

Reflection of Social Reality in Romantic Literature: The Case of Chimney-sweepers

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Abstract

Whatever the Aesthetes say in favour of the autonomy of art, by flaunting the slogan 'Art for Art's Sake', no amount of abstraction can sever art and literature from their roots in real life – life lived as a throbbing interweave of joy and sorrow, dream and actuality, hope and despair. Any form of art is cradled in and nurtured by the actualities of human experience, social and private. Therefore, it would be no travesty to say that literature and society are co-extensive and symbiotic. The symbiosis between literature and society is an abiding principle of human history. It is a commonplace of criticism to dissociate the Romantic from the real. But it appears to be a fallacy in the logic of criticism. The most sensitive Romantic is paradoxically most keenly aware of the pinpricks of real life. A revolution is a co-ordinate of socio-political and economic history. But it creeps into the vision of a poet. So a poet and society or an artist and morals are not apart, not irrespective of each other. William Blake was very much aware of the socio-political scenario of industrial London, and he did not escape from urban society. Rather he dealt with problems like child labour, chimney sweeping (which were vicious outcome of industrial revolution) in his poems and his poems were actually a protest against these socio-political evils. This paper tries to throw light on this aspect of Romantic literature taking cognizance of the fact that art and literature are not lying but merely a fine excess of the essence of life.

Key words: romantic, society, child labour, chimney sweeping.

The Romantic Period was marked by great changes like the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The Industrial Revolution was a period in the late 18th and early 19th centuries when major changes in agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation had a profound effect on socioeconomic and cultural conditions in Britain. The onset of the Industrial Revolution marked a major turning point in human social history. David Daiches points out that "the beginning of the Industrial Revolution towards the end of the century produced a very different view of the value of life in urban society from that found in the Queen Anne writers," (Daiches 857) indicating a change in the approach to life in general.

In "Picturing the Child in Nineteenth-Century Literature" Jacquelyn Spratlin Rogers looks on this new view on life and children asking the rhetorical question, why children were depicted as "miniature adults" in illustrations of books of the same period. She lists the reasons for children not having a childhood as we understand it, some being "high mortality rate of children due to poor nutrition, work hazards, and disease played an important role" (Rogers 1). The children were not allowed to be children, childhood was seen as a dangerous period and the children's "clothing, work, responsibilities, and attitudes of children mimicked the adults" (Rogers 2). The main reason for the absence of a childhood, in 19th century England, was the need for cheap labour with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution as factories and mines were established. One of the worst social effects of this Revolution was child labour, a phenomenon created long before but fully exploited during this time, in pitiful need for workers on the rise of Capitalism. There was still limited opportunity for education, and children were expected to work. Employers could pay a child less than an adult even though their productivity was comparable; there was no need for strength to operate an industrial machine, and since the industrial system was new there were no experienced adult labourers making child labour the labour of choice for manufacturing in the early phases of the industrial revolution. Before the passing of laws protecting children, many were forced to work in terrible conditions for much lower pay than their elders. A specifically British tradition was the custom of cleaning chimneys by sending tiny boys and girls up the chimneys. They would be taken as apprentices as early as four years of age. Historically it is believed that children were only used since the 18th century for the purpose of cleaning chimneys, since "more complicated and narrow chimney systems of eighteenth-century houses" (Lamont 110) became common.

Reports were written detailing some of the abuses, particularly in the coal mines and textile factories and these helped to popularise the children's plight. The public outcry, especially among the upper and middle classes, helped stir change in the young workers' welfare. Politicians and the government tried to limit child labour by law, but factory owners resisted; some felt that they were aiding the poor by giving their children money to buy food to avoid starvation, and others simply welcomed the cheap labour. In 1833 and 1844, the first general laws against child labour, the Factory Acts, were passed in England: Children younger than nine were not allowed to work, children were not permitted to work at night, and the work day of youth under the age of 18 was limited to twelve hours. Factory inspectors supervised the execution of the law. About ten years later, the employment of children and women in mining was forbidden. These laws decreased the number of child labourers; however, it remained in Europe up to the 20th century.

