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Applying Marxist Criticism to “The Chimney Sweeper” by William Blake

Applying Marxist Criticism requires the reader to pay close attention to power and money, but at first glance, neither seems especially prominent in the poem. However, there are sure signs of oppression throughout. First, the chimney sweeper, who is introduced by a third-person narrator in the opening lines, is described as “[c]rying weep, weep, in notes of woe” (2). Later on, the chimney sweeper says of himself, “They clothed me in clothes of death/ And taught me to sing notes of woe” (7-8). The words “woe” and “death” suggest the boy is oppressed, especially as his present situation is much worse than his past one. After all, he was once “happy upon the heath…smil[ing] among the winters [sic] snow” (5-6). This last image contrasts the first line of the poem, which introduces the chimney sweeper as a “black thing among the snow” (1). Obviously, the change in the young boy’s fortune can be attributed to his move from the countryside to the city – and into a world of work. Chimney sweepers in 18th century England were typically young boys since their diminutive size allowed them to descend into narrow chimneys. In the late 18th century, these young boys, who were taken on as apprentices, were subject to slave-like conditions of work and, consequently, high death rates:

Even if a chimney didn't prove too hot when an apprentice entered it to clean, the chimney flues were pitch black, claustrophobic, potentially full of suffocating soot and confusing to navigate in the dark. It was dangerous enough work, even when the master chimney sweep tried to do well by the apprentices. The children not only had to go up these tight, dark chimneys, they had to come back down them after the work was done.

Unfortunately, the turns, twists, and merges of the chimney flues behind the walls of tall buildings created a confusing, pitch black and soot-filled maze that could sometimes be deadly to a young apprentice chimney sweep trying to make it to the roof. (Iverson)

In addition to these dangerous work conditions, young chimney sweepers were often at the mercy of their employers. There were few government regulations to protect these children; moreover, faced with poverty and even starvation, destitute parents were often forced to send their children to work. Orphans were also plucked from orphanages by master chimney sweeps, who paid them meagre wages and had many replacements in waiting.

Clearly, the poem criticizes child labour in Industrial England, yet it also attacks the social system which facilitated the practice to continue. After all, there is no mention of master chimney sweeps or employers in general. Instead, Blake’s scope is much wider. First, he identifies the boy’s parents as the cause of their child’s misery: while “they” are praying at church, he is sweeping chimneys after “they” clothed him in workers’ clothing. Blake suggests, however, that their complicity can be pinned on partial ignorance: “they think they have done me no injury” (10). However, Blake attacks a much wider social system, one that is less ignorant than desperate parents in Industrial England. Again, Blake repeats that the parents are praying to “God & his Priest & his King” (11). The repetition is hardly coincidence since the last line of the poem charges these authorities with “mak[ing] up a heaven of our misery” (12). Thus, Blake targets not only parents and employers, but also a much wider social net which allows the practice of chimney sweepers to exist. The parents have turned a blind eye, but society has willfully conspired against these young vulnerable workers.