harm.

William Blake
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The Chimney Sweeper

The Chimney Sweeper, a little boy, (about six or seven years old) is telling the story of his despairing life as well as the sad tales of other chimney sweeper boys. The little boy narrates that he was very young when his mother died. He was then sold by his father to a Master Sweeper when his age was so tender that he could not even pronounce the word ‘sweep’ and cryingly pronounced it ‘weep’ and wept all the time.

Most chimney sweepers, like him, were so young that they could not pronounce sweep and lisped ‘weep’. Since that tender age the little boy is sweeping chimney and sleeping at night in the soot-smeared body, without washing off the soot (blackness).

Through this poem, the poet sheds light on the pitiable condition of the chimney sweepers who were being exploited by their Masters.

This is a poem which describes the rampant bondage labour, child labour, exploitation of children at tender age, and the pitiable condition of the orphaned children or the poor children who were sold by their poor parents.

In all, this poem sarcastically attacks the advanced societies that keep their eyes shut toward these children, but act as being generous among their near and dear ones by holding or attending some charity shows/functions for the poor and down-trodden people in their country.

The Chimney Sweeper consists of six quatrains, each following the AABB rhyme scheme, with two rhyming couplets per quatrain.

The main theme or message of this poem:

- Child labour and exploitation: During the Industrial Revolution, poor children were employed to do dangerous work in small spaces such as chimneys and mining tunnels. These children were powerless and could do nothing to change their situation.

- The role of Christianity in oppression: Christian teachings say that if people live good lives
on Earth, they will be rewarded by God in Heaven. This teaching was used by those in power (and the church) to keep poor people in their place. It encouraged the oppression and exploitation of the weak by using the promise of Paradise as a reward for obedience and hard work.

Mood/Tone

The tone is exuberant (in a good mood), wistful (thoughtful and sad) and ironic in places.

- Exuberant: The description of the boy’s dream in Stanza 4 where the angel releases the boys from their coffins and they can play in the sun and wash in the river is lovely and happy. The boys are happy and clean.

- Wistful: The angel tells Tom that there is a condition to his happiness in Stanza 5: if he is good, he will go to heaven. In other words, there can be a positive outcome but he needs to fulfil certain conditions, like doing his duty. The hopelessness of his situation is emphasised.

- Ironic: The boys are ‘locked in coffins of black’ (chimneys) in ‘clothes of death’ to do their ‘duty’ on Earth. The irony is that this ‘duty’ will more than likely bring them harm.

The poet uses the change in mood and tone to highlight the situation of the child labourers. They dream of being happy children, but have been brought up to believe that they must work hard while they are alive in order to benefit when they are dead.

Symbols in the poem

clothes of death, black (both literal and figurative representing death and the soot from the chimney), coffin, heaven.

Themes and message

The poem “The Chimney Sweeper” deals with a couple of themes:

- innocence and faith,
- misery and death.

- Innocence and faith

  The theme of innocence and faith/religion is explored in the poem through the character of Tom, a boy who has just become a chimney sweeper. Unable to deal with the harsh reality of being probably sold into labour, the boy finds refuge in faith, in God and in afterlife. In his dream, the typical innocence children should enjoy is depicted as they run free, clean (pure) in what resembles Heaven.

- Misery and death

  Misery and death are explored in the poem through all the characters; the speaker, the “thousands of sweepers” (l. 11) and Tom, all of them being children. The poet presents the miserable lives these boys have to put up with.
Imagery
The poet presents two very opposed images of children. In the first one, describing reality, they live miserable lives working in the chimneys and sleeping in soot (l. 4), waking up in the dark and getting ready for work even in cold days:

> And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark
> And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
> Though the morning was cold... (ll. 21-23)

Metaphors
A metaphor is a way of describing something by saying it is something else.
- In the poem, chimneys are compared to coffins containing dead bodies (stanzas 3 and 4). The young boys who clean the chimneys are ‘lock’d up in coffins of black’. The chimney sweepers spend their time in narrow chimneys covered in soot. Some of them die in these chimneys.
- The white hair stands for innocence which, by being cut, is metaphorically spared of being lost or destroyed by the reality of child labour:

Similes
A simile is a comparison between two things that have something in common. It uses ‘like’ or ‘as’.
- Tom’s hair is ‘curl’d like a lamb’s back’ (line 6). In other words, Tom’s blond curly hair is compared to the wool on a lamb. Blake uses the lamb as a symbol of innocence, just as Tom is young and innocent.

Allusion
An allusion is a reference to other writing or poetry.
- Line 13: ‘an Angel who had a bright key’. The poet is alluding to Christian stories of St Peter who holds the key to the gates of heaven. He unlocks the gates only for those who have lived good lives on Earth.
- Line 16: ‘wash in a river and shine in the Sun’. Again, the poet is alluding to the Christian belief that all who are good and ‘free of sin’ will be rewarded. In the dream, the boys are cleaned of all the soot, as if they have been cleaned of all their sins.

