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COMPREHENDING THE EMOTIONAL SPECTRUM OF PATHOS AND  
ANGER IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S "THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER"

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ABSTRACT

Although William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge are considered to be the pioneers of the Romantic Movement in English literature, before them it was William Blake who sowed the seeds of romanticism through his poetry. Thus, many scholars regard Blake as the father of romanticism in English literature. Blake was a revolutionary poet who, in his poetry, expressed his anger against the injustice and inhuman practices that prevailed in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London society. He considered religion and the government responsible for the inhuman treatment and cruelty to the poor section of society, especially the poor orphaned children. One of the most cruel and inhuman practices of that time was the employment of poor and orphaned children into the cleaning of chimneys of the houses of the elite class of the society. Cleaning the chimney was such a dangerous task that most of the children died due to lung diseases and falling from the chimney. Blake, being a humanitarian, was very much hurt by this inhuman practice which was legalized during that time. In protest of this inhuman practice, Blake wrote two poems of the same title, 'The **Chimney Sweeper**'. In this paper, we propose to have a close textual study of both the poems and highlight the pathos and anger present in these poems.

**Keywords:** Anger, Chimney Sweeper, Inhuman, Pathos, Romanticism.

Introduction

William Blake was a revolutionary poet who revolted against injustice and inequality that prevailed in the society of his time. In most of his poems, Blake has criticized the church, religion and the government and holds them responsible for human exploitation and human misery. Child labour and child exploitation were very common during his age. Child labour was legalized in the London society of his time. Small children of five and six years old were sold by their poor parents to work in chimneys because they were small and lean and thin which made it easy to enter into a chimney to

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clean it. The work was so dangerous that some of the children even died of falling from the chimney and most of the rest became the victims of dangerous ailments like lung and kidney diseases and ultimately died. The pathetic condition of the poor children and the inhuman behaviours of the society with them grieved the poet and so, in many of his poems, such as Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, he has expressed his grief and anger against the prevalent system in the London society of that time. In the poem, The Chimney Sweeper of the both Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience, Blake has described the pathetic condition of those children who were forced to work in the cleaning of chimney. Although the same title, The Chimney Sweeper in both the collection, the two poems have some similarities as well as some differences. Both of them are similar in theme but different in thoughts of the characters in both the poems. In Chimney Sweeper of songs of Innocence, the child is innocent. His thoughts are also innocent. His thoughts are only limited to get warm during the winter. He is happy thinking that he will not face cold during the winter season. He is unable to realize the cruelty and inhumanity of the society. But in The Chimney Sweeper of Songs of Experience, the child is grown up. He has experience of the society. He is well aware of the cruel and inhuman treatment of the society with him. So, he is angry with the society. He realizes his pathetic condition and holds church and religion responsible for his miserable condition of life.

The two poems with the same title, The Chimney Sweeper, have been written by William Blake and were published in Songs of Innocence in 1789 and Songs of Experience in 1794. When the poem was written, child labour was very common in England. Due to the Industrial Revolution in England, a number of factories and industries came into existence. These factories needed cheap labourers which were easily available in the form of child labour. The children were preferred because they were easily low-paid. Due to poverty they accepted odd jobs with low salaries and were made to work in factories and chimneys. They were hired by agents from their parents in return for hard cash and were engaged in sweeping chimneys. The parents were happy that their children were employed at a good place and enjoying their lives. But, on the contrary, these children were forced to lead a miserable life. They were kept in dirty and unhygienic places and were poorly fed.

#### **Literature Review:**

A lot of scholars like David Erdman, Stephen Behrendt, Michael Ferber etc., have written many full-length books and short articles on William Blake's Poems in which they have given scattered commentary on the poem Chimney Sweepers. David V. Erdman in his book, William Blake: A New Kind of Man has discussed Blake's personality and his poems. He proves that unlike the other poets of his age, Blake possessed a revolting personality and so he wrote many poems against the present system of the London society.

Diana Hume in her book *Blake and Freud*, studied Freud's psychological influence on Blake which resulted in poems like The Chimney Sweepers.

Michael Ferber in his full-length book, *The Social Vision of William Blake* has probed into Blake's understanding of the society of his age and his views on the evil of the society prevailed in the London society. It was due to his understanding of the evils of society that Blake revolted against the norms of society and wrote revolutionary poems in order to reform the social order.

Peter Abbs in his research article, "William Blake and Forging of the Creative Self" has studied Blake's inner vision through which he used to see angels and so acquired the angelic quality which helped him in reforming the society.

Sherley Dend and Jason Whillaker in their book on *Blake, Radical Blake: Influence and Afterlife* discuss the revolutionary nature of Blake and his influences on the other poets of the time and even after his life. Blake as a poet left an everlasting impact on society as a reformer who tried to reform society through his poetry and he succeeded too in his effort.

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**Objective of the Study:**

Following are the main objectives of this research paper:

- a. How the anger has been expressed in the twin poems, *The Chimney Sweeper*.
- b. Contrast of the thoughts of the protagonists of the poems in *The Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience*.
- c. To trace the religious attitude of the poet in this poem.
- d. To trace the causes of injustice and cruelty with the poor orphan children in 18<sup>th</sup>-century London society.
- e. Effect of this suppressed revolt by the poet on the London society.