Romanticism emphasises on the individual's creative power as a direct response to the gradual dissolution of feudal ties and class distinctions into the two great classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat. But William Blake's poetry can be considered as an exception to the image of the Romantic poet in social isolation drawing his inspiration from Nature. This exception is due in large part to Blake's nearly lifelong residence in the heart of London.

Blake drew much of his inspiration from the urban setting in which he lived. While Coleridge and Wordsworth were travelling through Germany, Blake was still in London struggling to sell his stylistically obscure prophetic works. By far, the most successful of Blake's illuminated works was *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, published jointly in 1794. Yet, even in these works Blake's politics is overtly showcased. Poems like "London" and "The Chimney Sweeper" (two poems) illustrate Blake's leftist, proletarian politics. Blake considered child labour a curse of his time. Blake saw the growing need for child labour a threat to their innocence. Blake's view is expressed in his two poems; the first one having been published in *Songs of Innocence*, and the second one in *Songs of Experience*. His capturing of the suffering of working children changes from the first to the second work. His is a slow awakening into cold reality, quite simply put, from innocence to experience.

Blake was a lyric poet interested chiefly in ideas, and a painter who did not believe in nature. He was a commercial artist who was a genius in poetry, painting, and religion. He was a libertarian obsessed with God; a mystic who reversed the mystical pattern, for he sought man as the end of his search. He was a Christian who hated the churches; a revolutionary who abhorred the materialism of the radicals. He was a drudge, sometimes living on a dollar a week, who called himself "a mental prince"; and was one. (Kazin)

Blake's first "The Chimney Sweeper" shows a harsh yet idealistic point of view of a child chimney-sweeper, how innocence can have a hidden side of crude reality. On the surface, this lyric tells the story of a little chimney sweeper, who dreams a beautiful dream about an angel who releases both this boy and his fellow chimney-sweepers from their sufferings under the harsh ill-treatment of this matter. Psychoanalytically, pre-industrial agrarian phase is the pre-oedipal phase. Land is seen as mother's body. People in pre-industrial England are like child in union with mother's body. Capitalism, industrialism is the father figure with the threat of castration. In post-oedipal symbolic stage there is separation, suffering, loss, estrangement. In industrial England people are severed from mother's body. Dreaming is in a way a wish to go back to that union. It apparently might seem a parable of capitalism. And the poem apparently points a conventional, devotional moral:

And the angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father, and never want joy.

Such an interpretation of the poem, however, cannot be sustained for long, for Blake's lyric also records in stark detail the reality of the fates of the children who were forced to work as chimney-sweepers:

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.

The boy of these lines was put to work while he was so young that he could not even pronounce "sweep" properly. It was a fact that the chimney-sweepers of London in Blake's time were small boys as little as four years old. Often orphans or motherless boys, they were literally sold to men who used them as forced labour to clean small and narrow chimneys in the houses and buildings of London. Forced to work for long hours from before daybreak to late in the afternoon, deprived intentionally of sufficient food so that they would remain thin enough to climb up chimneys, denied all opportunities to play and even wash themselves, locked up in dark and dingy congested rooms at night to prevent them from running away, the flight of the small chimney-sweepers was one of the blamed social scandals of the late 18th century. It was about the plight of such child-sweeps that Blake wrote his poem, giving a voice to just one such boy.

The boy tells of Tom Dacre, who was deprived of his purity – hair that curled like a lamb's back--. That night Tom has a dream: "That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack,/ Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black". An angel appears with a "bright key", both alluding to light and Heaven, and "open'd the coffins and set them all free". The child-sweepers play in meadows and wash and shine; they become pure, regain their innocence. Then, "naked and white", they rise up to Heaven. The Angel tells Tom "if he'd be a good boy, he'd have God for his father, and never want joy", clearly referring to Heaven. Tom awakes, and returns to reality: cold, work, darkness. Yet Tom is "happy & warm": "if all do their duty, they need not fear harm." Here the child-sweeper, the narrator in this poem, apparently performs the role of a comforter. But it cannot be overlooked that Tom Dacre's dream which the narrator holds out as a kind of cure for all the sufferings of the children chimney-sweepers is just a sort of escapist vision without any power of bringing about any change in the material conditions of the suffering children. The "Angel" may indeed be read as a symbol of institutionalized religion which may offer hope but is in no way capable of lightening the burden of real suffering.

