English & Cultural Studies 1G03: Study Notes

Dr. David L. Clark

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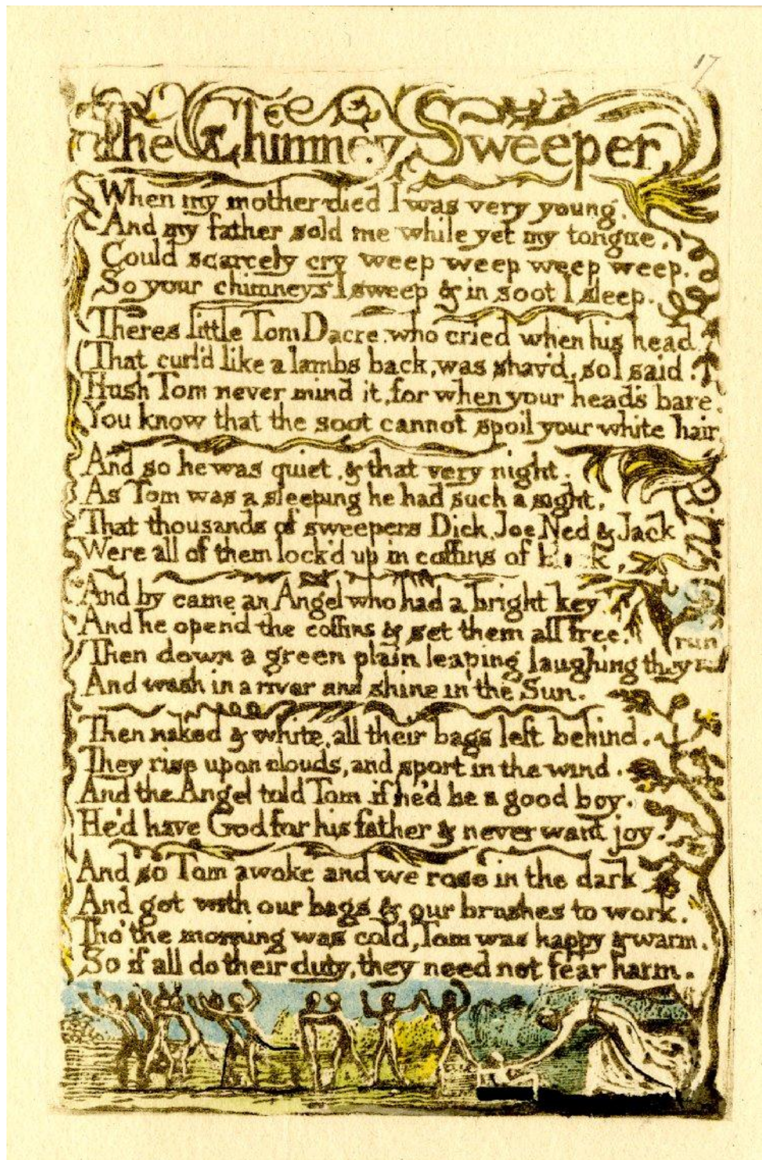
Study Tip: Remember that the Study Notes, which I will post periodically during the semester, not only amplify what I said in lecture about a particular assigned text, but also *model* for you ways of reading and understanding literature.

William Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper," from *Songs of Innocence* (1789)



The Chimney Sweeper

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 & in soot I sleep.

Theres little Tom Dacre who cried when his head
That curl'd like a lambs back, was shav'd, so I said.
Hush Tom never mind it, for when your heads bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a sleeping he had such a sight,
That thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned & Jack
Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of [illegible],

