Critical Analysis Paper Notes

HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

* William Blake was very fond of allegory and classical symbolism and metaphor; however, this poem is contemporary and deeply affecting.
* Child labour was beginning to be an even worse problem during the time Blake created this poem/image.
* With the Industrial Revolution came an increasingly capitalist political climate. Capitalism, which emphasized for-profit private enterprise, blossomed during the time partly in thanks to a lack of well enforced labour laws and exploitation of workers. Children were often the worst hit in this kind of system.
* New modes of production lead to a boom of industry. Output surged. Though hand crafting was replaced by machines, man power was needed to run and care for the machines; and there were lots of them. This work was often repetitive, unsanitary, and dangerous, and since the machines could run at all hours, people were expected to work at all hours to keep them running.
* The work of running the machines was often performed by unskilled workers who could easily be replaced, leading to very low wages. (Before, skilled craftsman would have been paid what their time, education, and ability was worth.)
* The machines which fed the industrial revolution were run by coal power, rather than the previously dominated wood or bio-fuels. Coal was a powerful fuel, but it created lots of soot and smog; chimneys were needed to run the furnaces and fires, and those chimneys quickly clogged with soot and creosote.
* During the Industrial Revolution, chimneys were everywhere. As population rose in urban centres, the houses were built higher to accommodate an increase in population density. As those buildings became taller, so did chimneys; as those buildings became narrower and packed together, so did the chimneys become narrower and winding.
* All these factors lead to a boom in the chimney sweeping industry. If chimneys weren’t cleaned, the soot and creosote would clog the flues and prevent fires from starting or being as effective, or they would ignite and cause unwanted fires. The chimneys needed to be cleaned, but their height, narrowness, and often twisting and turning shapes meant that adults or mechanical machines couldn’t often get the work done; thus, an industry sprang up with relied on the labour of incredibly young, small children, to climb up the flues and clear the way.
* Chimney sweeping for young boys and girls was incredibly dangerous. If they didn’t suffocate in the chimneys they often got respiratory diseases from the soot. They suffered bone deformation thanks to the constant cramped conditions. They suffered scrapes and bruising to their hands, knees, and elbows. If they got stuck, which was not out of the ordinary, they often died. Many times they’d have to climb up a chimney that was still hot from recently extinguished fires, which lead to serious burns. If those things didn’t kill them, they often got a very specific form of cancer of the scrotum that was known as chimney sweep cancer, or “soot wart”. Because the labour was so horrible, it was often performed by orphans sold into service by their impoverished families. In order to compel or force the children to climb the flues, the chimney sweep masters would often prick their feet or burn them. It’s safe to say that many of these children suffered unspeakable violence at the hands of their masters; many were malnourished, and suffered from stunted growth, as well as the other health problems. It was a horrible existence.
* Their plight did not go unnoticed, and yet little could be done to prevent their suffering. Chimneys needed to be swept, and there were many thousands of them. Often, little children were the only ones who could do the job.
* Efforts were made to regulate the ages, work hours, and treatment of chimney sweeps throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, but those regulations were rarely enforced. There was a lot of money saved by exploiting cheap labour, and due to the capitalist climate profits were the main concern of many, as there would always be more hungry people needing work to replace those who quit, were hurt or maimed, or died. It wasn’t until 1875, when a young chimney sweep, 12-year old George Brewster, died trying to clean the chimney at Fulbourne Hospital, when Lord Shaftesbury introduced legislation that required police authorization of their trade in each district, as well as banning anyone under the age of 21 from working as a chimney sweep. This finally gave the legal means to prosecute chimney sweep masters who broke the law.
* However, Blake wrote these poems in the atmosphere of the early days of industrial chimney sweeping. His chimney sweeps had seen no benefits from regulation (or attempted regulation) from lawmakers. They were a sorry lot, pitied, but ultimately tolerated thanks to the lack of effective and affordable alternatives.
* Childhood also wasn’t viewed quite the same way as it is today. Protestantism and Calvinist philosophy dominated the religious views of the day, which taught that “idle hands are the devil’s workshop”. Children were still seen to be afflicted with original sin, and needed to be taught good moral lessons and humanity through hard work. This provided all the social acceptance that was necessary to allow children to work and, on top of that, view it as a necessity for the salvation of their souls.
* So while people pitied chimney sweeps, and many campaigned against their poor treatment, it was often considered a necessary evil, or simply a somewhat unfortunate situation that little could be done to change. The fact that many young children worked in the lower classes was well known and accepted. Even then, chimney sweeps were pitied out of the knowledge that they were likely to die or become seriously hurt in their work. There was an air of death around them, as mentioned in the poem: “They clothed me in the clothes of death”.