Certainly it is true that in so far as Tom is concerned, his dream-vision does bring him a kind of comfort:

Tho' the morn was cold, Tom was happy and warm;
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

Yet these lines are not as innocent as they appear. The angel's message that God would be Tom's father (in the place of the one who deserted him) is typical of the promises of a better life held out by religions. Like the opium of the masses that Marx described religion as, Tom Dacre's vision makes him forget the real wrong that is being done to him. After hearing what the angel tells him, Tom no longer cries out at the injustices that is meted out to him, but instead feels "happy and warm" even though the "morn was cold". "Angel" is one of the certain constructed myths (which we are born with) created by ideology so that ideology can perpetuate its power. As Althusser said, people are born in a society as individuals, but as they grow up they succumb to the various processes of exploitation. By giving their consent the exploited people become subjects of society accepting the permanent ideology of society. Similarly, in this poem Tom Dacre is accepting his reality. In the last line of the poem, "all" ostensibly refers to all the chimney-sweepers performing their duties without complaint, it can also mean that if "all" (including the real father of the chimney-sweeper) really did their duties, there would be no suffering, no pain and no children forced to sweep chimneys for the profit of a few cruel men and the convenience of the heartless men and women who hired the little children whenever their chimneys needed to be cleaned. This is how capitalism functions in society. Blake is simply unfurling the ways in which people as subjects are exploited. Unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge who pretty often depict pre-industrial past denying industrial present, Blake is accepting industrial present. He tries to say that it is the journey of history and nation, and people have to adopt means to counter the evils of capitalism to which they are kept oblivious.

The plate Blake carved for his first Chimney-sweeper is sky-blue, with the thin shadows of little children walking up to Heaven: children whose souls are leaving for a better good. The rhyme scheme of the poem is almost like nursery rhymes (meant for children) portraying children in a joyous state. But the irony of Blake's poem is that thematically it is just the reverse of the nursery rhyme. The tone is idealistic and hopeful with an underlying taste of crude reality; more of a nuisance than a tragedy.

In 1789, there was a Revolution taking place at the other end of the British Channel. Many European artists including Blake were being influenced by the amazing explosion of ideas that was taking place in France. As Kazin remarks, "He [was] a pioneer Romantic of

that heroic first generation which thought that the flames of the French Revolution would burn down all fetters". "The Chimney Sweeper" is clearly influenced by these strong principles and by Blake's idealisation of them; an overall hopeful view on life, a sort of *La Vita é Bella* of the 18th century: make the best of what life has to bring; all's well that ends well.

His second poem has a more overtly critical tone. It is now a bitter time, 1794, and war has broken out between Britain and France. A commercial depression is sweeping over the country and Blake is more aware of the harshness around him: he becomes more critical with the Church and with society, and more interested in politics. "Blake's work had become more overtly political after the upheavals in France in 1789." (<http://www.lilith-ezine.com/articles/williamblake1.html>). He was especially concerned with the industrialisation of cities, the destruction of nature, those *Dark satanic Mills*: "Across from Blake's home in London was a factory. From this he created a sketch of what an entire landscape of factories and their destruction of the landscape would be like. Right down to the towering smokestacks and sewage waste. A prophetic image to say the least. The factory later burnt down mysteriously, and Blake moved to the more rural Lambeth in 1790." (<http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/williamblake2.html>)

Blake expresses many of his ideas from this point on: he abhorred slavery and believed in racial and sexual equality. He rejected all forms of imposed authority; Blake's views on what he saw as oppression and restriction of rightful freedom extended to the Church. His spiritual beliefs are evidenced in *Songs of Experience* (in 1794), showing his own distinction between the Old Testament God, whose restrictions he rejected, and the New Testament God (Jesus Christ in Trinitarianism), whom he saw as a positive influence (New World Encyclopedia). Blake has the mystic's tormented sense of the doubleness of life between reality and the ideal. But he tries to resolve it on earth, in the living person of man. Up to 1800 he also thought it could be resolved in society (...). Blake is against everything that submits, mortifies, constricts and denies. (...) He ceased to be a revolutionary in the political sense after England went to war with France and tried to destroy the revolution in Europe. That was less out of prudent cowardice—though like every other radical and free-thinker of the time he lived under a Tory reign of terror—than because he had lost faith in political action as a means to human happiness. (Kazin)

