



**CHILD EXPLOITATION AS REFLECTED IN WILLIAM  
BLAKE'S "THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER"**

**A FINAL PROJECT**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement  
For S-1 Degree in Literature  
In English Department, Faculty of Humanities  
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**2019**

## **PRONOUNCEMENT**

I states truthfully that this project is compiled by me without taking the result from other research in my university, in S-1, S-2, and S-3 degree and in diploma. In addition, I ascertain that I do not take the material from other publication or someone's work except for the references mentioned in bibliography.

Semarang, 21 June 2019

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## **MOTTO AND DEDICATION**

*Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men  
stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will  
renew their strength.*

-Isaiah 40:30-31

*This final project is dedicated to my family*

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The writer realizes that this project is still far from perfect. Therefore, the writer will be glad to receive any constructive criticism and suggestion to make this project better. Finally, the writer expects that this project will be useful for the readers.

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## ABSTRACT

This study is examining William Blake “The Chimney Sweeper”. In this final project, the writer decides to examine diction, symbolism, and dramatic irony of “The Chimney Sweeper” as the intrinsic aspect and child labor exploitation of the poem as the extrinsic aspect. The aim of this project is to identify and to empathize the meaning of this poetry and to analyze the historical content in this poetry. The writer uses close reading method and sociology of literature approach. The result of this study is the writer known that the conditions of young sweepers in Blake’s era are full of sorrow. They lack of love, lack of education and lack of freedom because they have to work all day long.

Keywords: Poetry, history, children, labor, exploitation, England.

Penelitian ini mempelajari puisi Wiliam Blake yang berjudul “The Chimney Sweeper”. Pada projek akhir ini penulis memutuskan untuk mempelajari diksi, simbol dan dramatik ironi pada “The Chimney Sweeper” sebagai aspek intrinsik dan eksploitasi pekerja anak pada puisi sebagai aspek ekstrinsik. Tujuan dari projek ini adalah untuk megidentifikasi dan memahami arti dari puisi ini dan untuk menganalisa kandungan sejarah di pusi ini. Penulis menggunakan metode pembacaan cermat dan pendekatan sosiologi sastra. hasil dari penelitian ini adalah penulis megetahui bahwa kondisi anak-anak pembersh cerobong di era Blake penuh dengan penderitaan. Mereka kurang kasih sayang, tidak mendapat pendidikan layak dan mereka tidak bebas karena mereka harus bekerja sepanjang hari.

Kata kunci: Puisi, sejarah, anak-anak, pekerja, eksploitasi, Inggris.

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **1.1 Background of the Study**

As a student with English Literature major, we have to know about element in poetry when we want to analyze a poem. Analyzing poetry is an action to explore our feeling or to advance our taste of translates the actual meaning from the poetry. Poetry has a rooted meaning that it actually does, so from this study, we can learn more to knowing the actual meaning of the poetry.

Therefore, the writer is considering making a paper to examine a remarkable poetry from the well known poet. The writer takes “The Chimney Sweeper” by William Blake. The writer takes this poem because this poem contains many histories of situation in the past and the author’s experience specifically on child labor exploitation.

In this paper, the writer examines some of theories used in Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper”, to comprehend better about what the actual meaning explained in this poetry. The purpose of this study is to analyze William Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” intrinsic aspect and extrinsic aspect.

This study is not the first paper that discuss about labor exploitation. The writer found a paper about labor exploitation written on 2012. That paper discuss about labor exploitation in “Song to the Man of England”. It talks about labor exploitation in general, and it gets the conclusion by analyzing the extrinsic element

of the poem. The difference between that paper and this paper is that this paper discusses child labor exploitation and gets the conclusion by analyzing the intrinsic element of the poem.

## **1.2 The Poet**

William Blake was a late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century prominent writer and artist of the romantic era. He was born at Soho, London on 28 November 1757. He spent much of his life in this place.

His father James Blake was a hosier. He and his wife Catherine had 6 children. From early age William Blake was artistic. William was apprentice to an engraver called James Basire when he was fourteen. William served seven years and became an engraver himself in 1779. On this year too, he became a student at the Royal Academy of Arts.

On 18 August 1782 Blake married Catherine Sophia Boucher at the church of St Mary in Bettersea. Blake also wrote poems. A book of poems called Poetical Sketches was published in 1783. In 1789 he published a book of poems called “Song of Innocence”.

William Blake passed away on 12 August 1827 in London, England.

### **1.3 Paraphrase of the Poem**

The narrator is a little boy who lost his mother. Immediately after, his father sold him to someone to work as a chimney sweeper. There is another little chimney sweeper, Tom Dacre, who cry over his shaved head. The narrator tried to comfort him. He tells Tom not to worry about his white hair.

