

### ***The 'Chimney Sweeper' poems***

*Songs of Innocence and of Experience* are closely engaged with the life of the marginalized. The poems are not spoken by the hegemony (society's rulers) – none of the speakers are churchmen or politicians or capitalists – instead the speakers are the marginalized: women (such as the nurse), infants and children. And those poems that are not spoken by the marginalized are about them, such as the hapless soldiers and prostitutes in 'London'. Right at the bottom of the social heap of eighteenth-century London were child chimney sweeps. Children were used for this job, of course, because they were small enough to be forced up chimneys to clean them and remove blockages and, moreover, they had few, if any, legal rights:

Blake would have known that an attempt was made in 1788 to improve the conditions of child chimney-sweeps: eight was the proposed minimum age; hours of work would be limited; regulations were proposed to ensure that sweeps were properly washed every week; and a ban proposed on the use of children in chimneys on fire. In the event, the Porter's Act was not passed. (Wu, 63n)

It is one such child that becomes the narrator of 'The Chimney Sweeper' in *Experience*:

A little black thing among the snow:  
Crying weep, weep, in notes of woe!  
Where are thy father & 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, & 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. (E21-2)

The child is weeping in the snow when the narrator of the opening lines encounters him (see Blake's accompanying image). Surprisingly, the child is not an orphan, he has parents, but the parents are the cause of his suffering, or at least they allow it to continue while they are at church ('gone to praise God & his Priest & King'). The parents have not gone to church because they are evil people, but because, presumably, they believe it is the right thing to do. The question that Blake brings into focus here is: How is it that the pursuit of an abstract good (represented by church-going here) can lead to particular evils (in this case, child neglect)? The poem shows that exploitation exists because a system of ideas (here, religious 'good') is being put before the welfare of the child. In other words, an abstract idea of good has been given precedence over the miseries of a particular human life. For such reasons, Blake is not interested in the idea of doing 'good' in the abstract, and he writes:

He who would do good to another, must do it in Minute Particulars  
General Good is the plea of the scoundrel hypocrite & flatterer  
(*Jerusalem*, pl. 55, E204)

In the *Experience* poem, the child realizes what's going on and is sufficiently astute to depict (his parents' understanding of) God, Priest and King as a power alliance, a trinity making up 'a heaven of our misery'. In this respect the *Experience* poem is fairly straightforward: the child is neglected and narrates the reasons for his neglect. But Blake has a companion poem in *Innocence* also entitled 'The Chimney Sweeper' that goes a step further:

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,

Theres little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head  
That curl'd like a lambs 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, & 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 coffins of black,

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
And he open'd 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.

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.

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

The poem is similar to that in *Experience* in that it is a narrative told by a child chimney sweep. The child relates his effective orphaning, and the hard life that such children live, in which their only solace and solidarity lie in each other. This is followed by the dream section of the poem, in which the children are liberated by an angel. It's a religious image, baptismal, showing a wonderful scene of emancipation, but it is also dark and full of pathos, because the implication is that this release is actually death. After this vision, the children return to work nourished and supported by both the dream and the words of the 'angel', but these words are sinister and full of threat as the subtext of the last line is 'If you don't do your duty, you'd

better fear harm'. The angel, as in *The Marriage*, appears to be a representative of power, perhaps the children's employer, who is using the language of religion to enjoin them to accept their miserable fate. The key way in which this story differs from that of the *Experience* poem is that the child – and herein lies his 'innocence' – has swallowed and internalized the narrative that keeps him enslaved. Like the parents in the *Experience* poem, he cannot properly see his own suffering because it is obscured by the promise of a higher 'good'. This disempowers the child because he cannot change his situation unless he can first see it. At least the *Experience* child may have some chance of improving his situation, if he doesn't die of neglect first.

The two poems are acute in their social analysis, and show that Blake is not simply interested in pointing his finger at the tyrants in society, as he recognizes that the issues are more complicated than that. It is tempting to put blame on the parents in the *Experience* poem, but should blame be placed on the child in the *Innocence* poem for effectively doing the same thing? Everyone involved is subject to the destructive systems that they perpetuate; even the 'innocent' child internalizes them. Nonetheless, there are guilty parties here: just because a narrative or system of power is ingested by everyone does not mean that it is not therefore benefiting *someone*. Blake sees clearly how the powers that be within any culture – the hegemony – invariably have self-authenticating abstract narratives.