His second "The Chimney Sweeper" is bitterer and darker; worldlier. Blake sees the chimney-sweeper barefoot and dirty, carrying a big bag of soot, walking under grey rain, with a sad expression on his face. This poem opens with the voice of a narrator, who observes, notes or records and then asks a question to which the chimney-sweeper responds. The response is significant for several reasons. In the first place, it is noticeable that the child chimney-sweeper is a living being, but it is referred to as "A little black thing". This is because the child, dressed in his soot-covered black rags, is so insignificantly small that he is no more than a "black thing". Next, in the second line is mentioned the child's "notes of woe" – its cries of misery and suffering. And finally there is the last line of the stanza which indicates the institution of the church for not only reflecting small exploited children like the chimney-sweepers, but also for directly or indirectly making it possible for parents to forget the plight of their working children. The last two lines of Blake's poem indeed sound as a direct note of condemnation:

And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery.

"God and his Priest and King" make up a kind of triumvirate of Divinity, clerical or Church authority and political and social power that effectively neglects looking often and so destroys the happiness of the little children which is their birthright. Experience, in other words, is the "heaven" of enjoyment that some build out of others' "misery". The tone of this

poem is completely different from that of the one in *Songs of Innocence*. It shows that the wretched plight of the whole proletariat class is basically a nexus between Church, family and King. Most of the poems in *Songs of Innocence* have pre-industrial agrarian or pastoral setting, whereas poems of *Songs of Experience* are set in urban areas. Experience is a mental state of maturity. Whereas in *Innocence* there is a note of acceptance, in *Experience* there is a revolt against the evils of society. Blake's anti-industrial sensibility anticipates Dickens.

The poem in *Songs of Experience* is bitter and sad and evokes lost innocence, hunger and abandonment. It is highly contrastive in its lexical perspective and imagery; scenes of innocent childhood are swept by pictures of darkness and suffering. Kazin describes Blake's concept of a child: "In his own time, when children were regarded as miniature adults, or as slaves or pets to those who ruled by their maturity, he showed that a child is not an abbreviated version of the adult, but a different being." This child certainly is a perfectly aware being who still needs to feel joy, and knows who to blame for his untimely suffering. Someone asks, as he stands in the snow, alone, weeping: "Where are thy father and mother? Say? They are praying in church". He had managed to bring happiness to harsh times, smiling "among the winters snow", but was "clothed in the clothes of death [and] taught (...) to sing the notes of woe". He bitterly tells "Because I am happy and dance and sing,/ They think they have done me no injury:". His parents, and everyone else, have gone to "praise God and his Priest and King,/ Who make up a heaven of our misery."

The overtly critical tone of this poem shows a definite evolution in the life of Blake, parallel to that of British society and political events as it drew into the last moments of the Romantic era - a necessary, yet bitter evolution from idealistic Innocence to realistic Experience.

Blake's poem, "London" is clearly written in protest of the society he lived in. However, the poem's speaker does not seem to be particularly active politically. For instance, the speaker simply wanders, without decrying the horrors he marks along the way. Simply registering these injustices rather than openly and vociferously decrying them suggests a resignation on the part of the speaker. Here the poet is again concerned with the evil practice of chimney-sweeping. The third quatrain of the poem goes thus:

How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appalls;
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

It effectively carries the image of society's ideological imprisonment reminding the source of all this misery and oppression. The images of Church and Palace walls point the accusatory finger directly at church and government. The word 'appalls' serves as a double-entendre. The sweeper's cry should appall the church leadership. The brutal, naked exploitation of child labour should horrify and dismay them, perhaps leading them to act on the sweepers' behalf. However, in reality the churches employed these tiny proletariats. Hence, 'Every black'ning Church appalls.' The churches grow black with soot, and the sweepers' trade makes them clean and white again. In this second sense, the word 'appalls' signifies to make pale, from the meaning of the Old French verb *apalir*: to grow pale (askoxford.com). Alternatively, only in "London" the chimney-sweeper's cry is said to "appall" that is "to cover as with a pall or shroud", and Blake wants to say that the neglect of the little chimney-sweepers by the Church was a kind of black shroud of disgrace that disfigured this edifice of supposed compassion. Again, the reader detects a vast difference between the speaker's perspective and the perspective of the ruling institutions as depicted in this poem. The quatrain concludes with another sound image. The speaker hears 'the hapless Soldiers sigh' as it 'Runs in blood down Palace walls'. Again the reader is referred to the Bible. The image of blood running down the walls is reminiscent of Exodus 7:17, which

