WILLIAM BLAKE

"THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER"
William Blake (1757-1827)
- an English poet, visionary, painter, and printmaker.
- While his visual art and written poetry are usually considered separately, Blake often employed them in concert to create a product that at once defied and superseded convention. Though he believed himself able to converse aloud with Old Testament prophets, and despite his work in illustrating the Book of Job, Blake's affection for the Bible was belied by his hostility for the established Church.

“I must create a system or be enslaved by another man's.”
Songs of Innocence and Experience

- *Songs of Innocence* was first published in 1789; the companion collection, *Songs of Experience* was first published in 1794.
- Blake combined them into a single volume in 1794.
- Although Blake adopts the format of a children’s book, and writes at times with a disarming directness, the meanings of his poems are anything but straightforward and conventional.
- Innocence and Experience contrast opposite states of human existence, before and after the Fall.
**Songs of Innocence and Experience**

- The poems of *Innocence* express themes of religious faith and acceptance and adopt a pastoral tone; those in *Experience*, by contrast, convey disillusionment and anger and employ a bardic voice.

- Many poems in the two books bear the same or parallel titles.
The Nurse's Song

When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still.

Then come home my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise.

Come come, let us play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies.

No, no let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep.

Besides, in the sky the little birds fly
And the hills are all covered with sheep.

Well, well go and play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed.

The little ones leaped & shouted & laughed
And all the hills echoed.
"The Lamb" & "The Tyger"
"The Blossom" & "The Sick Rose"

**The Blossom**

Merry Merry Sparrow  
Under leaves so green  
A happy Blossom  
Sees you swift as arrow  
Seek your cradle narrow  
Near my Bosom.

Pretty Pretty Robin  
Under leaves so green  
A happy Blossom  
Hears you sobbing sobbing  
Pretty Pretty Robin  
Near my Bosom.

**The Sick Rose**

O Rose thou art sick  
The invisible worm  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:  
Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.
WILLIAM BLAKE

"THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER"
Background
A chimney fire can occur when the interior of the flue is neglected by not being cleaned or when it becomes choked and partially blocked with a build-up of soot deposited by the coal or wood burning process. As early as the Georgian period it was appreciated that chimneys needed to be swept in order to avoid problems. In Victorian Age Britain, the business became notorious for employing young boys as they were small enough to enter the chimneys and clean them from inside. The work was dirty and dangerous, and their employers were notorious for abusing and exploiting them.
Being a chimney sweep was not lucky for the little girls and boys who had this job in the 1700's to 1800's. They were a type of indentured servant, bought by the chimney sweep master. The master was to teach them the trade while being responsible for housing them. Their job was to actually climb up, inside the chimney, brushing the flue as they went, and they weren't done till their heads poked out of the chimney top. This, of course, was a scary job for these children and they were often reluctant to perform as expected. Many masters used a dangerous punishment: the child was forced up the flue then a fire was lit. Since he couldn't come down, they had no choice but to climb up the flue. Many Sweeps' Boys were parish children or orphans although others were sold into the trade by their families. Some grew up to be Journeymen (assistants to the Master), the remainder were put out to various trades to attempt to become skilled at other work. In London there was the London Society of Master Sweeps with its own set of rules, one of which said that boys were not required to work on Sundays but must go to Sunday School to study, and read the Bible.
Health and Conditions
These children lived in deplorable conditions. Conditions for the children were harsh and sometimes cruel. 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. Some were forced to sleep in cellars on bags of soot and washing facilities rarely existed. They were often sickly, and learned to beg handouts of food and clothing from their customers as all the money they earned went to their masters. The soot they collected was sold to farmers for fertilizer. There was no safety clothing or safety regulations to protect the boys and there are instances recorded where they were choked and suffocated to death by dust inhalation whilst trying to sweep clean the chimneys. They often became trapped in the narrower flues or fell from the rotten stack to their death. The boys also suffered from deformed joints, burns, and a form of testicular cancer caused by the carcinogenic chemicals in the soot.
Top-hats and Tails

Why did chimney sweeps wear tophats and tails? They are said to have most often gotten their clothing as cast-offs from funeral directors. The outfit was always a very practical black in color, and gave an air of distinction to a dirty, though necessary, job. Chimney sweeps often served double duty as the town's "nightman", whose job it was to clean out the privy. It is said that chimney sweeps wore slippers because they could be more easily removed, freeing the toes to aid their climbing grip.

1864

Only in 1864, after many years of campaigning, was an Act of Parliament finally approved by the House of Lords, to outlaw the use of children for climbing chimneys.
Songs of Innocence
The Chimney Sweeper
SONGS
OF
INNOCENCE

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, weep.
So your chimney I sweep, in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curd like a lamb's back, was shaven, so they said;
Hugh Tom never mind it, for when your heads bare
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.
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 lock'd up in cells of black.

And by came an Angel who had a bright key
And he open'd the cells, and set them all free.
Then down a green plant leaping, laughing they run
And wake in never more slumber in the Sun.

Then ask'd they, what all their bags left behind
They ran upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom if he'd been a good boy
He'd have God for his father, never want joy.

And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags, and our brushes to work
The morning was cold, but we was happy and warm.
So we'll all do their duty, they need not fear harm.
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 curl'd like a lamb's back, was shav'd, 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 lock'd up in coffins of black.
And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he open'd 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.

