Name _____ Class _____ Date _____



The Chimney Sweeper (Experience)

by William Blake

Grades 8–11 · Common Core RL.9-10.4, RL.9-10.2, RL.9-10.6

The poem appeared in Songs of Experience (1794). In Blake's London, children as young as four or five were sold or apprenticed to climb inside chimneys and sweep out soot; many were injured or died young. Blake wrote two poems with this title; the Songs of Innocence version (1789) is more hopeful. This one has three four-line stanzas.

THE POEM

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 smiled 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 made up a heaven of our misery.'

VOCABULARY

woe — great sorrow

heath — open, wild land

clothed — dressed

injury — harm, hurt

priest — a religious leader

misery — great suffering

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the two speakers in stanza 1? How do you know the child's job?

2. What is the double meaning of "'weep! weep!'"?

3. Why did the parents send the child to work, according to the child?

4. What are "the clothes of death"?

5. Who does the child blame in the last two lines, and why is "a heaven of our misery" so bitter?

WRITING PROMPT

Write a short poem in the voice of a young worker from history or today, telling a passer-by what their life is really like.

The Chimney Sweeper (Experience) — Answer Key

1. A passer-by who asks “Where are thy father and mother?” and the child sweep who answers. He is “A little black thing” (covered in soot) crying “weep!” (the sweeps’ street call).
2. It is the street cry of the word sweep, said by a child who cannot pronounce it, and it also means he is weeping.
3. “Because I was happy upon the heath”: he was happy, so they assumed he could bear hardship.
4. His black, sooty work clothes, which may lead to his death; also like a burial shroud.
5. “God and His priest and king,” the church and state, along with his parents, who praise God while living off children’s suffering: they “made up a heaven of our misery.”

Read the full poem online: poetrycatalog.com/the-chimney-sweeper-experience-william-blake/