

Lesson Plan: William Blake's 'Chimney Sweeper' Poems: Ode to the Industrial Age

Teacher-contributed lesson plan by Dr. Pooja Sancheti, IISER Pune, India

As a **high school** and **Undergraduate English Literature** teacher, you can use two of William Blake's poems, both titled "The Chimney Sweeper", to teach your students how to interpret poetic texts. These poems may serve as an introduction to the genre of Romantic poetry that gained popularity during the Industrial Revolution. They emphasize labor conditions during the Industrial Revolution in England and include references to the effects of coal burning, thought to be responsible for global warming.

Thus, the use of this lesson plan allows you to integrate the teaching of a climate science topic with a core topic in **English Literature**.

Use this lesson plan to help your students find answers to:

- What are some of the features of Romantic poetry?
- What differences do you see in these two poems by William Blake? Comment on the emotions evoked by them.
- Describe the state of child labor during the Industrial Revolution in England.
- Comment on the overlapping timelines of the Industrial Revolution and the period of Romanticism.
- What were the environmental effects of coal burning in England during the Industrial Revolution?

About the Lesson Plan

Grade Level: High School, Undergraduate

Discipline: English Literature

Topic(s) in Discipline: Analysis of Poetic Texts, Romantic Poetry, William Blake, Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience, Industrial Revolution, Child Labor, Chimney Sweeper, Coal Burning, Soot

Climate Topic: Climate and the Anthroposphere, Climate and the Atmosphere

Location: Global, England

Access: Online, Offline

Language(s): English

Approximate Time Required: 55-60 minutes

1 Contents

1. Reading (15 min)

Three brief readings to introduce the topic of Romantic poetry by poet William Blake during the Industrial Revolution in England.

- An introduction to the **Industrial Revolution**, especially in England.

This can be accessed at:

<https://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution/industrial-revolution>

- An introduction to **Romantic poetry**.

This can be accessed at:

<http://perino.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/117929346/Abrams%E2%80%99%20A%20Glossary%20of%20Literary%20Terms.pdf>

- An introduction to **William Blake**, a prominent English poet in the genre of Romantic poetry.

This can be accessed at:

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/william-blake>

2. Reading (15 min)

A reading of William Blake's, 'The Chimney Sweeper: When my mother died I was very young' for critical analysis- first of two poems to analyze using a list of questions.

This can be accessed at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43654/the-chimney-sweeper-when-my-mother-died-i-was-very-young>

3. Reading (10 min)

A reading of Blake's, 'The Chimney Sweeper: A little black thing among the snow' - second poem to analyze using a similar set of questions.

This can be accessed at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43653/the-chimney-sweeper-a-little-black-thing-among-the-snow>

4. Classroom Activity (15 min)

Part 1: A set of discussion points to compare between these two Romantic poems by William Blake.

Part 2: An interactive timeline of global carbon dioxide emissions from pre-industrial age to today, to discuss climate change due to extensive coal burning during the Industrial Revolution in England.

This can be accessed at:

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cumulative-co-emissions?year=1751&time=1751..2016>

Suggested questions/assignments for learning evaluation

- What are some of the features of Romantic poetry?
- What differences do you see in these two poems by William Blake? Comment on the emotions evoked by them.
- Describe the state of child labor during the Industrial Revolution in England.
- Comment on the overlapping timelines of the Industrial Revolution and the period of Romanticism.
- What were the environmental effects of coal burning in England during the Industrial Revolution?

2 Step-by-step User Guide

Here is a step-by-step guide to using this lesson plan in the classroom. We have suggested these steps as a possible plan of action. You may customize the lesson plan according to your preferences and requirements.

1. Topic introduction and discussion of key terms

Before your students begin to analyze the two poems in question, there are three key terms that they need to be made aware of.

- Use this resource, '[Industrial Revolution](#)' by History.com, to introduce the salient features of the **Industrial Revolution** to your students, with an emphasis on its origins in England.

