Critical Analysis Essay Draft:

When I was researching for my group’s presentation on the theme of childhood, I was fortunate to come across William Blake’s poem, “THE Chimney Sweeper”, which was printed in his book *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in 1795. I’m not usually drawn toward poetry, but perhaps it was all the research I had been doing on child labour and chimney sweeping in particular, or Blake’s wonderfully poignant writing style, that drew me in. The poem is accompanied by one of Blake’s inimitable illustrations depicting the cold wintery scene of a young chimney sweep walking through a deserted, snowy, street. It was created through a “relief etching” technique of Blake’s own invention and hand-painted with watercolour, which had the effect of making each print utterly unique. Because of this work’s roots in a history that seems far removed from us today, it is important to keep the historical context of the work in mind while viewing it, to gain the full understanding of its message.

In the 18th and 19th centuries the Industrial Revolution swept through Britain. It was a massive turning point in history, and affected almost every part of daily life. Technologies boomed and factories blossomed, bringing with them mass production and a new world fuelled by coal power. Coal powered the steam engines that ran the machines, and those coal furnaces needed chimneys to feed the fires and reroute the smoke. These chimneys sprang up everywhere, in factories and in rising residential homes, in increasingly twisted and complicated networks. Due to the nature of coal they quickly clogged with ash, soot, and creosote. If the chimneys weren’t cleaned regularly, they could catch fire; a particularly disastrous possibility, especially when you consider that only a century earlier the City of London was devastated by a fire that started in a bakery. In order to clean these twisting and narrow chimneys cheaply, master sweepers turned to the almost endless supply of poor or orphaned children, who were often from workhouses, bought from their parents, or taken from the streets, and put them to work. These children, some as young as 5 years old, worked long hours in often terribly abusive conditions, and suffered many psychological and physiological health problems if they were lucky enough to survive. The work was often deadly.

The poem accompanying the image is a heartbreaking glimpse into the life of a young boy forced into chimney sweeping by his parents. It’s told from the point of view of a passer-by, who sees a young boy wearing black crying “‘weep! ‘weep!” in the snow. When the passer-by asks the boy where his parents are, the boy replies that his parents have gone to church. They saw him happily idle in the countryside, and decided to put him into work as a chimney sweep by dressing him in black, or “clothes of death”, and teaching him how to advertise his work, which he calls “[singing] the notes of woe”. It is likely the parents put their child to work due to the prevailing Calvinist ideals at the time which taught that “idle hands are the devil’s workshop”. Kids were expected to work in order to grow into well-adjusted human beings. As the boy’s parents sit in church and pray, content that they have done the right thing and also profiting from his work, the boy sits miserably in the snow and ends by saying that God (and by extension his parents and the rest of the world, perhaps) profits from the poor, like him; they “make up a heaven of our misery”. It is a poignant reflection on the often ironic dependence of the privileged on the labour of the impoverished for their stability and wealth.

The image itself perfectly portrays the abandonment and hopelessness this child surely felt. In the upper quarter of the image, a dark, stormy sky dominates the composition. This darkness is echoed in the heavy weight slung over the back of the sweeper; it is oppressive and heavy, a weight he is forced to bear. From this sky comes a multitude of dark diagonal marks, rain or snow, which further beat upon the back of the boy, ushering him on past the centre of the image, subtly implying how these people often escape our notice. The snowy atmosphere around him, with the street peppered with black mud and stones peeking through the snow, further implies a cold, bleak reality. The shed to his right, the house to his left with its lone, black window, and the empty street between them, create a depth of space that is utterly devoid of life; the boy is alone in this dark, stormy world. The texture of the printed lines and the watercolour paint strokes implies a hastiness with which the image was rendered, adding to the tumultuous emotion of the scene. This isn’t a heavily rendered, sentimental depiction of the dignity of the poor, to be consumed by the wealthy; it is an honest depiction of a cold and unfortunate reality. The monotone colour scheme, painted in watercolour over the roughly printed lines, shows no colour except for the subtle pink hue of the boy’s cheeks, his face turning up toward the sky and the beating rain with a resigned hopelessness. Perhaps the lighter mark in the dark sky represents the presence of God, who continues to beat upon the boy’s back with rain and snow, signifying his abandonment by the higher power.

In my research I found myself continually thankful for the tireless work done by many to ensure the rights and wellbeing of those who cannot fight for themselves. Thanks to child labour legislation and changes in cultural depictions of childhood, we have been able to enjoy a modern interpretation of childhood that makes the safety and wellbeing of children paramount to their positive development. It is a reminder that such ideas of childhood have been fought for and hard won, and that there are still many millions of children out there in the world who continue to live in a world of neglect and poverty. No matter how comfortable our lives become, we must continue to fight for the rights and wellbeing of those who may not have a say in our society, and whose hard work and exploitation is responsible for our modern lifestyle. We must always remember that even today we “make up a heaven of [their] misery”.