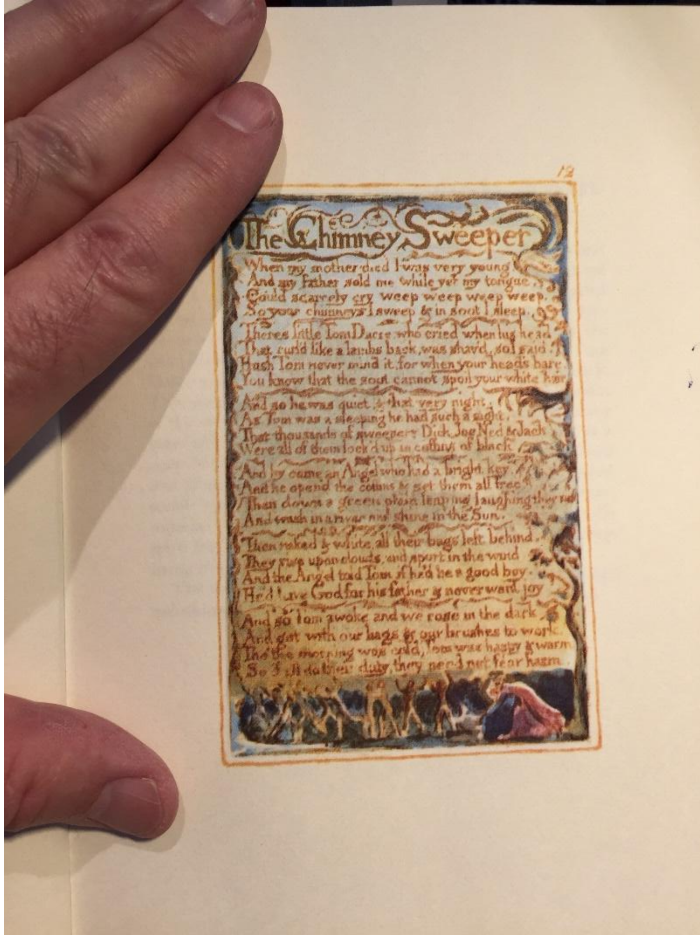
And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he open'd the coffins & set them all free.
Then down a green plain leaping laughing they run
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind.
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm.
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

William Blake (1757-1827) was a Christian visionary, poet, engraver and painter who combined his many artistic talents into a new art-form called "illuminated printing." (See Powerpoint presentation also posted on Avenue for more works by Blake.) When Blake wasn't creating engraved images for other people, the work for which he had apprenticed as a child and by which he struggled to make a living, he toiled away on his own art, sometimes painting but often combining words and images in engravings of the sort that we see in his collection of poems called *Songs of Innocence*. Blake deliberately turns *from* the dominant and growing printing technologies of the day, which standardized mechanically printed texts for mass consumption. Instead, Blake created his work in a much more artisanal manner. His illuminated works, in other words, are hand-made rather than mass-produced. Why do you think that is? Why did he deliberately choose to develop an artistic practice that effectively cut him off from the mass market of printed texts? Blake wrote his poems, engraved them on copper sheets, printed them and then, with the assistance of his wife, Catherine, he hand-coloured them. No two versions are exactly alike. Each text that he produced in his "printing house in hell"—as he once ironically called his home in London--is thus completely unique. They are scaled quite small (see image below), small enough to be held comfortably in your hand or to stick in your pocket, i.e., to carry with you as you go about your day, as if reminding us that each of us carries within us the gift of imagination, of vision . . . even if we live in a world that seems marshalled against us ever developing that imagination, that vision. Question: Does the university nurture your imagination, help you grow your capacity, in the company of others, to imagine a world otherwise? Or does the university instead resemble *The Hunger Games*, pitting each person against another? You might be interested to know that I have written about this problem elsewhere.

The artistic printing practice that Blake developed, which is in some ways still poorly understood, is labour intensive but it leaves his particular stamp on every work he created. Blake produced his illuminated works only in very limited quantities. Why would that be important to an artist? Is it a way for Blake to connect in more intimate ways to his audience? As I said in class would not be until 150 years later that Blake in fact found an audience; during his own day, he was a kind of prophet in the wilderness, writing poems and created works of art, including his illuminated printing, that condemned the gross injustice of his age even though he knew that in his own lifetime so few would hear or see what he was trying to say and show. Although he had a close group of friends, including friends who were much younger, who recognized his powers, he was either ignored or viewed as delusional. But the paradox is that for Blake it was the world that suffered a delusion, not him. All he had to do was walk the streets of the great capital, London, and see merciless exploitation at every turn. The delusion is that too many folks had been schooled into believing that the cruelty was normal: it was just the way that it was.