In the same night, after he cools his temper down, Tom has a dream. In his dream, thousands of sweepers are trapped in black coffins. And then, an Angel who has a bright key comes and unlocked the coffins. The Angel sets them free. They are running through a green plain happily. They wash and clean themselves in a river. They left their sweeping equipments. The Angel tells Tom that if he be a good boy, God will be his father and he will always be happy.

Tom is awake in the dark morning. He goes to work with his sweeping equipment happily, even though the morning is still dark and freezing. He believes that everything will be fine if he does his job properly.

### **1.4 Research Problem**

Associated with the background of the study, the writer identifies two problems:

1. What are diction, symbolism and irony in Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper"?
2. How is child labor exploitation described in Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper"?

## **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

Related to the research problem, the objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze diction, symbolism, and irony in Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper".
2. To analyze child labor exploitation in Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper".

## **2. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1 Diction**

Diction is a selection of words or phrase the poet used to write poetry. In literature, diction also can be outlined as a style of writing determined by the selection of words by poet. The selection of phrase that the poet uses is very essential to form an esthetics side of the poetry itself. The chosen word occasionally has deeper and more complicated meaning and it cannot be taken literary in the dictionary.

Kennedy, in his book *An Introduction to Fiction, Poetry and Drama*, said that "*Poem states ideas, to be sure and sometimes the ideas are invaluable and yet the most impressive idea in the world will not make a poem unless its words are selected and arranged with loving art*" (1978: 440)

### **2.2 Symbolism**

The other theory used in this poem is symbolism. According to Perrine in *An Introduction to Poetry* (1969:83), "*A symbol may be roughly defined as something*

*that means more than what it is*". Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. A symbol is literary device that contains several layers of meaning. Symbolism can take different forms. Generally, it is an object representing another to give it an entirely different meaning much deeper and more significant. Sometimes, however, an action, an event or a word spoken by someone may have a symbolic value. Symbols do shift their meanings depending on the context they are used in.

### **2.3 Dramatic Irony**

According to Perrine (1969: 113) Irony is a literary device or figure that may be used in the service of sarcasm or ridicule or may not. Irony has meanings that extend beyond its use merely as a figure of speech. In simple words, it is a difference between appearance and reality. The chosen words are intentionally used to indicate a meaning other than the literal one. There are three types of irony: verbal, situational and dramatic irony. The writer uses only dramatic irony because dramatic irony dominates this poem greatly.

Dramatic irony, occurs when the reader is aware of something that the characters in the story are not aware of. The author conveys to the reader something different, or at least something more, than the character himself intended (Perrine 1969: 115).

## 2.4 Child Labor Exploitation in Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century England

Exploitation adverts to societal relations where someone uses others for their own because of an unbalance power between them. In the other word, exploitation means pickings vantage of weaker person because of his or her inferior position, giving the exploiter the power.

The setting of “The Chimney Sweeper” is a late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the Industrial revolution occurred.

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from idiocy of rural life. (Marx and Engels,13)

With the presence of industrial revolution, there was transformation from rural to industrial area. This transformation also caused the citizen within this area to become labors.

In this era many laborers used child labor to get a lot of benefit. Just like Hindman said in his book, *The World of Child Labor*:

Several factories explain this heavy reliance on children and adolescent. As the pioneers in industrialization, and facing substantial investments in novel technologies, many British factory owners were desperately eager to cut labor costs in order to maximize return on equipment. Children’s wages, far lower than those of adults, seemed particularly attractive. British manufacturers sometimes imported crews of orphans and other vulnerable children, who had no other option and whose labor was particularly cheap. Furthermore, early industrial equipment, less sophisticated than what came later, provided many opportunities for young workers. (2009: 39)

From the text it can be seen that the most common reason of child labor is poverty. The laborers saw this condition as an advantage. They hire and they pay children in small amount of money. The children do not have any choice and so helpless to fulfill their need, so they cannot refuse this condition.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain had turns into great colonial power, the British Empire. Even though slavery was still common, and to an extent still accepted by the general public, the abolitionist movement grew rapidly in the 1780s, and the number of antislavery poems, songs, and broadsheet was increasing rapidly as well (Shandu: 15). “The Chimney Sweepers” poem have historical aspect of child labor that suffered from exploitation. By this poem William Blake wants to describe and tells society about the miserable life of child labor in his era.

