“The Chimney Sweeper”

During the late eighteenth century, the now taboo practice of child labor was socially acceptable. “The Chimney Sweeper” by William Blake addresses the widely publicized and dark political issue during the time when he was actively writing. The poem reflects the cultural realities that took place and are real depictions of young children from the working class during the time of the Industrial Revolution. In “The Chimney Sweeper,” Blake protests against the working conditions, living conditions, and overall treatment of young chimney sweeps through the eyes of a youth; using radiant imagery and symbolism, Blake successfully emphasizes the innocence of a child who does not comprehend the injustice that he is experiencing.

During the time that the Industrial Revolution was rapidly spreading across Great Britain, children as young as 5 years old were bought, sold, and traded into a life that was completely at the mercy of their owner (Gessner). Masters, as they were referred to, were compensated to clothe, accommodate, and teach the boys the trade (Gessner). The job tormented their small bodies that were used to crawl up chimneys that could be as small as seven inches in diameter. They were required to scrap away and clean soot and other tar deposits caused by wood or log fire smoke from the inside of the flue. There were no safety regulations, and children often suffered because of it. The children were poorly fed and often slept in cellars on bags of soot. Life for these boys was hard; some choked to death or
suffocated due to the lack of oxygen that was available in the chimney. Causalities were also caused from being stuck in narrow flues or from falling to the ground from old rotten chimneystacks (Gessner).

The barbaric lifestyle of these children and the oppression they endured was thoroughly illustrated by Blake in “The Chimney Sweeper”. The poem begins with a depressing and sympathetic tone where the child explains the death of his mother and horror of his father trafficking him into the gruesome life of being a chimney sweep. “And my father sold me while yet my tongue / Could scarcely cry “‘weep! ‘weep! ‘weep! ‘weep!” (2-3) The word ‘sweep’ is replaced with “weep” encouraging not only a theme of anguish but suggesting that the boy is not even old enough to pronounce “sweep”. The next line reads “in soot I sleep[,]” (4) which refers to the living conditions for the boys, which were far from humane. Blake then continues on the theme of innocence for the children who are enslaved in this occupation by introducing Tom Dacre. “Hush Tom! never mind it, for when your head’s bare / You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair” (7-8). Not only is Blake creating an illusion of life and purity, but he is also reiterating the innocence that cannot be corrupted by the soot and grime that the boys have been accustomed to being covered in.

In the third stanza, Blake really begins to delve into his use of imagery with his descriptive vision seen by Tom. “And so he was quiet, and that very night, As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight!” (9-10) He dreams of an abundant amount of chimney sweeps like himself, “That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack, / Were all of them locked up in coffins of black.” (11) The black coffin is highly symbolic of the life the boys lived. It refers to the boys having stained, unwashed skin. The action of climbing up the black chimneys on a
daily basis could be viewed as a coffin. The black coffin also illustrates how many lives were lost during the time that this disturbing practice took place. The feeling of entrapment that the boys endured can also be symbolized by the coffin because their life can be referred to as a living hell; the boys were enslaved to a life that was chosen for them.

As the uplifting vision continues, Tom dreams of a spiritual figure that has come down to liberate him from his misfortunes. “And by came an Angel who had a bright key, / And he opened the coffins and set them all free …” (14). The reader is able to sympathize with Tom, and almost feel pity for him, as his heartbreaking dream is only to play in the sun and to be clean. Blake continues with the white imagery in the fifth stanza, “Then naked and white, all their bags left behind, / They rise upon the 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…” (19). This inherent trust on the part of a child is utterly characteristic because all children hold a view that justice always triumphs and a belief in which there are always happy endings. Tom’s dream ended in the last stanza; however, he is awoken with a fresh sense of hope and an image of salvation to hold onto to help him survive through his reality.

In conclusion, William Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” is a profound poem that communicates the humanitarian concerns that existed during the time of the Industrial Revolution in England. The poem highlighted the life of a chimney sweep and his dream of breaking free from his imprisoned life that was not his own. Blake expresses the horrors of the children’s lives though strong imagery, voice, and mood. His use of literary devices helps to strengthen and illustrate his disapproval of the mistreatment of the young children.
Works Cited

