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Global Literature II

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### Romantic Poets Response

*Question 2: William Blake, in his “Chimney Sweeper” poems, uses the voices of child workers in response to the terrible, dangerous child labor practices of the nineteenth century. How effective is the use of children’s voices in these poems?*

The use of children’s voices is particularly effective in William Blake’s chimney sweep poems for two reasons. First, hearing the children’s voices in first person brings the issue of child labor down to earth. Child labor is no longer an abstract issue, but something one can see up close. The reader can hear what the children think about the situation, and empathize.

For example, in “The Chimney Sweeper” in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*, the child shares his story, saying that his mother had died and his father sold him to be a chimney sweep. One can imagine how lost and abandoned he feels. The child also tells the story of another child, Tom Dacre, who dreamed at night of being set free from his work in order to see the sun and play.

Yet the author writes, “and so Tom awoke, and we rose in the dark.” The imagery of darkness is deeply infused in the child’s language: inescapable soot, climbing up dark chimneys, waking up in the dark, and coffins of black. It is a bleak life that the child is showing the reader. He is showing how trapped he and Tom feel, when Tom dreamed of an angel with a bright key. “Bright” contrasts the rest of the poem, and represents the freedom they desire. They desire freedom from their prison in which all they can see is soot—representing their endless work, with no sun or river or time to play.

Second, the reader may feel like the voices of the children are crying out to them directly. The child's words jump out at the page and make the reader feel personally responsible. In line 3, the child narrating says he was sold when he could still barely cry "'weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!'", because of his lisp as a young child when he tried to say "sweep".

The child could not even say his s's yet, but was searching the streets for work. This contrast between his innocence and the corruption he lives in is sick and heartbreaking. In line 4, the child says, "So your chimneys I sweep/& in soot I sleep". The word "your" hits the reader in the gut. This young child has lost his childhood and health to life to sweep YOUR chimney. At night he sleeps in soot, and never escapes. Thus the child's voice is effective in holding the reader accountable. It is hard to overlook a child speaking directly to oneself.