Symbols
The poem also includes a few symbolical elements. The chimney sweepers, who are the topic of the poem, function as a symbol of misery and injustice.
### Playing with the language

Though the poem sounds very playful because of its rhythm and rhyme, the poet is actually quite straightforward. The only instances when we get the feeling that he is playing with language is when he uses several allusions such as the one to the lamb of god (ll. 5-6),...

### Tense of the verbs

The poem renders past events, describing the speaker’s past and Tom’s dream and attitude using mostly past tenses: “died” (l. 1), “sold” (l. 2), “cried” (l. 5), “was shaved” (l. 6), “were” (l. 12), “came” (l. 13), etc.

The poet also employs present tense to show permanent situations, unlikely to change, particularly related to the status of the children: “So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.” (l. 4)

### Sentence structure

The poet combines sentences with a normal word order with sentences in which he uses juxtaposition and inverted syntax.

### Irony

Irony is not noticeable at a first sight in the poem; only after we compare the way the poem sounds (playful, joyful) with the topic of child labour.
The Chimney Sweeper Analysis

Stanza One

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.

- A little boy is telling the story of his despairing life as well as the sad tales of other chimney’s sweeper boys. The little boy narrates that he was very young when his died.
- He was then sold by his father to a Master Sweeper when his age was so tender that he could not even pronounce the word ‘sweep’ and cryingly pronounced it ‘weep’ and wept all the time.
- The pun intended through the use of word ‘weep’ three times in the third line of this stanza holds pathetic significance.
- Most chimney sweepers, like him, were so young that they could not pronounce sweep and lisped ‘weep’.
- Since that tender age the little boy is sweeping chimney and sleeping at night in the soot-smeared body, without washing off the soot (blackness).

Stanza Two

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.”

- In the second stanza, the little narrator tells us the woeful tale of Tom Dacre.
- Tom wept when his head was shaved, just as the back of a lamb is shaved for wool.
- The narrator then told Tom not to weep and keep his peace. T

Stanza Three

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;

- The third stanza continues the story of Tom who was calmed by the consoling words of the narrator.
- That same night while sleeping Tom saw a wonderful vision.
- He saw in his dream that many Chimney sweepers, who were named Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack, were dead and their bodies were lying in caged coffins, made of black-coloured wood.

Stanza Four

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 the fourth stanza, the vision is completed.
- An Angel, who was carrying a shining key, came near the coffins.
- The Angel opened the coffins containing the bodies and set all the bodies free from the bondage of coffins.
- The freed little sweepers of the chimney ran down a green ground, washed themselves in the water of a river and dried themselves in the sunlight to give out a clean shine.
- This was really a very delightful moment for these chimney sweepers, who got freed from the shackles of bondage labour, exploitation and child labour.

**Stanza Five**

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.

- The little boy continues narrating the dream vision of Tom.
- All the little boys were naked and white after washing.
- They were naked because their bags of clothes were left behind.
- They cast off the burden of life along with the bags of soot at the time of death.
- Now naked and white, the little chimney sweeper boys ride the clouds and play in the wind. The image of clouds floating freely is Blake’s metaphor for the freedom from the material boundaries of the body and an important visual symbol.
- The Angel told Tom that if he would be a good boy he would have God for his father and there would never be lack of happiness for him.

**Stanza Six**

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 narrator tells that Tom woke up and his dream vision broke up.
- Tom and other little sweeper boys rose up from their beds in the dark.
- They made themselves ready to work taking their bags for soot and the brushes to clean chimney.
- The morning was cold, but Tom, after the dream, was feeling warm and happy.
- In the last line of the poem, a moral has been thrown to us: If all do their duty, they need not fear any harm. The last stanza shows the reality of the sweepers' life.
The Chimney Sweeper

