

## METHODISM IN WILLIAM BLAKE'S *THE CHIMNEY SWEEPER*

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**Abstract.** This article explores one of Blake's poems entitled *The Chimney Sweeper* which sees gloomily the condition of child labour during the industrial revolution in Britain. In the poem, it seems that Blake criticizes the use of children to work for family income. Especially, this article discusses Blake's ironical discussion on the Methodism's teaching to work hard in order to have the eternal life in the poem.

**Keywords:** *Methodism, hard work, child labour, industrial revolution*

### INTRODUCTION

British Industrial Revolution in the 18 century brought this country to be a great and prosperous one. As iron became its product, the biggest in Europe, machinery took human power to produce mass production to meet the demand of the growing bigger population. People with big investments started to build manufactories in some areas which in a very short time became towns. Wool could be changed into best qualified cloth with high price imported to European countries. Weapons were also produced and imported to African countries. Professions such as lawyer, merchant, manufacturer, and the kind appeared and positioned themselves to be the middle class group who actually drove the British economy, leaving European countries behind.

The prosperity that the other countries thought was not an absolute wealth that made the ordinary people rich. When the industry began, it was the change of the

country from agriculture to capitalism. The landowners started to become manufacturers or cattle breeders who enclosed their lands making the country people, the land workers, lose the job. They went to towns, dreaming of betterment without considering the skill that could be their survival. Consequently, they were not hired due to their lack of how to operate machines and the worst, machinery did not need many employees. Families, then, each member, had to find their own food. This means cheap employment, and children were cheaper and obedient, saving much money for the employers. Child labor began as they were useful to clean chimneys because of their small bodies.

The poverty happening to the ordinary people which in France led to French Revolution did not move them to protest the government. It is assumed that Methodism, a religious movement conducted by John Wesley, could save England from a revolution. With the teaching that gave the ordinary

people living in industrial areas a sense of purpose and dignity (McDowall,1989,124), people accepted many of the injustices of the times without complaint (McDowall, 1989, 125).

Children working in a terrible condition also could accept the injustices happily, and William Blake put this condition in his poem, 'The Chimney Sweeper'. This poem tells the condition of children of low class as workers, and how Methodism could raise their spiritual life. This is what makes the writer interested in analyzing this poem.

The interesting thing to be analyzed is the condition of low class that does not lead to any social problems such as revolution in France. The speaker of the poem tells about himself who is sold by his father to a manufacturer. When he is sleeping, Tom Dacre, the speaker's friend, dreams of other children locked in black coffins, but then he meets an angel who promises him to be God's son if he is good. This article concerns on the kind of life that ordinary children had in Industrial Revolution, on the religious values that Methodism taught ordinary people, and on the result of the Methodism's teaching.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative as it attempts to describe, explore, analyze and explain phenomena observed in the data as detail as possible to achieve study in depth (Blaxter et al., 1996, Sugiyono, 2002). It is descriptive as it is characterized by real data (Bogdan and Biklen, 1982; Moloeng, 2002). This study is inductive, in that a general fact is generated from analyzing the specific ones. The source of data in this study is an Blake's poem *The Chimney Sweeper*.

## DISCUSSION

### The condition of poor children

When Industrial Revolution took place in England, ordinary people, who were farm workers, lived the miserable life. The enclosure of land did not give them chances to find food, or to hunt wild rabbits. Trespassing any nobles' land meant severe punishment. What the people thought was to go to towns where factories were built. As machinery became the main core of production, factories did not need many employees, even in need, factories preferred to employ children and women due to their obedience though they received small amount of payment for long work hours. These workers lived in big groups in dirty workhouses under ones' watch, eating thin soup every eating time. Children would be grouped separately with women, and men. One thing that could be an advantage for a family was a safely born son because father could sell him to a workhouse when he was three, as the following quotation:

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry, 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!  
'weep! (lines 1-3)

The above quotation shows how young the speaker was when he was sold. This was a common condition for a poor family to find money by selling a son. Actually in a poor family, each member had to find his/her living to survive. They lived in different workhouses, meaning they would probably never meet each other.

