

# The Chimney Sweeper

by William Blake



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# Notes

## **What is a literary classic and why are these classic works important to the world?**

A literary classic is a work of the highest excellence that has something important to say about life and/or the human condition and says it with great artistry. A classic, through its enduring presence, has withstood the test of time and is not bound by time, place, or customs. It speaks to us today as forcefully as it spoke to people one hundred or more years ago, and as forcefully as it will speak to people of future generations. For this reason, a classic is said to have universality.

The eighteenth century was a time of revolution; the French Revolution, especially, was supposed to usher in a new era of enlightenment, brotherhood, and individual freedom. The artistic movement that arose in Europe in reaction to the events of this time is called Romanticism, and it is characterized by a stressing of emotion and imagination, as opposed to the emphasis on classical forms that was important to previous artists. In England, the major Romantic poets were Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, William Wordsworth, and John Keats. These poets took up the revolutionary ideas of personal and spiritual emancipation through language that is often bold and simple, like the speech of the common people of England.

Romantic poetry frequently focuses on images of nature, which is viewed as a force that expresses sympathy with human beings.. Romanticism also features supernatural events and includes melancholy settings, such as deserted castles or monasteries on lonely hillsides.

A concern for human society also marks the early English Romantics. Blake describes a time when Albion (England) will be free from oppression and injustice, and all men will enter into a new age and a new heaven on earth. Wordsworth despises the ugliness of the expanding cities and urges a return to a spiritual home in nature. Later Romantic poets, though, especially Keats, focus more on the intense emotions and deep paradoxes of human existence.

Despite the variety of opinion and style within English Romantic poetry, one idea remains central to the movement: Individual experience is the primary source of truth and knowledge. In fact, some recent scholars have attributed the modern ideas of personality to the Romantic poets, whose focus on personal, emotional, and subjective experience may have given rise to our notions of individuality.

# Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

**The Romantic Movement** was a literary, artistic, and intellectual movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It began as a reaction against the rigid conventions—artistic, social, and political—of the Enlightenment and asserted the power and the value of the individual.

Romanticism stressed strong emotion and the individual imagination as the ultimate critical and moral authority. The Romantic poets, therefore, felt free to challenge traditional notions of *form*. They likewise found themselves abandoning social conventions, particularly the privileges of the aristocracy, which they believed to be detrimental to individual fulfillment.

Because Romanticism is, at its core, a rebellion *against* rigid standards of form, taste, and behavior, it is difficult to establish a set of standards to *define* Romanticism. It is possible, however, to point out some common motifs that offer an overview of what the Romantic poets believed and tried to accomplish in their poetry.

## **The politics of the Romantics:**

- The Romantics were, for the most part, disheartened liberals.
- The successful revolution of the American colonies against the oppressive British crown and the developing revolution in France were exciting to the Romantics.
- Blake, Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley all lost heart, however, because of the Reign of Terror in France and the rise of Napoleon as the French Emperor.
- The Romantic focus on the imagination was a direct response to eighteenth-century rationalism.

## **The psychology of the Romantics:**

- The nature of experience: its duality and fleeting quality were of great interest to the Romantics. Notice Blake's contrast between Innocence and Experience, the role of memory in Wordsworth's work, Shelley's lamenting the passing of an experience, and Keats' assertion that the *imagined* experience is better than the actual, in that it will never end.
- Beauty was to be found in Nature, not in man-made objects or concepts.
- The Romantics sought solitude in Nature, believing that the key to all emotional healing could be found in Nature.
- Nature imagery is the most predominant feature of Romantic literature.

- The concept of a pantheistic Nature (God exists in all things) became almost a religion for Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats.
- In the “religion” of the Romantics, virtue was exemplified by being true to one's nature while “sin” occurred when denying one's own nature or forcing someone else to conform to a foreign code of principles or behavior (in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake wrote: “One law for the Lion and Ox is oppression”).

### **The Romantic Sense of Beauty**

- While the literature of the Enlightenment focused on the hero and the high-ranking socialite, the Romantics celebrated the commoner, the laborer, and the “underprivileged.”
- Eighteenth-century esthetics had favored the highly ornate and artificial (as epitomized by Baroque music and architecture), but the Romantics strove to emphasize beauty in simplicity and plainness.

### **The Byronic Hero**

Taking into consideration the personal traits the Romantics found most admirable—passionate conviction, absolute individualism and independence, a disregard for restrictive authority and the outmoded or unjust laws it represents—it follows that the Romantic notion of the hero would be just such a person. Byron's most famous characters, *Manfred*, *Childe Harold*, and *Don Juan*, typify this type of hero, as did Byron himself. Thus, the Romantic hero came to be known as the Byronic Hero.

# William Blake

“If the doors of perception were cleansed, every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite”

—William Blake

*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

WILLIAM BLAKE WAS BORN on November 28, 1757, to a middleclass family in London. His father was a hosier, and his mother took primary responsibility for Blake's education. The Blakes were Dissenters and may have belonged to either the Moravian sect or the Muggletonians. Both were Protestant sects that focused more on an individual's right to read and interpret the scripture than on the need of a priest to instruct the faithful. The Bible was a strong early influence on Blake and would continue to be so throughout his life.

Like the founders of the Muggletonian sect, Blake claimed to see visions. His first was when he was eight or ten years old, and he reported seeing a tree filled with angels “bespangling every bough like stars.” This visionary and mystical aspect of religion would become a significant element in Blake's art and poetry.

As a young man, Blake was apprenticed to learn the engraver's trade, and he would forever combine his engraving, printing, and poetic arts into a single form, claiming that the text was incomplete without the illustration and vice versa.

In 1782, after a refused proposal of marriage, Blake met and married Catherine Boucher, who would become his most powerful ally and assistant for the rest of his life.

As a writer during this period of revolution (the American Revolution began in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789), Blake became friends with William Wordsworth and William and Mary (Wollstonecraft) Godwin (parents of Mary Shelley). Blake abhorred slavery and believed in racial and sexual equality. He had great hopes for the revolutions in the United States and France and was extremely disillusioned by the Reign of Terror and the rise of Napoleon.

Following her husband's death on August 12, 1827, Catherine claimed that Blake would come and sit with her for two or three hours every day. She continued selling his paintings and illuminated poems, but would transact no business without first consulting her late husband. On the day of her own death, in October 1831, she was calm and cheerful, and called out to him “as if he were only in the next room, to say she was coming to him, and it would not be long now.”

Blake was an important proponent of imagination. He believed that the creative force would allow humanity to overcome the limitations of its five senses. In addition to being regarded an early Romantic poet, Blake is celebrated as a forerunner of the “expanded consciousness” movement of the twentieth century. Aldous Huxley took the name of one of his most famous works, *The Doors of Perception*, from one of Blake's most famous works, and the rock group *The Doors* took their name from Huxley's work.

# The Chimney Sweeper

From *Songs of Innocence*

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, and in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head,  
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved; so I said,  
Hush, Tom! never mind it, for, when your head's 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 locked up in coffins of black.

And by came an angel, who had a bright key,  
And he opened 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.  
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm:  
So, if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

# The Chimney Sweeper

From *Songs of Experience*

A little black thing among the snow,  
Crying “weep! weep,” in notes of woe!  
“Where are thy father & 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 & dance & sing,  
They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,  
Who made up a heaven of our misery.”