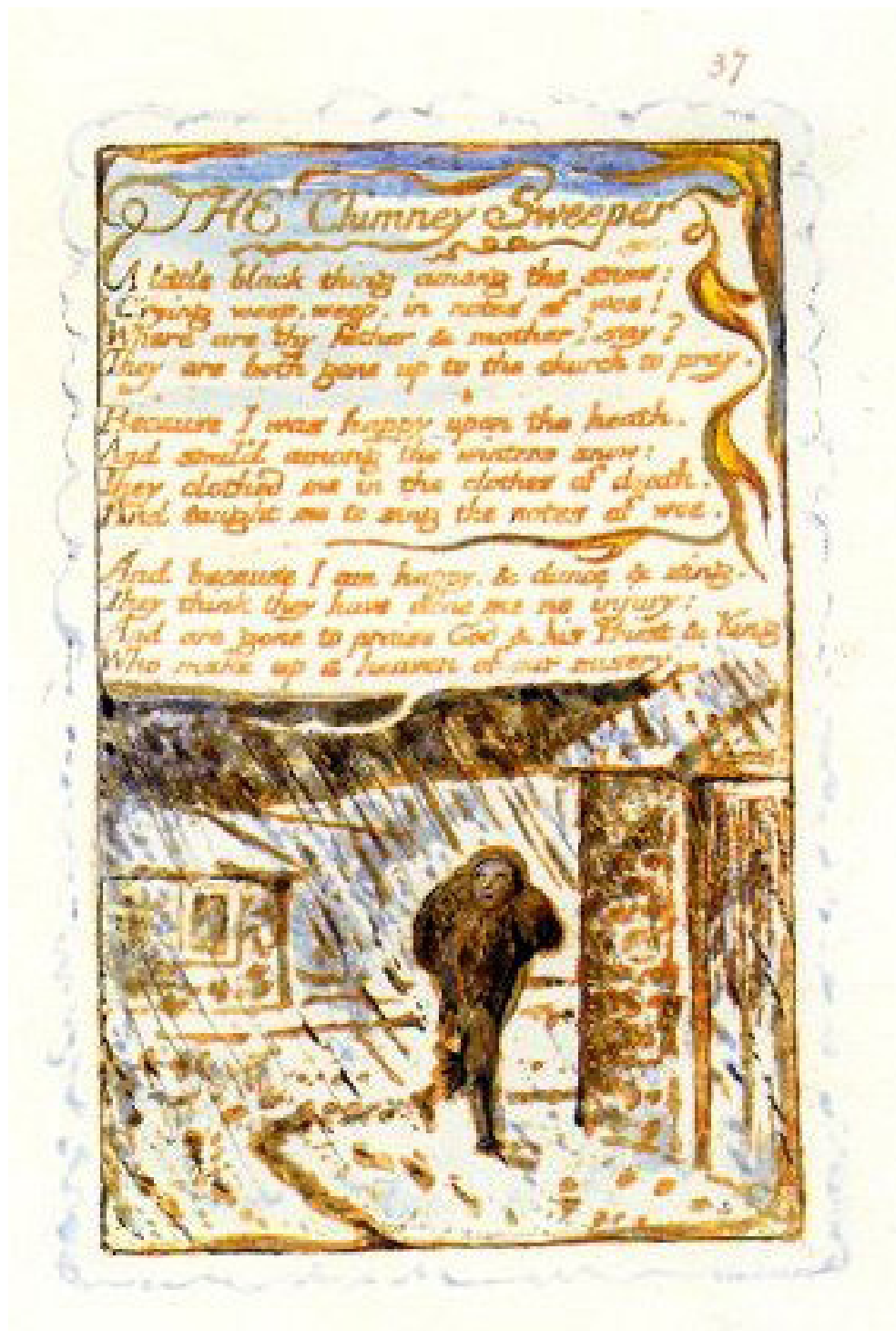


## William Blake- The Chimney Sweeper

Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience is an illustrated collection of poems. There is a wealth of critical opinion on the poems which were originally published as two separate collections and, if you are interested in finding out more, this would not be difficult. However, for the purposes of this task, it should be enough to know that the following poem is a companion piece from Songs of Experience to one with the same title in Songs of Innocence. This is a bleaker poem although it makes use of similar ideas.



Read the poem and reflect on it. Relate your thinking to the ideas you have discussed about the contexts affecting Romantic poetry.

## The Chimney Sweeper: A little black thing among the snow

A little black thing among the snow,  
Crying “weep! Weep!” in notes of woe!  
“Where are thy father and mother? Say?”  
“They are gone up to the church to pray.

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 songs of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and sing,  
They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone up praise God and his Priest and King,  
Who make up a heaven of our misery.

### Discussion points

- Who do you think is speaking here? What is his/her attitude to the child?
- What is the effect of the very simple word highlighted in yellow?
- Look at the text highlighted in blue. The child is crying. What do you find interesting about what he says?
- Look at line highlighted in red. This stanza starts with “Because”. What does this make you feel about the child’s parents?
- Look at the words highlighted in orange. What might Blake have wanted the reader to think about in relation to this image?
- Look at the words highlighted in green. Going to church is often seen as a “good” thing to do. What do you think Blake wants the reader to feel about where the child’s parents have gone?
- Look at the words highlighted in purple. Poets often use words or expressions which can be read in more than one way. Discuss the different ways in which these might be interpreted.

During this period, children, as young as four or five years of age because of their small stature, were sent up chimneys to sweep them. Use the link to read a brief description of the conditions they endured and also find information about the act of parliament which, although passed by the time of the publication of Songs of Experience, failed to make any improvements to their situation.

Ⓜ<http://www.ruchalachimney.com/history.html>

## Here are some exercises you might like to try:

- Write a paragraph about the way Blake presents hypocrisy in The Chimney Sweeper.
- Write about the way Blake presents a childhood in London here and compare it with the presentation of city life in another poem from the anthology.

## Extension Work

Read the companion poem from Songs of Innocence and compare the two works. Which do you think is the more effective and why?