

## "The Chimney Sweeper" (from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*)

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*Here are two of the best-known poems in this collection, both called "The Chimney Sweeper". One appears in Songs of Innocence, the other in Songs of Experience. The background to these poems is one of the many social problems that existed in Blake's time—the use of young children as chimney sweeps. Children were often sold at the age of seven to work as chimney sweeps. They were badly treated, with never enough clothes, food or housing. They were placed in constant danger of suffocating or burning, and the soot caused cancer and other serious illnesses that resulted in painful and early deaths.*

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### "The Chimney Sweeper" (from *Songs of Innocence*)

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 and in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,  
That curled 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, and 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 and 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 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.

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.

**"The Chimney Sweeper" (from Songs of Experience)**

A little black thing among the snow,  
Crying "'weep! 'weep!" in notes of woe!  
"Where are thy father and 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 and dance and sing,  
They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,  
Who make up a heaven of our misery."

## Suggested topics for philosophical discussion

### 1. Child labour

Why were children employed as chimney sweeps? Because of their small size? Because they were too young to realise how dangerous it was? Because they could be paid less than adults? Because they were afraid to say no?

Children are no longer used as chimney sweeps in England, but in many parts of the world they are still used to do dangerous and badly paid work. What is your opinion about child labour? How old should a child be before it can start to work? Is there any kind of work that would be suitable for small children? Or should children never have to work for money?

Who do you think is responsible for child labour in the world today? The children's parents? The people who employ the children? The government of the country where they live? Someone else?

### 2. Different personalities

Are there any differences in the way the boy in these two poems thinks and feels? If yes, what are they, and can you explain any possible reasons for these differences?