### **3. METHODS OF THE STUDY**

#### **3.1 Method of Research**

The writer uses library research to pick up the data related to the subject and to examine the data of the poetry. Library research involves identifying and locating sources that provide factual information from personal to expert opinion on a research question (George 2008: 6). It means that the data are taken from books, articles and journals.

### **3.2 Method of Approach**

The writer uses sociology of literature approach to examine this poem. According to Wellek and Warren in "*Theory of Literature*" (1949: 89), attempts are made to describe and define the influence of society on literature and to prescribe and judge the position of literature in society. The writer also uses close reading method to analyze the object.

## **4. ANALYSIS OF CHILD EXPLOITATION AS REFLECTED IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S "THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER"**

### **4.1 Diction**

William Blake uses simple and informal diction in this poem. The point of view is from a young child, producing a poem with an innocent tone.

On the first stanza the young boy tells the reader about his family. He said that his mother Died when he was young, and then his father sold him to the chimney sweeper master to get some money. Uses the words "died" and "sold" Blake tells us that the young child comes from poor background family. In the next line Blake chose weep instead of sweep. This indicates that the boy is very young. Blake uses a repetition to emphasize the suffering of this child who must work to clean the chimney. The child's suffering continues even when the child is asleep.

“*So your chimney I sweep & in soot I sleep*” (line 4). This phrase can mean many things. The child is sleeping with a dirty body full of soot or the child is sleeping with a blanket of cloth that he used when he worked to clean the chimney. This phrase can also mean that the child will always be struggling with the dirty soot from chimneys.

The second stanza tells about another young chimney sweeper, Tom Dacre, who cries because his hair is shaved. So the speaker of this poem try to comfort him until he finally falls asleep. To increase the notion of the innocence of the boy, Blake uses simile in this stanza. “*That curled **like** a lamb's back*” (line 6). This comparison of Tom with a lamb symbolizes his innocence because the lamb usually describes or symbolizes as a harmless creature and a symbol of innocence.

The third stanza is still about Tom, but this stanza is no longer talk about Tom’s white hair. After he calm down with his hair Tom was sleeping at that night. He got a dream that thousands of sweepers included Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack; they are all locked up in black coffins. Blake uses phrase “*all locked up*” (line 12) to tell the reader the condition of the chimney sweepers that are restricted because they have to work.

In the fourth stanza, came an Angel with a bright key held in his hand. He then unlocked all of the coffins and let the chimney sweepers all free. They run happily like they have nothing to worry about. Blake describes the dream as a hope of

sweepers. Just like a normal children, the chimney sweepers like to play around at their age. They also want to wash themselves and became clean, because their master never allows them to clean their body.

This fifth stanza tells the condition of the sweepers or the kids after bathing on the river. Naked and white, the symbol of innocence and purity, just like a newborn baby. By the time they are going to be free, they no longer need to carry a bag containing the equipment to work. Then the angel tells Tom that if he would be a good boy, so Tom would obtain the equal reward as what he did. In other meaning, actually Tom would get the paradise rewarded by the God if he would be a good boy. Or he will get a reward if he does his duty as a chimney sweeper. Just like a concept of religion.

Tom wakes up from his dreaming. Then he knows that he must continue his obligation as a sweeper in this sixth stanza. They rose in the dark. They got back to their real life as a chimney sweeper still trapped in their dangerous line of work. But Tom, driven by his dream, awakes and goes off to work happily. Tom believes that the chimney sweepers will find peacefulness in the afterlife.

In this poem Blake describe the young boys quite blissful and often unaware of their poor condition and the dangerous of their work. He is oblivious to the fact that they live as slaves.

## 4.2 Symbolism

The first symbol that can be found in this poem is “soot” in stanza, “*So your chimney I sweep & in soot I sleep*” (line 4). As can be seen in *Oxford Dictionary*, soot is a deep black powdery or flaky substance consisting largely of amorphous carbon, produced by the incomplete burning of organic matter. The soot in this line symbolizes the poor quality of the boy’s life after he sold by his father. He lost his childhood and has to work as a chimney sweeper. This can also mean that the young boy will always struggling with the soot from chimney.

In the second stanza we can found the next symbols, “lamb” and Tom Dacre’s “white hair”. This comparison of Tom with a lamb symbolizes his innocent because the lamb usually describes or symbolizes as harmless creature and a symbol of innocence. This whiteness contrasts with the blackness of the soot. Tom’s and lamb’s white hair symbolizes innocence, purity and childhood. And the soot symbolize the dirty and dark life of the chimney sweeper.