Notice the ways in which Blake's text—the words making up the title and verses of the poem—is mixed in with lots of images. Images and text compete for space on the same page and are compelled to speak to each other, illuminating each other. Sometimes the letters become something else than letters; they grow into tendrils that roil with life. What images make up the band of pictures running along the bottom of "The Chimney Sweeper"? Once you've read the poem, how does that change how you see and understand that image? You can ask a similar question of "London."

In "The Chimney Sweeper" we hear of two children. Both are "climbing boys," as they were called then, using a **euphemism** that British men and women used to disguise the fact that these kids were in fact impoverished and homeless enslaved children; "climbing boys" sounds like the children are horsing around when in fact they are forced to scrape the soot out of chimneys; the phrase *routinizes cruelty*, i.e., it makes brutal violence against powerless children seem everyday. These two children inhabit the world of the poem. The first, the speaker, is a child whose mother died when he was very young and whose father had sold him into servitude, and the second child, a younger boy named Tom Dacre, is the one to whom the speaker offers a lesson in being "good" and "dutiful." The speaker schools Tom into how to be a passive and obedient worker. But notice how Blake's poem doesn't simply condemn the speaker but observes that <u>both</u> are victims of the same culture that is murderously indifferent to the

lives of its most vulnerable members, the unhoused children. The poem does not blame the victims of violence, including those children whose victimization includes being compelled to make other children victims. Chimney sweepers were treated as dangerous and gang-like. Blake will have none of that.

One of the keys to understanding the poem and engaging it on its own terms is to determine what to make of Tom Dacre's dream. It looks and feels lovely: the child slaves are liberated from their "coffins of black," free to play not in the crowded and predatory streets of London but in the "Sun" by a refreshing "river," near "a green plain." They float away, freed from the force of gravity, one of their many enemies. This is a happy world of nature that seems the complete opposite of the unforgiving urban world in which the children are forced to do sickening and dangerous work. *But it is a dream*. Dreams and the capacity to dream are important, as we saw in Justice's sonnet, "The Wall." But Blake's poem reminds us that dreams can also be stolen from us and scripted differently. We will see a similar incredulity about dreams in Coates' *Between the World and Me.* As Coates says to his teenage son, "the Dream" is primarily a white thing. Coates invites you to wrestle with that observation, that lesson.

Tom dreams of freedom but the reality is that he can't live in that dream and *has no prospect of acting on that dream, no way to realize it, make it into a reality.* A world of peacefulness is the world of the afterlife, the promise of heaven. As the poem says, "we rose in the dark," meaning, not only literally that the two boys get up before dawn to work as slaves but also that they start a new day, every day, "in the dark," i.e., without being able to do anything else, without the vision or the strength or the capacity or the opportunity they need to see and do anything else. There condition is somewhat like the inhabitants of Eden in Justice's sonnet, walled in yet unable to see the wall. The sweepers' world is a world where it is always dark, where they are always rising in the dark. The reality is that Tom remains a slave and that the dream, far from saving him, only pacifies him, makes him a "fitter" slave. In the dream the "Angel" tells him that this paradise is his . . . but *only* if he is "a good boy," meaning only if he continues to be compliant, obedient. So Blake's use of the word "good" is terribly *ironic* here: it means one thing to the boy but another thing to us. As a poet, Blake is uniquely sensitive to the use and abuse of words and to the power—for good and for ill—that words have over us. The angel uses the word "good" as a kind of weapon with which to administer and control the boy, compelling him to believe that the wretched life he lives is right and normal, even praiseworthy, i.e., "good."

Blake cannot believe his ears, and so he throws that kind of misused moralizing language back at those who would use it to wage war on the country's youth. *Be a good boy* actually means *Be an enslaved child who is unable to question authority.* We are asked to think under what deranged conditions "good" is made to do this kind of dirty work. Angels are sometimes imagined to be protectors and immortal creatures of light but Blake always thought of them as instruments of mortal power. In Blake "angels" are a vivid metaphor for the forces at work in the culture that are deeply invested in control, pacification, management, normalization, and repression. (Devils, on the other hand, are for Blake a figure of expressive energy, freedom, and creativity. Blake was very fond of reversals in thinking like

this—it was a way to shake us up, and to waken our imaginations.) Angels make the exercise of power and violence seem like "goodness" when it is not. The angels in our everyday lives cause us to confuse submission with goodness and duty. Blake's poem is asking you to ask yourselves: Do such angels accompany you in your own lives? At what cost? What kind of culture is so afraid of its youth that it would rather see them sacrificed than thrive? When a woman is told to *be a good girl* what is it that is being demanded of her? This is the very question that Mary Wollstonecraft, a contemporary of Blake and the founder of modern feminism in the European tradition, was asking in her political treatises. As Wollstonecraft points out in the 1790s, "good girl" means being compelled to act like a mere "doll," i.e., the replica of a human being but not real. Remember the tasteless fruit in "The Wall"?

