

## Two English Poems on Chimney-sweepers

“Funeral Song”, by William Shakespeare

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,  
Nor the furious winter’s rages;  
Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages:  
Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o’ the great;  
Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke;  
Care no more to clothe and eat;  
To thee the reed is as the oak:  
The sceptre, learning, physic, must  
All follow this, and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning flash,  
Nor the all-dreaded thunder stone;  
Fear not slander, censure rash;  
Thou hast finished joy and moan:  
All lovers young, all lovers must  
Consign to thee, and come to dust.

No exorciser harm thee!  
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!  
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!  
Nothing ill come near thee!  
Quiet consummation have;  
And renownèd be thy grave!

(*Cymbeline*, 1611)



“London”, by William Blake

I wander thro’ each charter’d street,  
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow.  
And mark in every face I meet  
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man  
In every Infants cry of fear,  
In every voice: in every ban,  
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry  
Every blackning Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro’ midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful Harlots curse  
Blasts the new-born Infants tear  
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

(*Songs of Innocence and Experience*, 1794)

The chimney-sweeper (or chimney-sweep) was often a young boy, sent up flues to bring down the soot that gathered there and which caused a risk of fire. This was a dangerous trade and the children were usually ill-treated since only terror could induce them to enter such a dark and dirty space. The smallest were obviously best-suited to the job and hence they became the most pathetic sight in English cities—a profession hard to sentimentalise in contemporary England, as Hollywood ultimately did in *Mary Poppins* (1964). Not every poet was inclined to treat chimney-sweeps as tokens of social injustice, however, and in these two examples the poets make very different use of that little personage. Thus, while Blake treats his sweep as an helpless victim of child-labour, Shakespeare employs him as the vehicle of a Biblical allusion to the idea of ‘death and dust’ considered as our ‘last end’, so familiar from the Christian Burial Service. (*Cines es et in cinerem revertat: Gen. 3:19*). Here the poet suggests that we are all equal in death, rich or poor, since, like chimney-sweepers, ‘all must ... come to dust’. It can be counted a witticism because, of course, the chimney-sweep comes to dust in a literal sense—unlike the disguised noblewoman of the song from *Cymbeline*.