The next symbol can be found on the last line of third stanza, “coffins of black”. “*Were all of them locked up in coffins of black*” (line 12). Chimney sweeper is one of the worst and dangerous jobs in nineteenth century especially in London. Young children often used to sweep the chimney through the flues, because narrow chimney needed someone small to climb it. This was a dangerous and can be a lethal job. The children often had respiration problem because of the soot. Many of them

died young as a result of illness and accident. So it means that the “coffins of black” represent the hazardous life of the chimney sweeper or even the chimney itself. Because a chimney is dark and constricting from the inside, as well as a coffin.

In the fourth stanza, came an angel with a bright key held in his hand. “*And by came an Angel who had a bright key*”, (line 13). The Angel symbolizes the savior of these chimney sweepers, who had power over the freedom of these sweepers and who hold the key to the freedom of these sweepers. The bright key symbolizes death. The black coffin can only be unlocked by the bright key of the Angel. And the only way to get clean and free from the dark life of the chimney sweeper is death.

The last symbol that can be found in this poem is “bags” in fifth and sixth stanza. These bags represent their duty, their burden and their dead-weight as chimney sweepers. As the Angel sets them all free in the fourth stanza, they no need to bear the burden. They can do everything they want. But in the last stanza, they back to their dark reality, so they have to get their bags and brushes to work as chimney sweepers.

### **4.3 Dramatic Irony**

The first irony in this poem can be found in the first stanza. This stanza tells how the young boys became a chimney sweeper, a where a young boy climb into a chimney to sweep the soot out. His mother died when he was very young boy. And his father, immediately after the death of the mother, sold him to someone who runs chimney

sweeper business. This is really irony, father that is supposed to work and earn money to raise his child, sells his child to get some money and no need to raise him anymore. Whereas a very young boy, who has just lost his mother, has to work as a chimney sweeper, the dirty and dangerous job for a child likes him.

The next ironies can be found in the second stanza. The young boy meets another young chimney sweeper who cried because his white hair shaved off. Even he has a very tragic life story, lost his mother at a very young age and his father sold him as a chimney sweeper, he seems to be quite happy. He tries to comfort his friend Tom Dacre. The young boy shows humanity and act like a guardian to his friend. A young and innocent child who is more human compared to his father. This successfully makes his father that sold him for some money, seems become crueler.

Another irony in this stanza is when the young boy tries to comfort his friend Tom Dacre. He tries a good thing among bad things. He tells Tom not to worry about his hair. He said that Tom's white hair cannot get spoiled by the soot of chimney, because his hair was shaved so he has no hair to get spoiled by the soot. It means that if he wants to keep his hair clean from soot he has to shave his hair off and has no hair anymore. If we relate it with his white as a symbol of innocent then it also can mean that the dark life of chimney sweeper will never bother Tom's childhood, because his childhood is already taken at the first place.

The dream of Tom Dacre shows ironical contrast between realities of the chimney sweepers and blissful of freedom contain in the Tom daces's dream. In their childhood, chimney sweepers are not free to have fun. Their lives are restricted like prisoners because they have to work. Rather than have fun and get a proper education, they did hard work all day long. But in Tom's dream they free. The angel sets them free. They are leaping, running and laughing. In this dream they can run through a green plain. In the dream the can found laughter, light and colorful world. They can even wash themselves and became clean and soot free. But in their real lives, their world is full of darkness and sorrow.

More ironically, they can get this blissful life in their real life. The only way to get this beautiful and blissful life is to end their dark life first. On the other word they have to die first.

The thing that Tom Dacre believes is the last irony of this poem. The Angel tells Tom that if be a good boy, God will be his father and he will always be happy. Driven by his dream, Tom believes that everything will be fine if do his job properly. This is clearly an irony. To get heaven and God as his father, a young boy has to do a dirty and dangerous work in his real live properly. The reality is that he will never get these in his real life. The best thing he can get in his real life by believing this is he will not get beaten by his master.

#### 4.4 Child Labor Exploitation in late 18<sup>th</sup> Century England

Child labor happened because there were different classes in society. Bourgeoisie or the capitalist have power over the proletariat. In this poem, Blake uses the children who work as chimney sweepers to establish the proletariat or the working class. Using child's point of view, Blake wants to create a unique perspective. The message will appear more sympathetic.

With the industrial revolution, cities were expanding, farmlands have decreased and the population was growing rapidly. At the same time the factories began to be built. This caused the majority of rural area citizens, who were farmers, finally worked as labors to fulfill their needs.

However, since the majority of the citizens did not have proper capability, they were paid under wage. Because they come from poor family and they were also paid under wage, they employed their children to work with the hope to increase their family's income.