1. Why were chimney sweepers commonly orphans?
2. For who are the pronouns 'I' and 'my' used for in the first stanza of the poem?
3. What are reasons that the people in the chimney sweeping business have for making young children work?
4. Lines 1–2. (There's little Tom...a lamb's back;)
   (a) Identify the figure of speech in the above lines.
   (b) Which two things are being compared?
   (c) What does the lamb symbolise?
5. What does the author mean when he says in line 4 “in soot I sleep”?
6. In Tom's dreams, he sees thousands of sweepers locked up in black coffins. What do the coffins symbolize?
7. Refer to 'Were all them lock'd up in coffins of black./And by came an Angel who had a bright key, .... And he open'd the coffins & set them all free;' (lines 12–14):
   7.1 What are the 'coffins of black'?
   7.2 Why are these coffins black?
   7.3 What do the coffins symbolize?
   7.4 Using your OWN words, explain the allusion (reference) to the 'Angel' and the 'bright key'.
8. What does “free” in stanza four refer to?
9. What does the word “naked” in stanza 5 express?
10. Refer to stanza 4: What does the poet want to say in lines 3 & 4?
11. What does the word “bag” in line 1 stanza 5 symbolize?
12. Explain the meaning found in lines 3 & 4 of stanza 5?
13. Explain as fully as possible the significance of lines 11-12
   "Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black”?
14. What is the symbolic significance of the angel's opening the coffins and setting the boys free?
15. In the last stanza it can be seen that although the situation for Tom and the other chimney sweepers is the same but why are they happy?
16. Write down the rhyme scheme that is evident throughout the poem. Identify and discuss the theme that is evident in this poem.
1. Why were chimney sweepers commonly orphans?
   If they died they wouldn't have much to lose and people who would miss them. These children used to climb through the flues in order to sweep chimneys. This was very dangerous as children could be injured or even killed as a result of burns and suffocation.

2. For who are the pronouns 'I' and 'my' used for in the first stanza of the poem?
   The chimney sweep – he is telling his own story, using the first person voice.

3. What are reasons that the people in the chimney sweeping business have for making young children work?
   They are young and healthy and are small enough to fit into the chimneys. They believe they are taking these kids out of a miserable life and giving them a better life.

4. Lines 1–2. (‘There’s little Tom…a lamb’s back;’)
   (a) Identify the figure of speech in the above lines.
      Simile
   (b) Which two things are being compared?
      The boy’s hair is compared to the curly and white hair of the lamb.
   (c) What does the lamb symbolise?
      innocence

5. What does the author mean when he says in line 4 “in soot I sleep”?
   Figuratively it means that he is trying to convey this everlasting sadness and darkness in which these orphans live. Literally he is saying that these orphans go to sleep without washing, still dressed their dirty clothes.

6. In Tom’s dreams, he sees thousands of sweepers locked up in black coffins. What do the coffins symbolize?
   Tom’s dream is a glimpse into the afterlife of the chimney sweepers; the coffins of black are a conventional symbol for death, and the black ties back to chimney soot. A chimney, from the inside, is dark and constricting, much as a coffin is.

7. Refer to ‘Were all them lock’d up in coffins of black./And by came an Angel who had a bright key, …. And he open’d the coffins & set them all free,’ (lines 12–14):
   7.1 What are the ‘coffins of black’?
      The chimneys they clean.
   7.2 Why are these coffins black?
      They are covered in soot.
   7.3 What do the coffins symbolize?
      • Their miserable lives.
      • They are boxed in black chimneys like they are boxed in coffins.
      • Death
   7.4 Using your OWN words, explain the allusion (reference) to the ‘Angel’ and the ‘bright key’.
      An Angel, who was carrying a shining key, came near the coffins.
The Angel opened the coffins containing the bodies and set all the bodies free from the bondage of coffins.

8. **What does “free” in stanza four refer to?**
The chimney sweeper's life. - these boys got freed from the shackles of bondage labour, exploitation and child labour.

9. **What does the word “naked” in stanza 5 express?**
All the little boys were naked and white after washing.

10. **Refer to stanza 4: What does the poet want to say in lines 3 & 4?**
The freed little sweepers of the chimney ran down a green ground, washed themselves in the water of a river and dried themselves in the sunlight to give out a clean shine.

11. **What does the word “bag” in line 1 stanza 5 symbolize?**
Bag represent something that they're closely related to—the chimney-sweeping profession.

12. **Explain the meaning found in lines 3 & 4 of stanza 5?**
Tom has a conversation with the angel, who tells him that, if he is good, God will be his father and he'll never lack joy.

13. **Explain as fully as possible the significance of lines 11-12 “Were all of them lock’d up in coffins of black”?**
This is a metaphor for these child Chimney sweepers' lives. They are boxed in black chimneys like they are boxed in coffins.

14. **What is the symbolic significance of the angel’s opening the coffins and setting the boys free?**
The imagery is gentle and divinatory. The speaker dreams that an angel shows up with a "bright key"; in this line, angels are freeing the children from their coffins. The angels are freeing the children from their life of servitude.

15. **In the last stanza it can be seen that although the situation for Tom and the other chimney sweepers is the same but why are they happy?**
Tom's happy and warm because he believes (thanks to the lesson the angel gives him in that dream) that if you do your duty, no harm will come to you. In other words, if he keeps chimney sweeping like a good little boy, he'll be taken care of.

16. **Write down the rhyme scheme that is evident throughout the poem.**
aabb (rhyming couplet)

17. **Identify and discuss the theme that is evident in this poem.**
It is about the loss of innocence. It is a sad tale of children, who have no childhood at all. This poem is about the harsh and justifiable critique of child labour.