reads, “Thus saith the Lord, In this thou shalt know that I am the Lord: behold, I will smite with the rod that is mine hand upon the waters which are in the river, and they shall be turned to blood” (KJV Exodus 7:17). Again Blake assumes a prophetic tone couched in spiritual language in order to critique a very material reality.

Innocence is belief and experience is doubt. The tragedy of experience is that we become incapable of love. The tragedy of childhood is that we inflict our lovelessness upon it. That is what experience is for: to bring us from God the Father to the God that man alone creates. Experience is not evil; it merely shows us the face of evil as a human face, so that we shall learn that the world is exactly what man makes it, and that its ultimate triumphs occur within his understanding. Blake's thinking is always organic; it is always directed to the hidden fountains of our humanity. Having never lost the creative freshness of childhood, he challenged experience with it. (Kazin)

Revolutionary, idealistic, full of hopes and dreams, his first chimney-sweeper is cheerful and sooty, with angels and coldness. By the end of the century, he has run out of hope and receives but more dust from the grey rain falling from the sky. Blake was profoundly affected by the social, political and cultural changes taking between the production of these two works. His unworldly revolutionary ideas denote serious callowness, a certain 'purity wrapping' which has been necessarily rubbed off roughly by the evils of the Modern World.

“Blake's need of certainty, whatever its personal roots, is also one of the great tragedies of modern capitalist society; particularly of that loss of personal status that was the immediate fate of millions in the industrial England of the "dark satanic mills." Blake was only one of many Englishmen who felt himself being slowly ground to death, in a world of such brutal exploitation and amid such inhuman ugliness, that the fires of the new industrial furnaces and the cries of the child labourers are always in his work. His poems and designs are meant to afford us spiritual vision; a vision beyond the factory system, the hideous new cities, the degradation of children for the sake of profit, the petty crimes for which children could still be hanged. England has never recovered from its industrial revolution; Blake was afraid it could not survive it; the human cost was already too great.” (Kazin)

“Perhaps most important was the shift from a way of life based on ownership of land to a modern urban economy based on trade and manufacturing. By the beginning of the Victorian period, the Industrial Revolution (...) had created profound economic and social changes, including a mass migration of workers to industrial towns, where they lived in new urban slums. But the changes arising out of the Industrial Revolution were just one subset of the radical changes taking place in mid- and late-nineteenth-century Britain — among others were the democratization resulting from extension of the franchise; challenges to religious faith, in part based on the advances of scientific knowledge, particularly of evolution; and changes in the role of women.”(NAEL)

It is clear that Britain, as Kazin stated, has never recovered from its Industrial Revolution, or any other industrialised country for that matter, as it is its legacy that is slowly killing our world: pollution, extreme poverty and social degradation are just some of the side effects of the changes that took place between the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe. These changes, however, also included huge economical, social and scientific improvements. Thousands of children were abused during the time lapse running from the writing of each of these poets' work; however, thanks to the people's cry and the artists' word, decisive laws were established against the exploitation of children and women, Unions of workers were developed and working rights were secured across the world.

Charles Lamb's “In Praise of Chimney-Sweepers” in *Essays of Elia* (1820-23), as he writes in the Romantic tradition, reveals his “zest for the picturesque and the oddly individual in human character, and his occasional almost fierce attacks on the lack of human kindness”

(Daiches 926). And like many of his essays including "Dream-Children", "In Praise of Chimney-Sweepers" is a highly personal and sentimental poem even if the title does suggest differently. Lamb begins his essay saying, "I like to meet a sweep...one of those tender novices, blooming through their first negritude" (Lamb 123) Right at the beginning Lamb takes his reader for a walk on the streets of London, where chimney-sweepers were a common sight at his time. Lamb further makes obvious reference to Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" (1789 and 1892) with likening the chimney sweeper's call "'weep, weep" to the "peep, peep of a young sparrow." The sparrow usually emits these sounds when it calls for food, so it is ironical that the chimney sweeper is calling with a similar sound for work at his tender age. Lamb jumps from one image to another as he continues his essay "I reverence these young Africans of our own growth...and from their little pulpits (the tops of chimneys), in the nipping air of December morning, preach a lesson of patience to mankind" (Lamb 123) Calling the chimney sweeper an African was not unusual since the effort to emancipate them was compared to the fight against slavery.