The treatment the children received was miserable. To make the children easy to clean their bodies, especially their heads, the watchers shaved their heads, as the following:  
/ There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his  
head,/ That curl'd like a lamb's back, was

shaved; so I said,/ (lines 4-5). The reason to shave the children's head is that they did not need to clean their heads after cleaning the soot inside the chimneys, even they slept in soot, and woke in the morning / So your chimneys I sweep, and in soot I sleep/ (line 4).

From this explanation, it can be found how hard the poor children lived. They did not have right to enjoy their childhood. The long hours to work did not give an opportunity for them to play. The death of child labours did not change the manufacturers to make good regulation for the children as the government did not either. The Anglican Churches did nothing for poor people due to their closeness with the ruling class.

#### **Methodism values taught to ordinary people**

The condition of poor people who did not go to churches anymore made John Wesley willing to travel from one place to another teaching Christianity which had been left behind. He, then, built small churches called chapel to give sermons to people. His teaching was that people as Christian had to work hard, and be honest. The result of his teaching was that people accepted many of injustices of the times without complaint. The speaker as a child could also accept such bad treatment, and he calmed Tom Dacre crying of his shaved head, / 'Hush, Tom! Never mind it, for when your head's bare, / You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.'/ (lines 6-7).

Tom Dacre seems to understand / And so he was quiet: ...../ (line 9). The speaker seems to teach Tom about Christianity. A Christian had to work hard for life without any complaints. Even they lived miserably under the employers, they did not think that they had to fight the masters. When they died due to the master's cruelty, they died happily as they were good Christians, much better than their masters who did not know how to be

good Christians. 'Methodism was able to give ordinary people a sense of purpose and dignity' ( McDowall,1995: 124).

The teaching was also about heavenly matters, making the people believe that good Christians would be the sons of God in life after the death. Death was not something to be afraid of because they would have good life in heaven. Therefore the death of many children due to hunger and bad health did not make the speaker and Tom Dacre scared. They were sure that they would get the promise, like what Tom dreamt of:

And so he was quiet: and that very night,  
As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight,  
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned,  
and 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, and set them free;  
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing  
they run,  
And wash in a river, and shine in the sun.

Then naked and 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, and never want  
joy. ( lines 9-20)

The dream of Tom Dacre shows how the value the Methodism taught ordinary people to be obedient to God through doing what the Bible teaches them to do. Hardworking promised them to be the sons of God. With great acceptance of what they had, including hard life, misery, and any bad things, they would have good life in the life after death. The soot the children had every day, making them dirty, would turn into shine, making them clean and white.

### The result of the teaching of Methodism

The promise they had learned from Methodism created their happiness above their misery. They could work happily because good Christians were hardworking and honest, and there was nothing to fear :

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark,  
And got with our bags and our brushes to work;  
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy  
and warm:  
So, if all do their duty, they need not fear  
harm. (lines 21-24)

This belief made people accept the misery they got. People did not complain over bad things they received from their masters. They worked hard without considering to revolt against the government because everyone actually had responsibility and duty that they had to do. Doing everything based on what the Bible says would lead him or her to have true life. This is the assumption why there was not a revolution like French Revolution although the condition of Britain and France were much alike. John Wesley did not agree that French Revolution was the work of the devil: “ *The greater the share the people have in government, he wrote, the less liberty, civil or religious, does a nation enjoy*” (McDowall,1995:125).

### CONCLUSION

From the discussion, it can be concluded that ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ tells about the life of ordinary children in a period of Industrial Revolution. The poverty made ordinary children have to work and in turn it gave opportunity for the children to earn their own living by working hard as chimney sweepers in factories. That was child labour, showing the big poverty of a country which

could lead Britain to experience a revolution like France. It, however, did not happen because of Methodism taught by John Wesley. The teaching could make the people accept their life whatever it was. They were hardworking as they were responsible for their own life based on the Bible. This is an assumption why Britain was saved from a revolution.

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