

Documented Essay: William Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" Poems
ENWR 106: College Writing II
Instructor: Nash

William Blake's two poems entitled "The Chimney Sweeper," one from *Songs of Innocence* and one from *Songs of Experience*, offer rich opportunities for interpretation and research. The materials below emphasize learning about the historical context of the poems: the abuse of the young "climbing boys" and the hundred years of reform efforts. In Part 2, some information is included about searching in the library, in electronic databases, and on the Internet. These searches could be demonstrated in a classroom equipped with a computer and a data projector, or at Sprague Library, by arrangement with the reference librarians.

I would greatly appreciate learning about additional historical or critical materials that other instructors have found useful in working with these poems.

Note: One of Blake's poems is used extensively as an example in the textbook *Making Literature Matter*, ed. Schilb and Clifford, 2d ed. pp. 17-36.

Careful Reading

[This work should probably be carried out in small groups.]

Many readers have questions about the overall meaning and purpose of these poems. In the first poem, is the last line—"So if all do their duty they need not fear harm"—true to these boys' lives? Is it true to our lives? Does Tom's dream help him go back to work? Looking at the second poem, are you surprised at the sweep's attitude to his parents, religion, and the government? What does he mean when he says that they "make up a heaven of our misery?" When Blake published his two sets of poems combined into one book, he called it *Songs of Innocence and of Experience, Showing Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*. Do the chimney sweeps in the first poem seem to be in a different "state" than the sweep in the second? How would you describe the differences between them?

After you work out your ideas on what the poems mean, you should also think about their formal features, such as rhyme, meter, and diction (choice of words). Are these related to the meaning or purpose of the poems? (For example, what makes the first poem sound like a nursery rhyme? Is there any point or purpose to giving it this quality? Does the second sound different?)

Both poems are rich in imagery and image patterns, and they reward a slow, careful reading for those elements. Again, work to relate these to your sense of each poem's meaning.

Different Approaches and Interpretations

Literary critics disagree about whether Blake was being ironic in the first poem. Is he mocking a religious view of the boys' lives, based on ideas about a heavenly reward and the importance of duty? Or is he saying that this view provides a powerful shield that protects the boys from their harsh lives?

A generation ago, many critics (but not all) focused on trying to figure out what Blake thought about these topics, and whether the darker view seen in the poems of *Songs of Experience* indicates that he had changed his mind about religion and social problems. Some interpreters insisted that one must study all of Blake's writings to understand how he used a special symbolic system to encode the meaning of his poems. They claimed that one cannot understand any individual poem without a complete knowledge of this code.

However, these two poems (and others of Blake's) continue to appeal to many readers who are not interested in becoming Blake scholars. Is it legitimate for these readers to make their own meanings out of the poems, even though Blake might have meant something else?

A Historical Approach

Many scholars and critics today are insisting that in order to understand literary works, we need to understand their historical contexts, the social, political, and economic forces that shape what people write and how they read. They would want to look very closely into the social situations Blake was describing in his poems. This assignment is an experiment to see whether such information helps you understand the poems better and appreciate them more.

Use the materials listed below to learn as much as you can about the lives of chimney sweeps in London in the 1700s and 1800s. You will need to understand not only their working conditions (why chimneys needed sweeping and how it was done), but also who the sweeps were, how they became sweeps, and what happened to them as a result. This will involve some understanding of apprenticeship. These efforts will help you understand the social conditions hinted at in the words, "my father sold me" and "in soot I sleep," and why the sweep is angry at "God & his Priest & King."

The idea is to read the poem or poems carefully first, as outlined above, and then to "historicize" them by becoming familiar with their historical contexts. Make notes or freewrite about the poems as you go along in order to keep track of how your ideas and reactions change, first as a result of your careful reading, then as a result of your historical research.

- First read the poem through at least twice. Make some notes on your understanding of its meaning and on anything else that occurs to you at this point. (See the questions below.) Your records of this first reading experience are important, because they can be used to measure any later changes in your understanding and reactions to the poem.
- Next, do a careful reading as described above.
- Finally, do some historical research.

At each stage of your reading and study, you can ask yourself questions like these:

- What did you notice this time? What seems more important than before? (ideas, words, visual images, metaphors)
- How has your understanding changed? Has a certain word or phrase or line become clearer? Has anything become *less* clear than you originally thought?

- How has your reaction to the poem(s) changed? Do you like them better, or not as much?
- Does any part or word seem more important than before?
- Can you decide if the first poem is ironic about the value of religion and duty?
- Can you make sense of why the sweep in the second poem accuses England's social and political power structure (family, religion, government) of making "a heaven of our misery?"

As the final phase of the project, write an essay in which you do either or both of the following:

- Tell the story of your experience with the poem(s): describe how your understanding and appreciation have changed over the course of your work with it.
- Persuade other readers of the poem to understand it as you do.

Historical Resources

G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History; A Survey of Six Centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria*. New York: D. McKay, 1965. 544-45. **DA32.T7487** [attached: a brief account of reform efforts]

M. Dorothy George. *London Life in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965. Ch. 5, "Parish Children and Poor Apprentices" (excerpts). **HN398.L7G4 1965** [pp. 225-37, on apprenticeship in general; 243-47, on sweeps. This book is out of copyright. I will have some of it photocopied and also scanned and converted to Portable Document Format (PDF) files. Instructors who want photocopies or PDF files may email me: (nashj@mail.montclair.edu).

Lee Jackson. Victorian Dictionary: A Guide to the Social History of Victorian London. <http://www.victorianlondon.org/>. Under Professions and Trades: Service Industry is a page on chimney sweeps from a source identified as Uncle Jonathan, *Walks in and around London*, 1895 (3 ed.). It describes the changes in a sweep's work brought about by the 1875 reforming legislation noted in Trevelyan.