Ironic: Blake is being facetious/sarcastic with this statement. This is the P.O.V. of innocence that the idea of God and church can save one.
SONGS OF EXPERIENCE

The Chimney Sweeper

A little black thing among the snow:
Crying, weep, in notes of woe!

Where are my father & mother? say?
They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smiled among the winter's snow,

They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy, & dance & sing,
They think they have done me no injury,

And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King
Who make up a heaven, of our misery.
“The Chimney Sweeper” from Songs of Experience

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.

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.
Q: 1

What does Blake say about traditional notions of faith in Songs of Innocence?
What does he say in Songs of Experience?
How does his true views on both manifest themselves when comparing the two poems?

- In S.O.I., Blake says that it’s okay to suffer in your life or work because God will save you in the end by guaranteeing each person a place in heaven.
- In S.O.E., Blake, through the point of the speaker, God is actually viewed as the source of human suffering, which is empowered by Church and King. There is no real way to understand suffering.
Q: 1

What does Blake say about traditional notions of faith in Songs of Innocence? What does he say in Songs of Experience? How does his true views on both manifest themselves when comparing the two poems?

One must find a balance between innocence and experience. Neither one by itself provides a complete understanding of human nature.

Similarities: In both poems, Blake points out the social conditions of the Chimney Sweeper and therefore of society and also of the Church and of faith, of God, of eternal reward.
How does Blake’s use of symbolism in both poems help to develop his ideas.

- SOE ⇒ "clothes of death" which are representative of his social conditions also symbolically represent his early death (see notes on C.S.)
- ‘clothes of death’ are actually his ‘clothes in life’ and he walks around wearing his death.
- Darkness of clothing makes him an outcast; this contrasts with the white wool of the Lamb; in S.O.I, he gets his white hair shaved away, which was symbolically shaving away his innocence; sacrificed for the sake of his master and he gains nothing from it.
- In S.O.I., he is told by another child not to allow the shaving of his hair to bother him, which shows how a child has been corrupted already, and now...
How does Blake’s use of symbolism in both poems help to develop his ideas.

- Proliferates the Christian idea to other children.

- "Coffins" in S.O.I. - They obviously represent death; they also represent the restrictions of being a chimney sweep.

- "Black" - darkness

- "We rose in the dark" in S.O.I.

- Awakes to find out that he is still in the dark, metaphorically still in the coffin, also inside the dark chimney; surrounded by darkness.
What is Blake’s tone in each poem, and how does that tone make clear the theme of the poem?

**Tone:** the emotional attitude toward the subject implied by the literary work. Examples of different tones include playful, familiar, ironic, sarcastic, sincere, and serious.

_Songs of Innocence_

“So if all do their duty they need not fear harm” (24).

- obeying orders without questioning them.
- orders of society and of church and God.
- everything will be fine in the after-life.
- heaven is guaranteed to those who suffer.

Sarcasm; irony
What is Blake’s tone in each poem, and how does that tone make clear the theme of the poem?

**Songs of Experience**

**Sympathy/Sadness (Melancholy)**

- Child is alone walking in the snow, crying.
- Parents have abandoned him; while they go to church, he works; parents have sold him into the profession.
- Parents think everything is fine, but this is not true.
- Child doesn’t understand why he was sold; thinks he was sold because he was happy in life.

Happy as a child $\Rightarrow$ sold into labor $\Rightarrow$ appears happy, but actually miserable.
How does Blake’s brilliant use of point of view help to illustrate the difference between the two poems and Blake’s statement on the conditions of the chimney sweep?

- *P.O.V.* - 1st P.O.V. of a child goes into the position of C.S.

There is a shift to 3rd person in the second stanza as we here the story of Tom Dacre. Speaker believes that following order of society result in happiness.
How does Blake’s brilliant use of point of view help to illustrate the difference between the two poems and Blake’s statement on the conditions of the chimney sweep?

*Songs of Experience*

- Bardic voice - voice of an older person; innocence no longer remains.

- Begin by asking a question, which when answered switches the P.O.V. to 1st person as we hear the voice of a child who is suffering. The experienced bard can recognize the loss of innocence in the child.
The Essay

Introduction

What is the thesis of your essay? What will your essay prove? What will you be discussing? William Blake? What two poems? Where do those poems come from? What is the difference between these collections? What is the point that Blake is making (this is probably the thesis that you will be making)? You must have a thesis statement/topic of intent in your introduction.
The Body

How are you going to organize the body?

• You can talk about each poem in one paragraph and then compare the two poems in another.

or

• You can make each paragraph focus on one particular aspect of the poems. For example, you can write a paragraph on Blake’s symbolism in both poems in one paragraph and then talk about his attack on the Catholic church in another. (In this case, each paragraph would then be about both poems.)
The Conclusion: What is left to say?

• The conclusion can never be planned out because you learn something about your topic as you are writing it. Therefore, summarize your main points and make a connection back to your thesis.

• THE FOLLOWING SENTENCES ARE FULL OF SHIT AND SHOULD NOT BE USED:
The facts that I gave in this essay prove my point. Or I have shown that… Or

• William Blake is a wonderful writer that everyone should read.