Every factory has chimneys that have to be cleaned regularly. The chimneys after the great fire of London were often angular and narrow. An adult was unable to climb into such a small space, so climbing boys are employed to climb the chimneys to dislodge the soot.

A lot of young children were hired to do the dirty and hazardous work of chimney sweeping since they were small enough to get into chimneys to clean them. It can be seen in the first stanza line one to three: "*When my mother died I was very*

*young, And my father sold me while yet my tongue Could scarcely cry 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'*. Most of child labor comes from poor family. Their parent sold him because their parent cannot afford to raise them. And some of child labors are orphan. They are helpless and do not have any option, so they cannot refuse this condition. The bourgeoisie or the employer saw this condition as an advantage. They hire and they pay children in small amount of money.

In the last line of this first stanza, Blake uses phrase “your chimneys” to invite the readers to feel the poem. This phrase could be a criticism of Blake to the public, especially public in London at that time. Because “your” indicates the owner of the chimneys or their employer. Blake used “your” to grow a guilty feeling for the bourgeoisie readers. Instead of stopping it, people at that time still hiring child sweeper to clean their chimney.

Blake also wrote “*and in soot I sleep*”. This phrase indicates that young sweepers receive no facility from their master. They have to sleep on dirty place and they are not allowed to clean them self. They have to sleep with their soot covered cloth and along with the dirty bag and sweeping tools.

The loss of innocence’s energy is very strong in this very first stanza. His mother died, his father sold him, and then he forced to work as a chimney sweeper. A child who has no childhood at all. A parental care and joy of childhood-deprived child. He has to deal not only with the death of his parent, but he also have to take an adult role too. He received no facility from his master. He has to sleep on dirty place with soot covered cloth and along with his dirty bag and sweeper tools.

Blake describes those chimney sweepers as children who lack of love. Children on their age normally receive a lot of love from their parent and family. But because they came from poor family their parent cannot afford to love and raise them so their parent put aside their childhood and sold them to someone who runs chimney sweeper business. Once they become child labour especially chimney sweeper no one will care about them, even their master do not care about them. The only thing they can do is to take care of each other just like what the narrator done to Tom Dacre in stanza two.

The third stanza tells us that chimney sweeper is a dangerous work. “Were all of them locked up in coffins of black”. Blake uses phrase coffins of black because a chimney is dark and constricting from the inside, as well as a coffin. The coffins represent the dangerous and lethal life of chimney sweepers. They have no guarantee of health and safety. The young chimney sweepers often had respiration problem because of the soot. And many of them died as a result of illness and accident. The bourgeoisie do not care about these children’s safety as long as they can get the benefit from them.

In the stanza four and five Blake wrote a blissful life that should be the life of young chimney sweepers. But Blake wrote this blissful life as a dream of Tom Dacre. It indicates that the lives of young chimney sweeper are restricted and full of sorrow. The green plain is just a dream for them because they can only see black soot. They cannot leap, laugh and run through the green plain because they have to work, climbing and cleaning the chimney. They do not have time for playing and educating.

Even to cleanse themselves, they can only do it in dream. The dream is a representation and image of utopia of these children. This dream is their escapism from the never ending misery of chimney sweepers.

The sixth stanza explains the working hours of young chimney sweepers. *“And so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark, And got with our bags and our brushes to work”*. The young chimney sweepers have to do their duty before dawn. They start their day from very early in the dark and freezing morning. *“Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm”*. They do not understand their own circumstances because of their lack of education. The only thing they know is to obey their master. As long as they do their job properly, everything will be fine.

## 5. CONCLUSION

After analyzing the poem from its intrinsic element we can find what actually happen at the period when the poem was written. The poem "The Chimney Sweeper" is set against the dark background of child labor that was prominent in England in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Blake's intended reader was likely the public in London at that time. He wants to raise awareness among people who were likely pay for these sweepers service. Instead of stopping it, people at the time still hiring young sweepers to clean their chimney.

These young sweepers are lack of love because they do not have family. Some of them are orphan and some of them sold by their own parent. Their childhood was ruined because they must work as a chimney sweeper instead of playing and studying just like a normal kid at their age.

To be free from their suffering as chimney sweeper, there are only two ways. The first way is dismissed because the body has grown up. Even if they survived that long, they will grow up and will be cast into a world without proper education. The second way is by spiritual or religious way. Be a good boys and they will get a blissful afterlife just like what the Angel said. To get this blissful afterlife they have to end their current real life. In other words, they have to die first before getting the promised happiness.

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## APPENDIX

### 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! 'weep! "  
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head  
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, 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 locked up in coffins of black;

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
And he opened 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.  
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;  
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

William Blake (1797-1827)