As is typical for Lamb, he then reminisces about his own childhood in the essay, recalling how when he was a child he saw "a chit no bigger than one's self" and how he had been amazed to see a child disappear into a chimney and "running out of doors, to come just in time to see the sable phenomenon emerge in safety" (Lamb 123) Lamb then continues to give his glimpses of London city life, as he observes that chimney-sweepers have a liking for a brew made out of "sassafras...This wood, boiled down to a kind of tea" and then he gives a lively description of a chimney sweeper consuming this tea, "Being penniless, they will yet hang their black heads over the ascending steam, to gratify one sense if possible, seemingly no less pleased than those domestic animals – cats – when they purr over a new-found sprig of valerian" (Lamb 125). Lamb then imagines that the white teeth of some chimney-sweepers are evidence for their "good blood and nobility." He retells a story that actually happened and is well-known from a scene at the beginning of Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1863), namely a chimney sweeper lost his way and got down the wrong chimney while cleaning the chimneys of Arundel Castle. Finding a bed with clean bed sheets in the strange room, he lay down in it and was found there "at noonday," which to Lamb appears to be another evidence for the chimney sweeper to be a "young nobleman." Again Lamb sets the dark and dirty world of the chimney sweeper in stark contrast to the Castle, the royal chamber and a "pair of sheets whiter and softer than the lap where Venus lulled Ascanius" (Lamb 128) Comparing the life of the poor and dirty chimney-sweepers with life in a Castle or the readers of better means, is a way for Lamb to defamiliarise the reader and in a way shock him out of his comfort zone. His main aim becomes clearer near the end, which seems to evoke a feeling of sympathy and pity for these children and, it could be argued, for himself as well, as it is suggested that he liked to "parade himself" [11]. Therefore the last section of his essay can be looked at with mixed feelings as Lamb describes an annual feast in May, a "solemn supper held in Smithfield, upon the yearly return of the fair of St. Bartholomew" (Lamb 129). It was held for chimney-sweepers by a friend of Charles Lamb, James White, and Lamb participated and "ministered" to some tables at which children ate "hissing sausages" (Lamb 129). White died in 1820 and therefore Lamb writes at the end that with the extinction of his friend "these suppers have long ceased...and the glory of Smithfield departed forever" (Lamb 131). Though at last we see the mostly passive and observing Lamb active at the end, the essay still ends in an unexpected sad tone, and offers not much hope or any solution to the chimney sweeper's problems apart from the feast and the empathetic feeling one can have towards them.

The essay is a plea for kindness and charity towards those "dim specs" or "innocent blackness". Coming out of his autobiographical strain Lamb talks about the little chimney-sweepers of London and mentions quite directly in the beginning of the essay that he is not

going to discuss about the adult sweeps, but only the little ones: “I like to meet a sweep – understand me – not a grown sweeper – old chimney-sweepers are by no means attractive – but one of those tender novices, ...” (Lamb 123).

Lamb is full of sympathy and love for these little fellows and compares their “professional notes” to the “*peep peep* of a young sparrow” or to “the martin lark”. Their innocence and youth attracts Lamb. A true passionate man, Lamb extends his heart-felt kindness to these “dim specs – poor blots – innocent blackness”. He humorously satirizes the exploiting society who makes these little fellows work from the early morning, when it is their time to play and be merry. He boldly states “I reverence these young Africans of our own growth, these almost clergy imps, who sport their cloth without assumption; and from their little pulpits, in the nipping air of a December morning, preach a lesson of patience to mankind.”

