

THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER

William Blake

WILLIAM BLAKE (1757 -1827), son of a London hosier, received little formal schooling but was a dreamer and visionary. He reveals in his poetry souls' relationship with God, and God's ways to man.

*'The kingdom of Heaven is within you' – such a realization is the object of Blake's mysticism. His works include **Poetical Sketches** (1743), **Songs of Innocence** (1789) and **Songs of Experience** (1794). If **Songs of Innocence** sets out an imaginative vision of the state of innocence, the **Songs of Experience** shows how life challenges, corrupts and destroys it. 'The Chimney sweeper' taken from **Songs of Innocence** is a simple poem about childhood.*

From an urchin's mouth the poem tells of a dream of release from the drudgery and dirt of chimney-sweeping, a dream that emboldens the children to continue their job. The poem dwells upon the wretched conditions of the children employed as chimney sweepers by factories and industries. The children were required to work hard. Their heads were clean-shaved so that the soot of smouldering pockets of fire from the furnaces may not burn them. They had to live and sleep under inhuman conditions. Blake like David Porter took a sympathetic interest in the London 'chimney boys'. This poem is a homespun voice supporting the contemplated legislation against the use of children as chimney sweepers.



A. Work in small groups and discuss these issues:

1. In your locality you might have come across several children working in different fields of life. Do you think it is proper to be engaged in work when one should be studying in school?
2. Why do these children work? Is there any compulsion to work or is it sheer ignorance on the part of their parents?
3. Make a list of the kind of work children are usually engaged in. Also, discuss the treatment meted out to them at their work place.

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!**
 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, & Jack**,
 Were all of them **lock'd up in coffins of black**.

B.1. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. Who is 'I' in the first line?
2. Who sold the speaker and in what circumstances?
3. What does 'my tongue / Could scarcely cry' (lines 2-3) signify?
4. Who is Tom Dacre? What has been done to him?
5. What was the consolation given to Tom by the speaker?
6. What does Tom see in his dream about thousands of sweepers?
7. What does the phrase 'coffins of black' signify here?
8. What is the rhyme scheme in the two stanzas you have read?

CHIMNEY STACK



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.

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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.

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

B.2. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. Who has a bright key? What does he do with it?
2. What change does the arrival of an Angel bring in the life of chimney sweepers?
3. The Angel tells Tom something about God. What is it?
4. What does the phrase 'never want joy' mean here?
5. 'We rose in the dark'. Who does 'we' stand here for?
6. Why was Tom feeling happy and warm though 'the morning was cold'?



GLOSSARY AND NOTES

very young: a small child

'weep! 'weep! 'weep!: sweep! Sweep! Sweep!

chimneys | sweep: chimney sweeper (a man who sweeps chimneys that carry off smoke or steam of fire, furnace, engine, etc)

In soot I sleep: the boy sleeps stained by black substance rising in fine flakes in the smoke of coal oil etc., sticking to sides of chimney.

Tom Dacre: another child going to become a chimney sweeper.

was shav'd: Tom Dacre's head full of spiral lock of hair had to be shaved lest the soot sticking to the hair should prove prejudicial to his work as a chimney sweeper.

Head's bare: head is without hair (clean shaved)

Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack – all children chimney sweepers.

lock'd up in coffins of black: engaged in their acts of chimney sweeping

set them all free: free from the drudgery of sweeping chimneys

down a green plain leaping, laughing, they run: the picture of free and happy children refers to the prospective picture of the result of passing of legislation against child labour then contemplated.

Naked and white: free from the work of sweeping chimneys and its accessories.

They rise upon clouds wind – relieved of their burdensome work they now became buoyant and gay-spirited.

have God for his father: look up to their Divine father and trust in his assurance and security

never want joy: they will never be unhappy in life.

Tom awoke: this is eternal waking, an illumination of soul - for ever being God-minded.

We rose in the dark to work: look up our work of chimney-sweeping with our heart turned to God, our Father.

Tom was happy and warm: in spite of the cold of early morning Tom was in tune with the infinite and could rise above the physical conditions of life which appeared as light as gossamer.

So if all do their duty harm: no harm comes to him who does his work as divine worship.

C. 1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

Answer the following questions in details:

1. What does Tom see in his dream? Describe in details.
2. In what way is Tom's dream significant?
3. What picture of the 18th century England does the poem create?
4. What is the theme of the poem? Does the theme have any particular relevance in our state or country?
5. Narrate the gist of the poem in your own words.
6. Explain the paradox in line 23.

A Paradox is a statement which is apparently self-contradictory or absurd, but it has a valid and more significant meaning.

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

- Child labour is a bane to the society
- Why has the law against child-labour remained ineffective?

**C. 3. COMPOSITION**

- You have been asked by your teacher to deliver a speech on the occasion of Children's Day. Prepare a speech with the help of your friends in about 150 words on **'the ways to deal with child labour in our society'**.
- Write a short essay in about 200 words on **'the success of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan depends heavily on the abolition of child labour'**.

D. WORD STUDY**D.1. Dictionary Use**

Ex. 1. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of each of the following words—the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common:

young want sport warm coffin

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following line carefully:

*As Tom was **a**-sleeping, he had such a sight!*

In the above line prefix '**a**' has been added to the present participle 'sleeping'.

Normally '**a**' is added to the verb or noun to make it adverb; e.g. asleep, afresh. Now, form adverbs from the verbs and nouns given below:

new fresh wake jar foot

D.3. Word-meaning

Match the words given in column A with their meaning given in column B:

A
soot
coffin
want
worship
angel

B
lack
black substance in the smoke of coal oil etc.
cherub
tomb
devotion

E. GRAMMAR

Ex. 1. Read the following sentences carefully:

Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;

'Though' or 'although' is used to combine two sentences which apparently contradict each other. **Join the following sentences using 'though' or 'although':**

- (i) Mamta was hungry. She gave her food to a beggar.
- (ii) Saidar had little time to spare. He came to see my ailing father.
- (iii) Birju laboured hard. He did not secure very good marks.
- (iv) Chhabi loved him very much. She could not tell him so.
- (v) Mr Lal knows very little. He is very popular among students.

F. ACTIVITIES

Ex. 1. Project work

Make a survey of the children, in your locality, who are working at different places. Include in your survey

- (i) Name and age of the child
- (ii) Place of work - hotel, private house etc.
- (iii) Economic status of the family
- (iv) Educational status of the family
- (v) Social back ground
- (vi) Any attempt from any agency to dissuade them

Make an attempt to analyse the reasons of the prevalence of child labour and also suggest ways to deal with the issue.