This can be accessed at:

<https://www.history.com/topics/industrial-revolution/industrial-revolution>

- Explain to your students, the primary features of Romantic imagination and the evolution of **Romantic poetry**. Use M H Abram's brief introduction to Romantic poetry, '[Romanticism in M.H. Abrams' A Glossary of Literary Terms \(177-179\)](#)', provided by Hansjuerg Perino, to help the students understand the concerns that occupied the Romantic imagination, and to give them a timeline that shows the overlap between the Industrial Revolution and the Romantic age.

This can be accessed at:

<http://perino.pbworks.com/w/file/fetch/117929346/Abrams%E2%80%99%20A%20Glossary%20of%20Literary%20Terms.pdf>

- **William Blake** (1757-1827) was one of the most prominent English poets of the Romantic age. Use this reading, '[William Blake](#)' by Poets.org, to introduce his life and times to the students. This will enable them to have a basic understanding of his experiences and persona before analyzing his poems.

This can be accessed at:

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/william-blake>

2. Reading and Analyzing Poem #1

Hand out copies of William Blake's '[The Chimney Sweeper: When my mother died I was very young](#)' (written in 1789), instruct your students to read it to themselves, and then have one student recite it aloud in class to get a sense of the rhyme and rhythm of the poem.

Use the following discussion points to analyze the poem in detail:

1. What is the rhyme scheme in the poem? (Answer: six quatrains; 24 lines; AABB, CCDD...)
2. The movement of the poem (Answer: first two stanzas are an introduction to the narrator and Tom Dacre; the next three stanzas are Tom's dream; the final stanza is waking back to reality)
3. The characters of the narrator and Tom Dacre (for instance, the narrator is so young that he speaks "'weep" when he means "sweep")
4. What sensory effects and contrasts does the poem create? (colors like black and white, sunshine and soot etc.)
5. The significance of the title.
6. Poverty, child labor, and the use of coal.
7. The role of family.
8. The use of religion and religious symbolism in the poem (lamb, angels, heaven, god).
9. Juxtapositions of life and death.
10. The emotions that the poem arouses in the reader's mind.
11. What elements of Romantic poetry can be seen in this poem?

This can be accessed at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43654/the-chimney-sweeper-when-my-mother-died-i-was-very-young>

3. Reading and Analyzing Poem #2

Follow the same steps as above to read and analyze Blake's "[The Chimney Sweeper: A little black thing among the snow](#)" (written in 1793). In addition to the discussion points mentioned above, ask them to notice that the "King" (the British government) is also held culpable by the poet.

1. What is the rhyme scheme in the poem? [Answer: 3 quatrains; AABB CDCD EFEF]
2. The movement of the poem (Answer: first stanza is a conversation between an outside viewer and the narrator, and the other two are the narrator's lament and indictment of the church, family, and king)
3. The characters of the narrator (for instance, the narrator is so young that he speaks "weep" when he means "sweep", his criticism of social institutions)
4. What sensory effects and contrasts does the poem create? (colors like black and white, heath and snow etc.)
5. The significance of the title.
6. Poverty, child labor, and the use of coal.
7. The role of family.
8. The use of religion and religious symbolism in the poem.
9. Juxtapositions of life and death.
10. The emotions that the poem arouses in the reader's mind.
11. What elements of Romantic poetry can be seen in this poem?

This can be accessed at:

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43653/the-chimney-sweeper-a-little-black-thing-among-the-snow>

4. Classroom discussion to compare the two poems and on the impact of the Industrial Revolution on climate

Part 1: Once both the poems are discussed in detail, ask the students to compare the two poems. At this point, you can tell them that the first poem belongs to a set of poems called “Songs of Innocence” and the second to “Songs of Experience”. This is reflected in the change in tones and narratives of the two poems.

Discuss what elements do they find in common and what seems to have changed between the poems.

Answer Points:

- Among the things that are common between the two poems: the character and occupation of the narrator; the notion of exploitation; the contrasts between black and white; unchanged conditions of poverty and labor
- Among the things that have changed between the two poems: rhyme scheme; the first poem offers hope in the form of religion and hard work but the second poem offers no hope or escape; stark criticism in the second poem of church, religion, family, and government; the moral lesson of hard work in the first and of no redemption in the second poem.