He even advises all the readers to pay these “small gentry” an extra two-pence, so that they can buy some shoes to protect their “kibed heels” and cover themselves properly in the cold mornings. Lamb is in complete protest of the exploitation of these little kids and like a true humanist he urges all the readers to extend a helping hand towards them and buy these penniless sweeps a basin of sassafras tea, a slice of bread and butter too.

He reminisces an incident when Lamb fell hard on the snow and he was both in shame and pain – but all these disappeared just when he saw a young sweep pointing him out with his dusky finger to the mob and laughing his heart out. The sweep’s laughter, the twinkle in his eyes made Lamb forget his pain and was pleased to bring that “roguish grin” on his face. He masterfully describes this innocent smile of the boy as

A sable cloud

Turns forth her silver lining on the night.

Lamb then refers to a true incident, where a young chimney sweep was found fast asleep in a luxurious bed in an aristocratic mansion of Arundel Castle after feeling exhausted of the day’s work. This young boy had an aristocratic background and was perhaps kidnapped from his home in the infancy. Lamb thus brings forward the sad and grim situation in which these little boys spend their childhood. Instead of playing and studying they are forced to work in the suffocating chimneys and clean them. Their innocence and youth is pressed down under the huge load of work and this is where Lamb voices his protest.

Lamb with his friend Jem White used to organise annual parties to entertain a large number of young chimney-sweepers which they enjoyed whole-heartedly. They used to toast “May the Brush supersede the Laurel!” But after White’s death none cared to look after the happiness of these innocent little children.

Thus Lamb through the perfect blending of humour and pathos brings forth the actual situation which those young children face. His true concern for these little sweeps comes out quite spontaneously in each of the lines of this essay. First, we are amused by the various phrases that the writer uses for chimney-sweepers. He describes them as “dim specks”, “poor blots”, “innocent blackness”, “young Africans of our own growth” etc. These are witty metaphors. Then we are amused by the account of a young chimney sweeper laughing hilariously at the sight of the author’s slumping in a street and falling down on his back. The sight of this young chimney sweeper, laughing gleefully, would be a fit theme for a painting by Hogarth, says Lamb. There is a touch of humour also in the manner in which Lamb describes a chimney sweeper’s teeth which he calls “those white and shining ossifications”, and which he regards as “an allowable piece of foppery”. There is a streak of humour running through the account of the annual feasts which were held by Jem White to entertain young chimney-sweepers.

Not only humour, but “In Praise of Chimney-Sweepers” arouses our deepest sympathy for the young boys whose poor circumstances compelled them to earn their

livelihood by sweeping domestic chimneys. Lamb as a child used to wonder how a chimney-sweeper, entering a chimney from below, went up and up till the "sable phenomenon" emerged at the top. The author appeals to the readers to give a penny or two pence to a chimney-sweeper if they happen to meet one. The picture of a chimney-sweeper who being penniless, could not buy a cup of "sassafras" tea and who would, therefore, gratify his senses merely by smelling the steam of his beverage, is also pathetic. Here again the author appeals to his readers to buy a chimney-sweeper, a basin of "sassafras" tea and a slice of bread-and-butter and to offer him this meagre feast as a compensation for the hard work the poor fellow has to do. Our sympathy for these chimney-sweepers is further heightened when we are told that some of them were born in aristocratic families and were kidnapped from their homes in their infancy. To illustrate his point, Lamb gives us the pathetic incident of a young chimney-sweeper found lying fast asleep in a state-bed at Arundel Castle: "... so creeping between the sheets very quietly, laid his black head upon the pillow, and slept like a young Howard". This particular chimney-sweeper could never have dared to lie in that bed if it had not been for an inner prompting except the fact that this boy must have been born in some high and wealthy family and must have been kidnapped in his infancy.

Blake's poems and Lamb's essay betray a natural disposition to patronize Shelley's incredible saying: "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts" (Shelley). The description of the pitiful condition of children in 18th and 19th century urban England, might remind one of many children on the streets of various parts of India, where child labour and exploitation of children are still existent. Both Blake and Lamb, in their own individual ways, give voice to the unheard cries of the children of their age and try to stir us, the reader today in India, to action or at least compassion. Being made aware of our responsibility towards the children of India in our own time, we too should ask ourselves and others with Elizabeth Barrett Browning - "Will you stand, to move the world, on a child's heart? (Browning)"

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