

# The Industrial Revolution And Exploitation of Children In The 19<sup>th</sup> Century England: The Other Side of British Romanticism A Study of Some Selected Poems By William Blake.

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## Abstract:

The industrial revolution was one of the major epoch making events in the history of human civilization which had brought radical changes to the primary life style of men in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, along with the concept of prosperity and development associated with the revolution, there emerged certain other issues which had far-reaching effects in the centuries that followed. One such issue that strongly grounded in the revolution was the simultaneous exploitation of children. The revolution no doubt re- defined the power inherent in men but at the same time experienced the disintegration of certain basic human values. This aspect of the great revolution was visible in the patriarchal set up of the contemporary society in which children were treated as the 'other' and hence got exploited. The class difference became prominent once the idea of acquiring wealth and happiness became the sole motto of the time. These issues lie either in the background or in the foreground of most of the literature produced during that period. In this paper an attempt has been made to study a few poems by the precursor of English Romantic poetry, William Blake, and to highlight how his poetry is a scathing attack on the changing values of the society in which children were made victims.

## Key Words:

Industrial revolution, exploitation, disintegration, values, other, romantic.

## Introduction:

Exploitation of children has been an issue that occupies a centre-stage in various activities of human life including literature. It was realized in different forms in different parts of the world since the early years of human civilization. However the idea got consolidated during the period of industrial revolution in England. During this period a kind of meta-narrative came into existence which was strongly patriarchal in nature and it naturally sidelined both the women and children as weaker and innocent sections and hence got exploited. The revolution also brought a major change in the approach to common life with the germs of capitalism strongly grounded in the human activities. Thus profit making enterprise forced them to forget many basic human values and hence the rise of issues like child labour. The conditions in which these children worked were horrendous. They worked for around six to seven hours every day and started working when they were only just five years old. They had to be tiny, agile and thin to get into a chimney. For this reason, when they turned twelve, they weren't able to do this job anymore. Of course, this was only if they even managed to reach the age of twelve, as they could easily fall ill and contract incurable diseases, like cancer, due to the lack of hygiene and the ashes they breathed in. In 1788, there was a small breakthrough thanks to the so-called Chimney Sweepers Act which decided that children should only start working at eight years of age, that they should be provided clothes at least once a year and that they should be washed at least once a week. But the overall condition of children continued to be pathetic.

## William Blake and The Chimney Sweeper Poems:

William Blake (1757-1827) an English poet, is rightly considered as one of the most influential figures in the history of poetry and the precursor of English Romantic poetry. Like any form of art, Blake's poems tended to question reality and to enlighten the society to view things in a different way. One of his greatest pieces of work that fulfilled this function is the collections of poems, *Songs of Innocence* (1789) and *Songs of Experience* (1794), which reveal and compare the conflict between the purity, innocence and naivety of the world of childhood to the dark, repressive and dark world of adulthood. Moreover, they also illustrate the symbolic development between modernity and morality, which existed in opposition to each other. One of the most popular poems from these collections are the two *Chimney Sweeper* Poems from the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* respectively, through which Blake criticised the society on the brutal child labour in the 18<sup>th</sup> century supported by the church, parliament and society at large. This aspect of Blake's concern has been beautifully reflected in the poems.

Due to the rapid technological growth in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a result of Industrialisation, workers, including children who once worked in agricultural sectors had to compete for job opportunities in the newly urbanised regions. Consequently, children would often receive only the more dreadful and dangerous vocations like Chimney sweeping, which freed the chimneys from ash and soot. Chimney sweepers, either from very poor families, orphaned or parish children, were sold into the trade by their families to masters who in return were to clothe, feed and train them to become

professional chimney sweepers. Unfortunately the conditions they worked in was harsh and often cruel as they slept in cellars on bags of soot and were seldom washed, not forgetting the frequent deaths caused by lung cancer as a result of lack of proper protective gear from the soot, choking and suffocating during cleaning or by getting stuck in narrow chimneys, slipping and falling down from climbing rotten chimney stacks. For this reason, many prominent Blake critics have suggested that "*The Chimney Sweeper*" was inspired by the agitation which was then trying to pass laws against the use of children as chimney sweeps stating that sweepers should not begin work until they are eight, they should be washed once a week, and they should not be made to climb chimneys with fires. However, this law was poorly enforced and taken lightly hence the greater need to create awareness through the art of Blake's poetry.

Blake's first version, *The Chimney Sweeper* from *Songs of Innocence*, is a narrative poem spoken by one of the sweepers. In the first four stanzas, the speaker narrates the heart wrenching situation he finds himself in. Adding insult to injury of him being orphaned, he is sold off to a master sweeper where he is to work as a chimney sweeper. Blake uses powerful imagery to illuminate the appalling conditions imposed on the children, a technique that has been deemed necessary by critics. This helps the reader to realise the world of the speaker so as to understand the intensity of the plight. When the narrator says he slept on bags of soot, it is not just a metaphorical expression, it literary happened; climbing boys did indeed sleep on the bags of soot they swept.

In the second stanza the narrator explains how he meets a new recruit , little Tom Dacre "...who cried when his head that curl'd like a lambs back was shav'd...."(Blake, innocence , verse 2:5-6). He then optimistically consoles the new comer and reassures him that the shaving of his white hair is done in order to protect it from collecting soot. This show of optimism by the narrator has been termed by critics as ability to find "the silver lining of every cloud" further illustrating the innocence of these exploited children who even in light of such dark and hopeless situations, see the good in everything. "Hush, Tom never mind it, for when your head's bare, / You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair" (Blake, innocence, verse 2:7-8) sounds like a saying used among the sweepers to prevent them from thinking the worst. The simile of the colour white used to describe Tom's hair can also be seen as a symbol of purity in contrast to the greasy black soot which can be interpreted as exploitation.