Part 2: Climate change discussion- Use the reference to ‘soot’ and discuss how large-scale coal-burning during the Industrial Revolution may have affected society at large. Explain that this was the beginning of an extensive use of coal for energy by humans. Further, explain that coal-burning resulted in carbon dioxide emissions that have since contributed to global warming, one of the drivers of current climate change. Use the interactive slider, ‘[Cumulative CO₂ emissions, 1751](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cumulative-co-emissions?year=1751&time=1751..2016)’ by Our World in Data, to enable your students to visualize a timeline of country-wise carbon dioxide emissions since the pre-industrial age. Use this to initiate a discussion on the contribution of England’s Industrial Revolution to this emission data.

This can be accessed at:

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/cumulative-co-emissions?year=1751&time=1751..2016>

5. Questions/Assignments

Use the tools and the concepts learned so far to discuss and determine answers to the following questions:

- What are some of the features of Romantic poetry?
- What differences do you see in these two poems by William Blake? Comment on the emotions evoked by them.

- Describe the state of child labor during the Industrial Revolution in England.
- Comment on the overlapping timelines of the Industrial Revolution and the period of Romanticism.
- What were the environmental effects of coal burning in England during the Industrial Revolution?

3 Learning Outcomes

The tools in this lesson plan will enable students to:

- learn to critically analyze poetry
- describe the features of Romantic poetry
- understand William Blake's prominence as a Romantic poet
- discuss Romanticism in England in the context of the Industrial Revolution
- explain how orphaned children and the poor were exploited during the early Industrial Revolution in England
- describe the detrimental environmental effects of coal burning during the Industrial Revolution leading to significant carbon dioxide emissions that has contributed to global warming

4 Additional Resources

If you or your students would like to explore the topic further, these additional resources will be useful.

1. Reading

A blog, 'The Industrial Revolution as an Antithesis to Romantic Poetry' by Lissette Lopez Szwydky, to describe the effect of the Industrial Revolution on Romantic poetry.

This can be accessed at:

<https://britlitsurvey2.wordpress.com/2014/10/27/the-industrial-revolution-as-an-antithesis-to-romantic-poetry/>

2. Reading

A reading to explore William Blake's 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience'.

This can be accessed at:

<http://triggs.djuv.org/djuv-editions.com/BLAKE/SONGS/Download.pdf>

3. Reading

A teaching resource, "Letters and the Lamp: Davy, Stephenson, and the Miners' Safety Lamp" by Lancaster University to describe the working-class conditions during the Industrial Revolution in England.

This can be accessed at:

<http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/lettersandthelamp/sections/the-industrial-revolution-coal-mining-and-the-felling-colliery-disaster/>

5 Credits/Copyrights

All the teaching tools in our collated list are owned by the corresponding creators/authors/organizations as listed on their websites. Please view the individual copyright and

ownership details for each tool by following the individual links provided.

We have selected and analyzed the tools that align with the overall objective of our project and have provided the corresponding links. We do not claim ownership of or responsibility/liability for any of the listed tools.

1. Reading; 'Industrial Revolution'

By [History.com](#)

2. Reading; 'Romanticism in M.H. Abrams' Glossary of Literary Terms'

Provided by [Hansjuerg Perino](#), University of Zurich.

3. Reading; 'William Blake'

By [Poets.org](#)

4. Readings; 'The Chimney Sweeper: When my mother died I was very young' and 'The Chimney Sweeper: A little black thing among the snow'

By William Blake. Provided by [The Poetry Foundation](#).

5. Visualization; 'Cumulative CO₂ emissions, 1751'

By [Our World in Data](#).

6. Additional Resources

A multi-author blog, 'The Industrial Revolution As An Antithesis To Romantic Poetry' from '[British Literature 1700-1900, A Course Blog](#)' led by Lissette Lopez Szwydky.

Reading; 'Songs of Innocence and of Experience' by William Blake. Provided by [DjVu Editions, Global-language.com](#).

Reading; 'Letters and the Lamp: Davy, Stephenson, and the Miners' Safety Lamp', Davy Letters Project, [Lancaster University Impact and Knowledge Exchange](#).