

We Weep As We Sweep

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Abstract: A heavily loaded socio-political surrounding triggered an urge amongst the class of literary figures to spread awareness about the society that was getting insensitive towards children. Late eighteenth and nineteenth century literary writings argued for the case of children and the harmful effects of child labor on the young minds. These works reflect the experiences and the mind-set of the people during industrialization and the French Revolution.

Romanticism was a wide scale effort of the literary scholars in England that propounded revolutionary ideas against the new phase of society and developed an attitude of reverence towards the children. William Blake was one such writer whose poetry acts as a social commentary on the morals of the society during the Romantic era. In this paper, we shall explore the way Blake's poem 'The Chimney Sweeper' is a successful exhibition of the central theme, of a 'journey of the young children from innocence to experience'. This paper will also show and discuss the issue of the dark lives of the chimney sweepers by decoding the abstract level of representations revolving around the theme of poetry. We will take into consideration the specificity, content and form of the theme and thus, analyze the poem. With addition to this, we will also trace the essential tenets of Romanticism found in Blake's poetry. Further, we will talk about the emotional appeal of Blake's poem on the society and even refer to instances of reports made by the House of Commons with regard to chimney sweeping.

Keywords: childhood, child labor, chimney sweeper, emotional appeal, romanticism.

I. Introduction

Child labor has been a stigma on our society since the days children became easily available as cheap laborers. The onset of industrial revolution, religious unrest and the birth of the middle class gave a fillip to the 'rearing' of children as laborers in various fields of work. For instance, as a household help, a chimney sweeper, a young worker in the factory etc. The orphans and the poor children were the most affected by this kind of exploitation. With the upsurge of French Revolution, Human Rights came into existence and it brought with itself, the revolutionary idea of freedom as a birth right of every single child.

The literary figures of the Romantic and the Victorian era tried to bring forth the miseries of this vulnerable class of the society to the forefront. Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Browning and William Blake are a few writers who have written about the lives of the children in industrialized England. These writers understood the plea of the children and helped their outcry against the hardship and lost childhood to reach out to the whole wide world. Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper' is one such work amongst his many others that talks about the plight of the little chimney sweepers who used to work as apprentices under the head chimney sweep in the streets of London.

II. Analysis

Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper' in his famous work *Songs of Innocence and Experience* portrays the emotional transition of a child sweeper from innocence to experience. In the former poem that talks about innocence, the children are too young to even pronounce the word sweep and yet, they are forced to work for a living. Their little tongues can only say "weep" when they set out for work with their cleaning tools in hand. The latter poem describes the thought process of a child upon whom experience has been forced at a very young age. Both the poems by Blake, talk about the harsh realities of life and how the children got caught in the web of child labor. The society remained insensitive towards the suffering of the children until a few civilians started to recognize the ill treatment and thus, to raise their voice for child rights. Consecutively, reports were recorded by the House of Commons against the practice of chimney sweeping as a form of child labor.

Blake's poetry can be viewed as an artistic work that has the touch of Romantic ideals to it. The Romantics were essentially interested in a revolution to free the society from oppression and to allow them to exercise their human rights. Blake not only creates a realistic picture of the child being "a black thing" in the industrial world, but also makes an appeal for the freedom of these children from the clutches of slavery. Thus,

Blake's poem in itself becomes an image of a man as a social being and the world as its society. The constant conflict between the two has ruined the life of the young children and the world is ignorant enough to "think they have done me (the child) no injury" [1]. Such is the content of Blake's poetry and the form of the poem brings it out more vividly.

It sounds easy enough to talk of the form and the content of a given poem; both separately. To describe the form of the poem would be to talk about its metrical pattern, stanza length, rhyme scheme without talking about what exactly is the poem about. To talk of the content however, is to describe what the poem is about without mentioning its formal qualities. However, Bradley says that it is the interlocking of these two components that renders the analysis of a poem complete (Qtd. in [2]). Thus, at the level of specificity; the two unite and make the poem a work of art that is not ordinary, but is a fictional, special, poetic kind of illocutionary speech act. The poem on the whole conveys a host of increasingly specific meanings. The formulation of Blake's theme of 'Child labor' in 'The Chimney Sweeper' connotes its Romantic ideals of search for individualism and freedom through a natural use of language. Such is the specificity of the theme.

The content of Blake's poem 'The Chimney Sweeper' is highly emotional and tugs at the heartstrings of the civilians, surviving in a brutal society. The poem's theme and its format perform a social appeal that cannot be denied. The two poems under the titles: *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, convey the ideas of Blake in the form of an emotional message to the society. Poetry is said to be foregrounded on structures of linguistic and literary studies. The literary structure in this context of the poem, will serve as the tenets of Romanticism.