The three stanzas that follow recounts the events that happened in a dream that Tom has the same night. He sees "That thousands of sweepers... / Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black" (Blake, Innocence, verse 3:11-12). The black coffins foretell the tragedy that befall the sweepers. The soot they work in is a very fine, deep black material. After a cleaning, sweepers climb out of chimneys stained with it. Because the particles are so tiny, they readily form an aerosol, which coats the lining of the lungs with a highly carcinogenic substance leading to lung cancer. The dream continues and Tom sees an Angel who frees them from the coffins enabling them to leap happily down a green plain. Sad as it sounds, Tom views death as a way to free himself from his present misery, a motive that implies that angels mercifully bring death, particularly to children. Again the

naivety and the innocence of the children is emphasized again seeing that they see light at the end of the tunnel. They believe that even though they are in this dark and sad situation, a liberation will come at the end. The poem also clearly reveals Blake's opinion of the church and religion at large, which was, according to Blake, part of the system that causes this kind of suffering in the first place. "And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy, /He'd have God for his father & never want joy" (Blake, *Innocence*, verse 5: 19-20) and when Tom finally wakes up he seems happy because if they "...all do their duty, they need not fear harm (Blake, *Innocence*, verse 6:24). In this case "being 'good' means continuing in Tom's enforced labours. The Angel, who represents religion, tries to tone down the degree of the injustice and the oppression of the children making them believe that they are doing their job for the right reasons and will eventually go to heaven if they continue obeying their masters. Religion can also be seen as a form of escapism from accepting responsibility for the ill treatment of children. However, Religion is not the only institution to blame for this injustice, the whole society plays a role in this. This is illustrated in the first stanza where the narrator says "So your chimney I sweep and in soot I sleep." (Blake, *Innocence*, verse 1: 4). By using the word "your" even the reader is included in the blame. Blake implicates the reader in the circle of exploitation. Everyone plays a role in child exploitation.

The second version of the *Chimney Sweeper* in *Songs of Experience* is half as long as the one in *Songs of Innocence*. Unlike the predecessor poem, this version is more direct and the literary devices used are evidently more concrete. For example, the absence of a flowery, figurative style is filled by very particular diction in this poem from *Experience*. This time the narrator is more objective compared to the narrator in the former, even though he is not as active as his predecessor. The poem is about his encounter with the chimney sweeper on the streets.

The first two lines of the poem presents the reader with an image of an anguished child in distress, whose parents are attending a service in a church. "A little black thing among the snow: / Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!" (Blake, *Experience*, verse 1: 1-2). The chimney sweeper encountered by the narrator is alone, probably cold in the snow, left behind by his own parents attending religious devotion with the aim of finding solace in the church. Contrary to the first version of the poem, there is neither a sign of hope in form of an angelic rescue nor of any optimism. Denoting his attire, given to him by his parents as "...the clothes of death" and describing the songs taught to him by the former as "the notes of woe" (Blake, *Experience*, verse 2: 7-8), the chimney sweeper makes obvious of the contempt he holds on his current situation and he is very much aware of the dangers caused by it. He however doesn't hide a little cheerfulness when he reminisces about the times before he became a sweeper. "...because I was happy upon the heath." (Blake, *Experience*, verse 2: 5).

Instead of drowning in complete despair, the experienced chimney sweeper has learned to control his emotions and points a finger to those he believes should be held responsible for his misery; his parents, religion and the governmental institutions. He is very candid as he tells the narrator that his

parents have gone “to praise God & his Priest & King, / Who make up a heaven of our misery” (Blake, *Experience*, verse 3: 11-12). It is very evident that:

The neglect and the lack of sympathy for the underprivileged people led to many children living without parents, suffering bad health and experiencing many other tragic events during the revolutionary period, whereas the wealthy people could continue profiting from their misery .

Through this lines, Blake convinces the reader how great the impact of this kind of brutal child labour was on the children both psychologically and spiritually. Tom Dacre was innocent and naïve and accepted his situation contrary to the experienced chimney sweeper who blames his parents, the church and the monarchy for turning a blind eye to such vicious abuses.

A difference between the two *Chimney Sweeper* poems should be taken into account. Though the poem from *Experience* overtly condemns certain social institutions, Blake Slightly conceals his contempt in *The Chimney Sweeper* from *Songs of Innocence*, where little Tom Dacre finds strength and gratification in religion. Despite the different endings of both poems, Blake is successful in presenting his audience with different perspectives of viewing the situation. One thing for sure, no matter how contrary the perception of these two poems might be, the plight of children who had to work as chimney sweeper is the key agenda. It is crystal clear what opinion Blake has of the society that ruthlessly exploit and abuse its children instead of protecting them and offering a better future. Moreover, the sheer amount of religious imagery and conflict make it evident that Blake’s primary purpose for writing the text was to expound on his own religious views.

Conclusion:

The Industrial Revolution no doubt changed the whole face of human civilization and re-defined its role in the universe and helped man to realise their inherent power. It has brought hundreds of good things to the human life and from survival, the focus has been shifted towards acquiring a better life which provided a new space to the word luxury. But at the same time the evils that the revolution has introduced in the human society cannot be denied. One such evil is the institutionalisation of child labour which still continues to haunt the conscience of humanity. However there are laws across the world to safeguard the interest of children and implementing these with full force will definitely help to erase the evil completely in the near future.

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