For in-depth study

Improving the Lot of the Chimney Sweep: One Book and Nine Pamphlets, 1785-1840. New York, Arno Press, 1972. **HD8039.C49G74**. Includes materials by the eighteenth-century reformers Hanway and Porter, as well as "An Address to British Females" comparing the sweeps' situation with that of North American slaves, and an 1834 report with pages of quoted testimony about the lives of the sweeps. This material is out of copyright. I will have some of it photocopied and also scanned and converted to Portable Document Format (PDF) files. Instructors who want photocopies or PDF files may email me: (nashj@mail.montclair.edu).

Henry Mayhew. *London Labour and the London Poor* [1862]. 4 vols. New York: Dover Publications, 1968. Vol. 2: 339-83. **HV4088.L8M52 1968** Extensive coverage. Out of copyright. Will be photocopied and scanned, as above.

Adolphe Smith and John Thompson. "The Temperance Sweep." *Street Life in London* [1877]. With photographs. New York: B. Blom, 1969. 51-54. **DA688.T52 1969**. Out of copyright. For photocopies or PDF files, contact Jim Nash, as above.

Other literary treatments of sweeps

Charles Kingsley, *The Water-Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land-Baby* [1863]. Illustrated by Linley Sambourne. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966. **Juv PZ8.K619W1a** Trevelyan attributes the passage of the 1864 reform act to this children's book about a chimney sweep.

Charles Lamb, "The Praise of Chimney Sweepers" [1823]. *Essays of Elia*, First Series. *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*. Ed. E. V. Lucas. 5 Vols. New York, Putnam, 1903. Rpt. New York, AMS Press, 1968. Vol. 2: 108-14. **PR4860.A2 1968**. Out of copyright. For photocopies or PDF files, contact Emily Isaacs or Jim Nash, as above.

Examples of sources that can be used to learn about present-day child labor issues

The Department of Labor's 2001 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Trade and Development Act of 2000. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2002. **HD6231 .D47 2002**

Liza Featherstone and United Students against Sweatshops, *Students against Sweatshops*. London, New York: Verso, 2002. **HD2337 .F42 2002**

Literary Criticism:

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. *Innocence and Experience: An Introduction to Blake*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1964. **PR4146.H5**.

Hirsch interprets the poem from *Songs of Innocence* as "unironic" in effect and claims that it is not aimed at political reform (184-86). However, he sees the poem in *Songs of Experience* as expressing "savage indignation" about the social order (229-31). Students will find only very general references to the sweeps' social realities—essentially what any reader can gather from a close reading of the poems.

Stanley Gardner, *The Tyger, the Lamb and the Terrible Desert: Songs of Innocence and of Experience in Its Times and Circumstance*. London and Madison: Cygnus Arts and Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1998. Good treatment of the London background.

E. P. Thompson. *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. New York: The New Press, 1993.

Part 2: Library and Web searches

The subject of chimney sweeps also offers a good opportunity to teach about searches. Here are some examples.

A. Sprague Library Catalog

A search on the subject “chimney sweep” leads quickly to *Improving the Lot of the Chimney Sweeps* (listed above), an 18th-century book and 9 pamphlets advocating for reform (part of a series called *British Labour Struggles: Contemporary Pamphlets 1727-1850*). Search results also include fiction (*David Copperfield*), children’s books (incl. Charles Kingsley’s *Water-Babies*, listed above), a film (*David Copperfield*), and numerous child-labor studies (historical and present-day, national and international).

B. Electronic Database Search

An electronic database search gives opportunities for explaining search techniques and choosing among results.

Reader’s Guide: 1400 hits on “chimney sweep” or “chimney sweeper”
Explore an example, a hit on the first results page:

Title: **Chimney sweeps** are plunging into their work again

Personal Author: [Singer, Neal](#)

Journal Name: [Smithsonian](#)

Source: *Smithsonian* [v. 26 \(September 1995\)](#) p. 96-8+

Publication Year: 1995

A search of Sprague’s list of ejournals reveals that we can get the full-text article online thru several services:

Smithsonian is available as follows: [from 01/01/1984 to present in [Expanded Academic ASAP](#)] [from 06/01/1990 to present in [Academic Search Premier](#) and [MAS Ultra - School Edition](#)]

The article deals with contemporary sweeps, but also gives an explanation for their necessity and a brief history of the reform movement.

D. Web Search

Google search on “Chimney Sweep” and Blake: 690 results

The first link is to the Tate Museum, which provides an illustration, text, summary, and commentary on both poems:

http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/blakeinteractive/works/songs_05.html

The next few links are to e-texts from universities.

A link a little further down is just a list of poems on a personal Web site.

Just after that is a link to some background about the sweeps and a link to a 19thC parliamentary speech:

http://world.std.com/~jorge/cs_innocence/title_main_frame.html

A little searching produces a stanza by stanza commentary on the poems, with black and white reproductions of Blake's plates. Useful in showing students how to look for a main or home page to get more information. Also: although this Web site seems scholarly, the author offers no information about him/herself. (Note: this material can also be found at the Blake Digital Text Project, accompanied by other useful materials and a bibliography:

<http://virtual.park.uga.edu/~wblake/home1.html>)

Other links go to a discussion forum where students are sharing ideas about Blake's poems. The next page offers many links where one can buy papers. A little searching would also probably lead to papers posted on course Web sites and personal Web sites, and the advantages and dangers of using these could be discussed.

The [Blake archive](#) may also be very useful to students.