Romantic era brought with itself a revolutionary idea with respect to critical notions about poetic language, poetic subject matter and the soul of the poet. Blake's poetry brings out his personal and subjective thoughts on child labor in the form of chimney sweeping. The theme and the subject matter of 'The Chimney Sweeper' show its readers the inner persona of Blake and the way he uses language as a powerful tool against the immoral society. His poem describes the social conditions of the society where he lived and his experiences with the reality. "[T]he excellence of poetry does not lie in the 'action and situation', but in poet's intensely subjectiveness toward his experience" [3]. The feeling that is developed on an account of subjective description gives importance to the action and situation and not vice-versa.

The Romantics looked towards deviating from the traditional linguistic tools and methods to write poetry and thus, they aimed to write on impulse. Hence, we notice that Blake in his poetry; renders the reflection and imitation of the life itself- a life of oppression for the young children. The poetry opens with the natural speech of a child and the form is hindered by his difficulty to pronounce certain words correctly. These breaks in the lines of the poem refer to the hardships that a child laborer faces as an apprenticed chimney sweep. The poem presents itself as an auto-biographical reciting of a chimney sweeper who wants to be loved and cared for; instead of working in the soot. On one hand, the little workers talk about their angelic dreams and on the other, the harsh reality of their lives as child laborers.

Blake has not used exaggeration as a tool in his poetry. As a matter of fact, he has used Realism that hits in the face of the readers. The place that he describes in his poems is a commonplace in the history of England, a common scenario wherein the children were exploited. Realism is the key in bringing out the 'pathos' in these poems. The reality of their mother's death, their fathers having sold them to the workhouse are unfortunate instances portrayed in 'The Chimney Sweeper'. William Blake has used Realism to criticize the society and its ill treatment towards the innocent children.

Blake distorts the rhyme scheme in the poem to a great extent such that at most two lines in a sequence can rhyme. This can be viewed as the deviation of Blake from the tradition. He tries to make an effort to engage the reader's mind into the meaning of the lines rather than mere recitation of the poem. The use of second person and third person paves a way to significant interpretation. When Blake says: "your chimneys I sweep" [4], it renders a sense of responsibility on the part of the employers who make the children work. Also as he says "they clothed me...They think they did no injury to me... Have gone to pray" [1], Blake brings out the sense of awareness that has dawned upon the oppressed children about the pretentious and the grim world that they have been exposed to. This works as an experience for these children, they are no longer innocent.

One can relate Wordsworth's three step process to Blake's poem. According to William Wordsworth, a poet encounters a commonplace event which for some unknown reason, arouses powerful feelings in his mind and when the poet is away from the incident, he can see it only in his mind and can look calmly on feelings aroused by that same incident. Later, the mind suddenly becomes agitated to the point that he makes an exact copy of the original feelings he had once experienced.

Thus, Blake can be seen describing a commonplace and a scene that is not an integral part of his life, but nonetheless, it has a powerful impact on his mind. The plight of the children in the streets of England thus, becomes a realistic social experience for Blake and he pens down his agitation in the form of '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 [4]."

Here, Blake portrays the realistic scene from eighteenth century England, the little chimney sweepers sweeping the chimneys. The pronoun 'I' in this context would mean that the poet's mind is so moved by the experience that he completely empathizes himself with the child. Blake goes on to say:

"A little black thing among the snow,
Crying "weep! 'weep!" in notes of woe! [1]"

In these lines, William Blake describes the chimney sweeper as "a little black thing". The word 'thing' make these children sound quite inanimate and thus, devoid of feelings. It also renders a meaning that is similar to objectification of a human being. The children are sold off as commodities by their poverty stricken parents in exchange for money.

III. Conclusion

On a whole, it can be said that the atrocious behavior of the rich and insensible civilians failed to awaken the feelings of morality in the society. The adults never seemed to give a second thought to the children who worked hard for a living. It was beyond their ability to consider the innocent wishes of these chimney sweepers who yearned for a childhood.

Blake employs a unique blend of form and content in his poem to give specific details of the life that he wishes to depict; in order to arouse emotions in the readers. As a result, we can see a child laborer's life being portrayed in a realistic form. Thus, as one reads the poem, an image is created in the mind which is rich in emotional appeal.

In order to understand the miserable condition of the child sweepers in a better manner, we shall now consider a report from the Committee of the honorable the House of Commons on the *Employment of Boys in Sweeping of Chimneys* (1817).

"The report shows the conditions in which climbing boys worked between 1788 and 1817. The interview with the chimney sweep, an employer of child sweeps, states that he is keen to abide by the rules of the 1788 Act, but that he sometimes has to beat the boys to make them work properly. He says he would be willing to use a machine instead of a boy, but the servants in his employers' houses complain that machines make more dirt than boys. He explains that, on occasion, fires were lit under reluctant children; but perhaps the most shocking piece of evidence shows how older boys were sent up chimneys after smaller boys to prick their feet with pins in an attempt to make them go further" [5].

With the issue of Human Rights after the French Revolution, the condition of the children started to improve, but it was a slow process. Raising the age limit for the employment of children was an important step towards child welfare, but it did little to improve the working conditions of the many children who continued to be employed.

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