Author / Work: William Blake, ‘The Chimney Sweeper’
Theme: Literature and Injustice

Rationale
In this lesson, students will explore sources related to the lives of chimney sweepers in the early 19th century, highlighting the conditions endured by the children whose plight Blake highlights in his ‘Chimney Sweeper’ poems. Students will also analyse both poems, identifying the techniques Blake uses to present the lives of the chimney sweepers and the attempts to offer religion as a form of consolation.

Through their study of these sources, students will develop an understanding of why Blake felt so strongly about the situation of the chimney sweepers. They will also have the chance to consider how an understanding of historical context can illuminate the study of literary texts.

Content
Literary and historical sources:
- The Notebook of William Blake (1787-1818)
- Report into employing boys as chimney sweepers (1817)
- Illustration of ‘The Chimney Sweeper’ (see p. 37) from Songs of Experience (first published 1794)

Recommended reading (short article):
William Blake’s ‘Chimney Sweeper’ poems: a close reading by George Norton

Documentary films:
A selection of short documentary-style films (approx. 10 minutes each):
www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/videos

External links:
The William Blake Archive
The History of Children at Work

Key questions
- What working conditions did chimney sweepers in early 19th century Britain have to endure?
- Why was Blake so outraged about the plight of chimney sweepers?
- What techniques does Blake use to draw attention to the chimney sweepers’ situation?
• What was Blake’s attitude towards those who offered religion as a solution to the chimney sweepers’ plight?

Activities

1) Show students Blake’s engraving of the chimney sweeper from *Songs of Experience*. Students could pool their existing knowledge about chimney sweepers, using the following questions as prompts:
   • What did they do?
   • How old were they?
   • What would their working lives have been like?
   • What emotions and attitudes are conveyed by Blake’s engraving?

2) Introduce the ‘Parliamentary Report from the Committee on the Employment of Boys in Sweeping Chimneys’. Give students prompts to guide their reading of the text, interrogating it for information about the working conditions of chimney sweepers. Alternatively, students could generate their own research questions using additional sources (web and print-based) to gather additional evidence.

3) As a useful plenary activity, ask students to share anything they discovered that they found particularly surprising or shocking.

4) These insights can then be used to provide a context for students’ reading of the poems. Which aspects of the chimney sweepers’ plight does Blake draw attention to? What techniques does he use in order to do this? Encourage students to focus, in particular, on the effects of rhyme and metre, and on the images of innocence, naivety, bleakness and misery in both poems.

5) Students could then focus on Blake’s attitude to religion in the poems, and the way in which it has been offered as a consolation to the children depicted. How convincing is this as a form of consolation, and how does Blake appear to feel about it? Additional historical and biographical research will enable students to develop their understanding of social injustice and inequality in the early 19th century, and of Blake’s attitude to the established Church.

6) To conclude, invite students to consider the relationship between the two ‘Chimney Sweeper’ poems. Do they offer a straightforward contrast to each other, like ‘The Lamb’ and ‘The Tyger’ or the two ‘Nurse’s Song’ poems, or is the relationship between them more complex? Ask students to place the poems on a continuum line, with ‘Innocence’ at one end and ‘Experience’ at the other. Which poems would they put at either end of this continuum?

Extension activities
• Use the William Blake Archive to search for further images of injustice and victimhood, exploring the ways in which Blake’s work conveys his attitudes towards both the victims and the perpetrators of injustice.

• The British Library’s [English Language and Literature Timeline](https://www.bl.uk/discovering-lit) contains many images and extracts that students can explore to deepen their understanding of the historical context of Blake’s writing. The following are examples:
  - Map of the Gordon Riots (1780)
  - Report on the Storming of the Bastille (1789)
  - Rulebook, London workhouse (1791)
  - Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (1791)
  - Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792)

• Alternatively, students might consider contemporary examples of the literature of dissent, including protest songs. What kinds of injustice would Blake feel most strongly about today? As a creative writing activity, ask students to write their own poems about modern examples of inequality, drawing on Blake’s characteristic verse-forms and techniques.