As I said in class, one of the several contexts for this text is the explosion of "children's literature" that emerges in the eighteenth-century, especially books of nursery rhymes. At the time, literature written for children was almost exclusively fables and poems designed to teach boys and girls to be "good" and to warn them not to be "bad." I wonder if things are much different today? Think about the books and movies and television shows you were brought up with? In what way are they moralizing technologies, designed to shape you in a certain normalizing way? What about the social media you are consuming right now? Is some of that media designed to make you look and feel and act certain ways, telling you what kind of body you "must" have or what sorts of thoughts to think? One of the most famous examples of this kind of educational material in Blake's day was, as I said in class, Isaac Watts's (1674-1748) book, *Divine Songs for Children* (1720). The collection of illuminated poems of which "The Chimney Sweeper" is a part is called by Blake *Songs of Innocence*, a title that remembers the title of Watts's very popular collection of poems. Watts's book was widely printed and reprinted through the 18th century and well into the 19th century, long after Watts died. The book is composed of dozens of nursery rhymes designed specifically to shape the conduct of children, ensuring that they will grow up to be submissive adults, adults who will observe the rules without ever asking where those rules came from and in whose interest, exactly, they are applied. What is it about children, you have to ask yourself, that seems to call for all this regulation and administration? What is it about children that is so threatening to adults? Children who were impoverished and homeless were thought to be especially problematical. Writers like Sarah Trimmer (1741-1810), a prominent author of children's literature, worried that giving too much to the "climbing boys" and other homeless youth would only put unruly and dangerous ideas into their heads. The best thing for those boys, she wrote, was for them to buckle down and "to do their duty"---a phrasing and a commandment that Blake attacks in the last line of his poem. (Trimmer's view of homeless children is reproduced in the PowerPoint posted on Avenue.)

Blake adopts all the elements that go into nursery rhymes of the sort that Watts and Trimmer wrote, repurposing this form of literature for visionary ends. What are those elements?

> --Simple and straightforward words and word choice (**diction**), words that are easy to listen to and digest;

--Simple and straightforward story.

--Simple and straightforward rhyming scheme (rhyming couplets, i.e., the verses are organized in rhyming pairs), giving the poems a kind of sing-song sound, pleasing to the innocent ear.

--Lots of *alliteration*, meaning certain sounds get repeated in the poems.

--Repeated words and phrases; sing-song sound, not unlike Dr. Zeuss.

"The Chimney Sweeper" is no ordinary nursery rhyme but it does faithfully adopt many of the elements of nursery rhymes of the sort that Watts wrote. It *sounds* like a nursery rhyme but it *means* something very different from what conventional nursery rhymes and childrens' stories do. Look carefully at the poem, underlining the places in which you see and hear *alliteration*, simple rhymes (like rhyming couplets or pairs), repeated words and simple diction.

Pause and consider the ways in which Blake exploits and creates certain **ambiguities** in the poem. **Ambiguity** is a key feature of poems: i.e., the exploitation of the rich suggestiveness of words and phrases in the language, the wonderful unwillingness of the language to settle down and instead to be resonant, evoking several different meanings at once. For example, Tom is told that if he is "good," if he does his "duty," he will "never *want* joy." "Want" here means "lack," so the phrase in this verse seems at first to mean "Tom will never lack for joy" . . . that is, if he does his slave labour well. But it could also mean something very different: he will "never want joy" can also mean "Tom will never be a creature who wants to be joyful." Joy and the possibility of feeling joy has been stamped out of him. He doesn't deserve joy. The angel means one thing but we hear him or her saying something else, as if inadvertently admitting to what his or her job is . . . abusing, exploiting, and murdering children, coercing them into living lives that will lead to their deaths. If you do your duty, the Angel seems to be saying, you will be a creature who will never hope, never strive for joy, never really be alive. What other ambiguities can you find at work in the poem?