POETRY ANALYSIS:

* Also because the clothes of chimney sweeps were dark to hide the soot that covered them; black clothing = mourning attire, “the clothes of death”.
* “I was happy upon the heath/And smiled among the winter’s snow”: This could be in relation to the calvinist work ethic. Their child was happy and wasting time gallivanting, and upon seeing this decided it was time for him to be put to work and provide for the family.
* “Who make up a heaven our misery”: referring to the people who profit from the labour of children; like the parents who profit from their children’s wages, or more generally on society living better lives thanks to the sacrifices and labour of the poor. The world is a heaven created on the backs of the impoverished, which is tolerated and even tacitly encouraged by many religious officials of the day; especially calvinists.
* “Crying “‘weep! ‘Weep!” in notes of woe!” and “And taught me to sing the notes of woe.” It is explained that “‘weep” is the child’s lisping attempt at pronouncing the word “sweep”; that is, he is advertising his services on the side of a snowy street. These are his “notes of woe”. This stanza is in reference to his parents putting him into chimney sweeping work.

FORMAL ANALYSIS:

* Technique:
  + Medium: relief etching; a relief image is created through “painting” or “drawing” with an acid resistant medium onto a copper plate. The plate is then placed into acid; the areas not covered with the medium are eaten away, leaving a positive surface in the shape of the drawn lines. This is then inked and printed in a similar manner to a woodblock print. This allows the printmaker, Blake, to have his drawn image directly etched into the plate; it doesn’t have to be translated by an engraver.
    - After printing, Blake would often colour each print with watercolours, making each print one-of-a-kind.
    - He would often experiment with different colour combinations, making each print original.
    - He’d handwrite his poems onto the plates (he’d have to write backwards so that it would print the right way) rather than using block or lead type; this allowed him control over the letters, and gave his work a medieval illuminated manuscript feel.
  + At this point in time, illuminated manuscripts were very old-fashioned (by about a hundred years). At this time manuscript papers and books would be taken apart to reuse the paper and parchment in binding mass-produced publications thanks to the printing press. Blake’s approach to the style of this work is a fresh and contemporary take on the traditions of illumination; a process he might have been enamoured with thanks to his religious upbringing, spending time in churches (particularly Westminster Abbey, where such illuminated books may well have been on display), or working as an etching apprentice.
  + Blake also disliked the multiple levels of removal the final reproduced prints would be from the original artist. How it would work during his time was, an artist would draw or paint a work. This work would then be handed off to an engraver, who would translate the artist’s image onto a plate. This plate would be passed off to a printer, who would print the image in a multiple edition. Then, perhaps, these prints would go on to a binder, who would put them into books. Blake was deeply dissatisfied with the final work being so far removed from the artist, and the assumption at the time that an engraver was a lower class of craftsman who simply traced the superior talent of the artist. Blake, who was apprenticed as an engraver, wanted to merge the artist and engraving process, and get the work of the artist directly etched onto the plate. His “relief etching” method was his attempt at attaining this.
* The composition is split evenly in two; the top half contains the poem, the bottom half the image. In the upper quarter of the image a large black area indicates a dark and stormy sky; diagonal lines dart down from this dark sky with oppressive rain, or snow.
* The chimney sweeper walks along a snowy sidewalk, framed on the right by a dark wall or shed; in the background to his right, across an empty, snow-covered street, a house with a darkened window stands. There is space created by the perspective implied by these background elements; the wall, the house, the dirty wheel tracks or cobblestones peeking through the snow. This space is empty of people or any other living being, emphasizing the boy’s loneliness, and people’s indifference to his misery.
* There is simplicity in the line-work; the boys face is defined only by a few marks, but in those marks there s a world of emotion. His face is turned up toward the snow/rain, and from those marks is communicated a sense of resigned misery as he trudges on.
* Many of Blake’s works are very colourful; this one is almost entirely monotone blue-grey, with the only colour coming from the green of the plant-like decorative elements framing the text, and an almost imperceptible pink hue from the boy’s face.
* The rain/emptiness of the scene may even symbolize God’s abandonment of him, implied in the lines “God & his Priest & King/Who make up a heaven of our misery.”
* The chimney sweep is a little right of centre; the rain/snow falls diagonally, left to right, upon his back, subtly moving him out of the frame. Shoeing him on, out of our notice or immediate concern.
* The watercolour gives a spontaneity to the work; the marks are obvious, almost impressionist. They imply form and texture without explicitly rendering it.
* The brush-marks make the shadows tangible; the oppression is real, and heavy. The simplicity of the brush-work belies its important message.
* Blake treats this image with a stark reality. This isn’t fantastic; this isn’t allegory; this is real life. The suffering of these children is real and tragic.
* There is a lighter mark in the sky, above and to the left of the figure, spitting out the rain/snow which lands directly on the chimney sweep’s burdened back; I wonder if this lighter mark is meant to symbolize the holy spirit, or the presence of god, directly adding to this child’s suffering.

OUTLINE:

Introduction

Paragraph 1: Historical Context

* + ??? Chimney sweeps an unfortunate result of the industrial revolution at the time Blake wrote this poem
  + ??? Their lives were often dangerous and full of misery
  + Blake’s influences and technical innovations

Paragraph 2: Poetry Analysis

* + Calvinist work ethic resulting in a child pressed into work; the resulting hypocritical spiritual righteousness of his parents as the result of his suffering
  + The world making a “heaven of our misery”; the powerful living fine on the backs of the impoverished.

Paragraph 3: Image analysis

* + Colour scheme
  + Perspective and space
  + Dark cloud and oppressive rain/snow
  + Texture and brushwork

Conclusion

* Don’t forget to relate it to the theme of “childhood”!