**Scope of the Study:**

As we have seen in the literature review, a lot of scholars have worked on William Blake and his poetry but their studies are limited to themes of Blake's poetry, his influence on society, his religious attitudes and his revolutionary nature which brought changes in the London society but this paper will discuss one of his famous poems, *The Chimney Sweepers* in details and trace the pathetic and miserable condition of the poor minor children who were forcibly employed in the chimney sweeping trade and were motivated for hard work on the false illusion of religion that they will go to heaven if they work hard in this world.

**Analysis and Discussion:**

In the first poem, *The Chimney Sweeper* of *Songs of Innocence*, the speaker of the poem is a minor and innocent child. In this poem, the child does not realize the pathetic condition of his life. Moreover, his ambition and desire are limited. He becomes happy to get warm in winter. He narrates his story in an innocent way. He knows only that he was sent to the chimney because his mother died and he was sold by his father:

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! "weep!"

In this poem, the poet is exposing the cruelty and inhumanity of society due to the sudden increase in wealth as a result of the industrial revolution. Describing the pathetic condition of the chimney sweeper the poet also expresses his anger against the society. Thus pathos and anger go side by side in this poem. The poet considers the chimney sweeping an evil of the society. The chimney sweepers were fully exploited and were forced to lead a pathetic life which is the main cause of the poet's anger in this poem. The poet expresses his anger with the help of literary devices like irony, metaphor, and symbols. In both versions of the poem, we find the pathos which has been described symbolically in detail. The chimney sweepers weep throughout the day but no one shows any sympathy for them.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, child labour was spread like a pandemic in England and the poor children, as we have already mentioned, were forced to lead a miserable life. The pathos and misery in real life have been contrasted with the happy, joyous and free life in the world of dreams which Tom Dacre dreams while he is sleeping at night. In the dream, all the children who work in the chimney are dead and lying in black coffins. An angel comes, opens the coffins with a golden key, and sets them all free. In the dream, all the children are playing, jumping with joy and laughing. It seems that there is no worry for them. They are carefree and not afraid of anyone. Running, jumping, taking a bath in the river and shining in the sun, metaphorically show that the real life of the children should be like that.

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This is a vision of the poet for the children. The poet expresses his desire that instead of working and leading the life of a slave, the children should be free from any kind of worry and should lead a happy life in this world. In this way, the poet highlights the miseries and pathos of the poor working children and expresses his anger symbolically by contrasting the present condition of the chimney sweepers with the visionary condition which in reality should be.

In the dream, which is the poet's vision, the children are shown a glimpse of paradise where they will lead a glorious life, free from all worldly worries. But this is also on the condition that they behave well and bear the hardship of this world. The children are taught a lesson that if they work hard in this world and happily accept their present condition, they will be sent to paradise after this life where there is no worry and God Himself will become their father and so they will lead a happy, peaceful and joyous life. Here, through the dream vision, the poet is attacking the religion, church and government. He believes that these institutions are responsible for the present pathetic condition of the children and it is the religion which has trapped the children by teaching false conceptions that after their death they will be rewarded for their miserable condition of life in this world. The poet believes that this is a false promise. In fact, religion and the church do not have any worry about the welfare of these children. Neither have they had any sympathy for them. Instead of abolishing child labour and providing a good life for the deprived children, the religion, church and the government are playing tricks with them because they are only concerned with the welfare of the elite class of the society. They know very well that if the chimney sweepers stop working, the elite class will be in problem. So, instead of reforming society, the church is using religion as a trap for deprived children. At the end of the first poem, *The Chimney Sweeper of the Songs of Innocence*, Tom, after having the dream, starts believing that if he works hard in this world and does not complain about his miseries, he will be sent to paradise after his death. This false vision makes him happy and he happily goes to clean the chimney in the morning. Now he is sure that if he works hard and honestly, nothing will harm him, even the cold of the snow.

Thus we see that this poem is a sarcastic attack on the church and religion. The poet expresses his anger against the social and religious institutions which are not worried about the welfare and betterment of the lives of the deprived children rather they are responsible for their pathetic condition. Through irony, imagery, metaphors, and contrast, the poet has successfully presented the pathetic condition of the poor chimney sweepers which makes the readers angry with the church and the government of that time.

In the second poem, *The Chimney Sweeper of the Songs of Experience*, the same theme of pathos and anger is treated but here the child is not innocent rather he has acquired some experience and unlike, the speaker of the first poem, he understands his real position and his miserable condition of life. Thus, he matures and from an innocent child, he becomes "a little black thing" who knows those institutions which are responsible for the miserable and pathetic condition of his life. He clearly expresses his anger against them and is not ready to fall victim to their false promise.

This poem gives us updated information about the miserable condition of the sweeper boy who was an innocent child earlier. He knows that society and religion are responsible for his pathetic condition. It is these social and religious institutions which have destroyed the happiness of his life. So, he does not seek solace in religion which previously was shown to him in the dream.