You'll remember from my lecture notes about "The Wall" that poems bring themselves to their own conclusion in a process called ***closure*****.** How does this poem achieve its closure? Note how the last line sounds so flatly formulaic: it's a moralizing claim, a pearl of proverbial wisdom that the speaker, who is himself a slave, seems to believe to be true. It provides a pat and simplifying answer to life when what is really needed is a complex analysis of that life! The last line sounds and feels like it should snap the poem shut; it sounds like the voice of someone who has the answers and the authority to condense those answers into a simple moral. The last line or verse is spoken by the speaker, yes, but it does feel a bit like it floats free of the poem, as if, in the end, all that the older enslaved boy can muster is mouthing the official and authoritative words of another, as if remembering something that had been drilled into him.

But does this last verse in fact sew the poem up? Blake hated the power that clichés and inherited ideas have over our lives and insisted until his last day that life called for art---for poetry, for engraving, for painting, and above all for the sustained, exhausting work of a critical imagination. In the case of this poem, what is the moral that the speaker applies to his situation and that of his charge, Tom Dacre? *Do your duty, be the obedient child slave, and no harm will come to you*. The terrible irony is that it is precisely by doing what is called their "duty"—cleaning chimneys--that the child slaves face nothing but harm. The speaker of the poem, the older boy who lost his mom and who was sold by his dad, earnestly spouts nonsense like this as if it were true. He has, as it were, drunk the Kool-Aid that his own masters, including the Church of England, have offered him. But the poem tells us that this advice is not only false but also dangerous. As I said in my notes about "The Wall," poems *prepare* themselves for their endings. Look back at earlier parts of this poem. How does the poem prepare us to read this last verse or line ironically? How does the poem help us see how bitterly sardonic this last line is? Remember: just because the boy thinks what he says is right and true doesn't make it right and true. The test the poem performs is to see if we can sense that difference. Another way to say this is: given the traumatic and wounding scene that the opening verses of the poem describe for us, does the last verse explain everything away? Or does that opening scene of horror, and, indeed, the horror of child slavery that takes up the entire poem, throw into relief the complete inadequacy and the hollow reassurance of the last verse? One of the "laws of literature" is: ***Trust the tale, not the teller***. That is to say, read what is being said, being careful not to take who is speaking at his or her word. Speakers in literature are notoriously untrustworthy. What they say is important, to be sure. But they will say things that you shouldn't take at face value. Compare what is happening in a poem to what the poem says about what is happening.

Throughout the other poems of the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake affirms children for their uniquely robust powers of the imagination. In the imagination of children, in their extraordinary ability to create and recreate worlds, he sees what each of us once were, before we all succumbed to the numbing words of all those angels with the bright keys. That capacity is everyone's birthright and worthy of writing poems and creating beautiful illuminated plates about! But in "The Chimney Sweeper" he pauses and reflects on a problem. Children are also terribly vulnerable to the needs and demands of adults. The saddest irony of this poem is that it is precisely Tom's imagination that creates his dream of paradise. But his imagination has already being co-opted by the culture into which he has been born. As one of that culture's most vulnerable denizens, he cannot protect his imagination from being overtaken by cruel authority. His dream sustains him in the sense that it is all that enables him to rise "in the dark" and to survive one more day. But at what horrendous cost?

Blake is a visionary. In other words, he sees things as they really are. Remember that prophecy is not the power to see into the future but rater to see into the present. As Blake once said in another illuminated text called *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, his objective was to "burn apparent surfaces away" to reveal "what was hid." He was a devout Christian but reserved some of his sharpest criticism for

