

**2005 AP English Literature and Composition – Question 1**  
**“The Chimney Sweeper” (1789) and “The Chimney Sweeper” (1794)**  
**by William Blake**

The poems below, published in 1789 and 1794, were written by William Blake in response to the condition of chimney sweeps. Usually small children, sweeps were forced inside chimneys to clean their interiors. Read the two poems carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, compare and contrast the two poems, taking into consideration the poetic techniques Blake uses in each.

The Chimney Sweeper

When my mother died I was very young,  
And my father sold me while yet my tongue  
Could scarcely cry “weep! weep! weep! weep!”\*  
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

- 5 There’s little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head  
That curl’d like a lambs back, was shav’d, so I said,  
“Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head’s  
bare,  
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white  
hair.”

- And so he was quiet, & that very night,  
10 As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!  
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,  
Were all of them lock’d up in coffins of black;

- And by came an Angel who had a bright key,  
And he open’d the coffins & set them all free;  
15 Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they  
run,  
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun;

- Then naked & 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,  
20 He’d have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark  
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.  
Tho’ the morning was cold, Tom was happy &  
warm;  
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

\*The child’s lisping attempt at the chimney sweep’s street cry,  
“Sweep! Sweep!”

William Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper,” *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (1789; 1794; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

(1789)

The Chimney Sweeper

A little black thing among the snow  
Crying “weep, weep,” in notes of woe!  
“Where are thy father & mother? say?”  
“They are both gone up to the church to pray.

- 5 “Because I was happy upon the heath,  
And smil’d among the winter’s snow;  
They clothéd me in the clothes of death,  
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

- “And because I am happy, & dance & sing,  
10 They think they have done me no injury,  
And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,  
Who make up a heaven of our misery.”

William Blake, “The Chimney Sweeper,” *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (1789; 1794; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

(1794)

### Activity One—Read the Prompt

Read the prompt for the “Chimney Sweeper” poems.

Answer the following questions about the prompt:

- The first two sentences give you important background information to prepare you for writing about these poems. Pay particular attention to the second sentence. What is your emotional response to this statement? Why do you think the writers of the prompt included this information?
- What information do you learn from the copyright and footnote additions. Do you have any prior knowledge based on dates, etc.? What is the relationship between the two publication dates? Do the dates help you to place the author in an historical or literary period?
- The last sentence of the prompt is the actual question to which you must respond. It is the abstract part of the prompt. The first part of the sentence says to “compare and contrast the two poems.” What is the implicit message in these directions? What must you figure out about the two?
- Notice the concrete aspect of the prompt: take into consideration and write about the poetic techniques Blake uses in each. What are some examples of poetic techniques you might consider as you first read and annotate the poems?

### Activity Two—Read the Poems and Annotate

Read the poems and note diction, details, images, and other devices that help you understand the speakers in both poems. For guidance, consider using the NMSI Student Resource “Annotation Specific to Poetry.”

### Activity Three—Recording Information on a T-Chart

#### Questions to Ask About Each Poem

1. What is the writer saying?

2. How is he saying it?

3. What is the effect on the reader?

4. What is the theme?

Which of these 4 tasks seem most difficult? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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### **Activity Five—Pre-Writing and Composing the Essay**

Based on your notes and planning, choose two or three elements (such as imagery, structure, speaker, figurative language) that can be readily compared and contrasted in these poems AND that you can readily connect to meaning.

- Highlight/mark sentences/phrases in the poems that you will use for textual evidence with your analysis.
- Find sentences in your writing that definitely connect Blake’s poetic techniques to meaning. If you have problems locating explanation of meaning, use the “Revision Guide” resource for ideas to revise.
- Reread the prompt. Does your thesis absolutely answer the prompt and explain what you are about to analyze and show the reader?
- Check your essay for smooth transitions between paragraphs and between information about each poem.
- Bring the essay to a full conclusion with commentary about both the poems, perhaps keying on the most important feature you feel distinguishes each poem.

### **Activity Six—Examining the Scoring Guide**

Following is the scoring guide for the essays based on the “Chimney Sweeper” poems.

Underline or highlight key words in the descriptions of the scores.

After you have written your essay, examine your essay with a peer revision partner with the scoring guide. Determine where you think your essay might fit.

## Scoring Guide—“Chimney Sweeper” Poems

- 9-8** These essays offer a persuasive comparison/contrast of the two poems and present an insightful analysis of the relationship between them. Although the students offer a range of interpretations and choose to emphasize different poetic techniques, these essays provide convincing readings of both poems and demonstrate consistent and effective control over the elements of composition in language appropriate to the analysis of poetry<sup>1</sup>. Their textual references are apt and specific. Though they may not be error-free, these essays are perceptive in their analysis and demonstrate writing that is clear and sophisticated, and, in the case of a 9 essay, especially persuasive.
- 7-6** These competent essays offer a reasonable comparison/contrast of the two poems and an effective analysis of the relationship between them. They are less thorough or less precise in their discussion of the themes and techniques, and their analysis of the relationship between the two poems is less convincing. These essays demonstrate the student’s ability to express ideas clearly with references to the text, although they do not exhibit the same level of effective writing as the 9-8 essays. While essays scored 7-6 are generally well written, those scored a 7 demonstrate more sophistication in both substance and style.<sup>2</sup>
- 5** These essays may respond to the assigned task with a plausible reading of the two poems and their relationship, but they may be superficial in analysis of theme and technique. They often rely on paraphrase, but paraphrase that contains some analysis, implicit or explicit. Their comparison/contrast of the relationship between the two poems may be vague, formulaic, or inadequately supported by references to the texts. There may be minor misinterpretations of one or both poems. These students demonstrate control of language but the writing may be marred by surface errors. These essays are not as well conceived, organized, or developed as 7-6 essays.
- 4-3** These lower-half essays fail to offer an adequate analysis of the two poems. The analysis may be partial, unconvincing, irrelevant, or may ignore one of the poems completely. Evidence from the poems may be slight or misconstrued, or the essays may rely on paraphrase only. The writing often demonstrates a lack of control over the conventions of composition: inadequate development of ideas, accumulation of errors, or a focus that is unclear, inconsistent, or repetitive. Essays scored a 3 may contain significant misreadings and/or demonstrate inept writing.
- 2-1** These essays compound the weaknesses of the essays in the 4-3 range. Although some attempt has been made to respond to the prompt, the students’ assertions are presented with little clarity, organization, or support from the poems themselves. The essays may contain serious errors in grammar and mechanics. These essays may offer a complete misreading or be unacceptably brief. Essays scored a 1 contain little coherent discussion of the poems.

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<sup>1</sup> “language appropriate to the analysis of poetry” means poetic devices, *e.g.*, rhyme scheme, alliteration, metonymy, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Notice that essays receiving upper-half scores must address **both** poems and must discuss **how** Blake uses poetic devices to reveal meaning (theme).