Now he understands the irony of the condition which was laid down in the first poem earlier that he will be rewarded by God Himself after his death if he works hard and honestly in this life. Thus we see that he is not ready to be trapped by imaginary things. He is now wise enough to understand the reality and the intention of the society and the church. In this poem, the sweep clearly expresses that religion and the industrialized society have oppressed and exploited him for their benefit and he has been deceived by them.

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The sweep boy in the second poem is unrecognizable because his face is covered with soot and so his face has become black and he is unidentified and so he describes himself as “a little black thing among the snow”. This description has a dehumanizing effect on the readers. The inhuman treatment of the boy enrages the audience and they also feel guilty for the maltreatment of the sweep boy because they are also part of the society. In the poem, although the boy is now grown up yet he is still crying “Weep! Weep!” instead of saying ‘sweep’. It shows that he is still a child. After sending him to the sweeping job his parents are happy thinking that they have sent their boy to a good place where he will enjoy his life while earning also. This is the irony of the situation that the parents misunderstand the real condition of the boy and feel happy so go to the church to thank God. The irony is that the boy is suffering but the parents are unaware of his real situation and rather they are grateful to religion which shows their submission to the church.

Here in this poem, Blake has used symbols to intensify the suffering of the Sweeper boys. The boy was happy in the snowy heath where he jumped, ran and played in nature. This was not liked by the elite society and so he was sold to an agent who employed them in chimney sweeping where their face became black due to soot. The whiteness of the snow is the symbol of purity and innocence and the blackness of the soot symbolizes the suffering of the society. His black face, covered with soot, also symbolizes the black face of the society which has exploited and destroyed the life of a poor boy whose parents are happy thinking that their son is enjoying his life in the business of chimney sweeping.

This situation has an ironic effect on the reader. The readers of the poem become angry because they think, as part of society, that they are also responsible for the pathetic condition of the chimney sweeper. The irony is that they cannot reform the society because at that time the church was the most powerful. So they feel helpless. Symbolically the parents have thrown the boy into hell and deprived him of his joyous youth. So the chimney sweeper is weeping and crying. Blake, metaphorically holds society responsible for his cry.

The two words, “Weep! Weep!” in both poems establish a link between the two poems. This also indicates that the theme of both poems is the same but only the mental ability of the speaker is changed. Otherwise, the pathos and anger in both poems are the same. The sufferings of both characters are also the same. The only difference is that in the second poem, the boy has grown up and understands the reasons and sources which have made his life miserable and pathetic:

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.<sup>i</sup>

His understanding of the reality of the causes and sources of his pathetic life makes him reject the moral lesson given by the angel in the first poem when he was an innocent child. It is clear that now he is no longer an innocent child. The bitter experience which he acquired from the society, has made him wise and can understand the reality of the society of 18<sup>th</sup> century England which, according to the poet, should be changed. Now he understands the meaning of “the clothes of death”. But like others, the boy in the poem is also helpless before the church and the government of the time. Here Blake insists on the necessity of the revolution to change society.

The question, “where is thy father and mother?” symbolizes the poet's enquiry about the authorities who are responsible for the children. The authority is a silent spectator. They are thinking, as the parents, that the chimney sweepers are happy and leading a good life and so there is no need to

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43653/the-chimney-sweeper-a-little-black-thing-among-the-snow>

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care for them. Thus, in this poem, William Blake puts the blame both on the family as well as on society. Both are responsible for the pathetic condition of the chimney sweepers.

The answer to the above question by the sweep, "they are both gone up to the church to pray" shows that the chimney sweepers have been neglected by their parents. But who is responsible for their negligence? The answer is religion. It has been hinted at here that the parents have been literally kidnapped by the church. The parents are afraid of the institution of the church and so they, leaving their children at the mercy of the agent, are in the service of the church and thinking that they are doing good jobs and so they will be rewarded after their death. This is the most hypocritical teaching of the church of the time. Thus we see that here the situation is reversed. In the first poem, the child is trapped in the morality of the church but in the second poem, the parents are trapped by the church. This makes the poet angry with the church and so he revolts against the church and proves himself a humanitarian.

### Conclusion

Thus we see that these two poems are the reflections of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century society of England. Our analysis of both poems shows that these poems were written against the dark background of the labour industries in England in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in which the children were employed in odd jobs, especially in cleaning the chimney because of their small size, for a low salary and were cruelly exploited by the employers. Besides low wages, they were even not fed properly. Moreover, they became the victim of dangerous accidents and often died due to falling from the chimney or due to suffocation. Child labour in England at that time was an organized activity which was ironically legalized by the government. It was only for the convenience and welfare of the elite class of the society. In this poem, as we have noticed, the poet describes the pathetic condition of the lives of the poor working children with the sole aim of reformation of society and the prevailing law system. The main aim of the poet, in composing the poem, *The Chimney Sweeper*, was to abolish child labour in the country and to provide a favourable situation in which the poor children feel free and safe and the government abolished the child labour in England.

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