Christendom, i.e., for what the faith had become in England at the end of the 18th-century—i.e., a conservative and pious institution that jealously guarded its power and that aligned with the reactionary and anti-democratic monarchy and with England's business interests. The repulsive fate of the child slaves made the results of that alignment of those in authority bitterly evident. --Or evident at least to Blake. For one of the reasons why he engraved the poem was that he saw so few fellow Britons even taking notice of the homicidal violence taking place across the cities of England. Blake lived in a predominantly Christian culture that *preached* love, forgiveness, and respect based on the writings of the New Testament. But did it actually *practice* these things? The New Testament, the founding sacred text for Christianity, holds children in the highest regard. As I pointed out in class, in the Gospel of Matthew (19:14), Jesus rebukes the disciples for not welcoming children. Jesus says: *Suffer little children to come unto me* [meaning, permit and encourage them to approach me]*, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God*. But in London of the 1790s, children were treated instead as disposable waste, not unlike the waste they scraped out of chimneys. The same testament taught Blake that, properly speaking, all human beings have fundamental obligations or *duties* to each other and to all living things. "Every thing that lives is holy," Blake once wrote. And yet British culture seemed only to pay lip-service to the virtues that it professed. How had this happened, Blake asks? The New Testament makes a particular point of welcoming children, as it does to all those who are vulnerable. It is hardly alone among the world's sacred texts to do so. But Blake asks what kind of welcome British Christians offered its own youth.

"The Chimney Sweeper" in only one of a fascinating group of 19 or so poems gathered together in Blake's collection of poems called *Songs of Innocence.* Almost of these illuminated poems explore a world youths living amid natural beauty, peacefulness and possibility. In another poem, Blake called this world "England's green and pleasant land." Blake saw this world in the eyes of children and in the ever-renewing capacity of human beings to imagine new and better worlds. But he also saw that "innocence" was dangerously exposed to the predatory violence of adults who lived in what Blake calls the world of "experience." Both worlds exist side by side although more often than not, Blake reminds us, all that we see is the tortured world of experience. The fact that there are artists like Blake, fearlessly committed to creating beautiful and meaningful objects, objects that are inexhaustibly difficult and illuminating, never giving up all their secrets, puts to you and me that "innocence" survives the predations of "experience." The fact that he placed "The Chimney Sweeper" in the *Songs of Innocence* reminds us that Blake was not naïve about the world of innocence. Innocence is a necessary and important world. But it is not without its own dangers. Several years later, in 1794, Blake will combine another collection of poems, *Songs of Experience*, with *Songs of Innocence.* In that illuminated text, Blake looks unsparingly at the fearful, impoverished, sorrowful world of "experience." "London," the other poem we take up in class, comes from *Songs of Experience*. Blake never published *Songs of Experience* on its own though, always combining it with *Songs of Innocence* in an illuminated text he titled, simply, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul.* What do you make of that decision? Why was he willing to look so deeply and frankly at the terrorized life of late 18th-century London in

Songs of Experience, but never willing to circulate those poems unless they were bound together with the *Songs of Innocence*?

"*Every angel is terrible*" [*Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich*], the great German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), once wrote, channelling Blake.

"The Chimney Sweeper," William Blake (1789)

Poem	Rhyme	Notes
When my mother died I was very young,	**a**	**--scene of traumatic separation**
And my father sold me while yet my tongue	**a**	**--child swept into slavery/commerce**
Could scarcely cry " 'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!"	**b**	**--speaker's language says more than he knows**
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.	**b**	**--"*your* chimneys" means we are implicated**
There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head	**c**	**--simple rhyming couplets; a nursery rhyme**
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,	**c**	**--simple diction or word choice**
"Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,	**d**	**--mimics moralizing children's poems by**
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair."	**d**	**Isaac Watts**
And so he was quiet, & that very night,	**e**	**--the lie quiets Tom; it colonizes**
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!	**e**	**his budding imagination.**
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,	**f**	**-the anonymous homeless in fact have names: naming names humanizes them.**
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;	**f**	**--"coffins of black" = metaphor**
And by came an Angel who had a bright key,	**g**	
And he opened the coffins & set them all free;	**g**	
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,	**h**	
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.	**h**	
Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,	**i**	
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.	**i**	
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,	**j**	**--But what is "goodness" here?**

He'd have God for his father & never want joy.	**J**	**--"never *want* joy" = "never be without joy" AND "never desire/deserve joy"**
And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark	**k**	**--the children remain "in the dark"**
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.	**k**	
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;	**l**	**--Tom remains quieted, obedient**
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.	**l**	**--Can this trite concluding moral justify the horror inflicted on the children?**