

# Wedded Cages and Better Places: An Analysis of Central Metaphors Within Poems by Sylvia Plath & William Blake

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for David Coley's English 115 course *Literature and Culture*. The assignment asked students to use one poem from the authors William Blake and Sylvia Plath and demonstrate/compare and contrast how they deploy extended metaphors in their works. The paper uses MLA citation style.

This paper is an examination of the extended metaphors present in "The Chimney Sweeper" by William Blake in the *Songs of Innocence* and "The Jailor" by Sylvia Plath. It explores the significance of these metaphors and shows how both poets documented similar experiences of oppression and suffering, instilling blame in their works. Blake's poem delved into broad themes of suffering and being trapped, while also questioning the institutions of religion, and Plath's poem provides a more personal focus on her experiences and marriage, serving as a warning to women. The core emotion and imagery dissected in their works provided a comprehensive analysis for the similarities and differences that the authors established.

Sylvia Plath deploys a central metaphor within her poem "The Jailor" by portraying her marriage as a prison cell, her husband being the jailor, to represent the toxicity and abuse present in their relationship. In William Blake's first account of "The Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence*, he uses an image of child labour to portray the cruel reality of these chimney sweepers, stating that they may only find refuge after they are trapped in "coffins of black" (Blake, 12; l. 12) where they may then move onto a more heaven-like setting. Blake suggests by the way he deploys these metaphors that despite hoping for death to take them somewhere better, being worked to their graves is already a sort of death itself.

Blake's poem provides a very similar voice to Plath's, in that there appears to be a source of blame, in both the superficial and spiritual sense.

Plath slams her readers full force into "The Jailer" by crudely expressing her marriage as a prison cell, while her husband, Ted Hughes, takes the role of her jailor. She describes how in their marriage he betrayed and abused his power over her. She reveals that she feels used, exploited, and made vulnerable when being "drugged and raped" (Plath, 23; l. 6) by him, clearly indicating domestic abuse. This abuse is reinforced throughout many aspects of the poem, one being how she takes sleeping pills as a way to escape, and how he leaves her empty, like "something is gone" (l. 11) from her, suggesting she feels a sense of hollowness and worthlessness at the fact her only purpose is to bring pleasure to her lewd "rattler of keys" (l. 5). A line that especially reflects how he uses her is when she states, "carapace smashed, / I spread to the beaks of birds" (ll. 14-15). A carapace is essentially a turtle's shell, so in saying it's been smashed, it provides a metaphor for the fact that she is left exposed and vulnerable to the whims of pecking birds, or in her case, a controlling husband. Hughes truly takes a toll on her spirit with his injustices, but especially with his betrayal; we know that her husband had an affair with another woman while married to Plath, and we are made to assume that, along with the domestic violence, is the source of her hurt and rage in the poem. She writes: "he [] / hurts me, he / with his armory of fakery" (Plath, 24; ll. 28-30). This implies that his being revolves around lies about his unfaithfulness, and she is left betrayed and vengeful, "[wishing] him dead" (l. 39). For him to die, however, seems so far out of reach. Her marriage kills her inside: "Hung, starved, burned, hooked" (l. 35). She succumbs to a man's wrath, like so many other women of her time.

Blake's use of metaphors in "The Chimney Sweeper" is slightly more obscure until line 12, where it reveals the truth behind the children's labour: "all of them lock'd up in coffins of black." (Blake, 12; l. 12) This statement is metaphorical for the chimneys the children sweep; by inhaling the soot and being worked in horrible conditions, the children were dying. This metaphor proceeds in talking about how an Angel came with a key and "opened the coffins & set them all free" (l. 14), bringing the children to a beautiful place that suggests it is a heaven-like setting. Knowing this, the children were "happy & ... need not fear harm" (ll. 23-24) because they knew that if they were good, they would soon be taken away to that better place. They were happy in life because they knew that when death came, which would be soon, it would be favourable. However, in this

innocent view that the children perceive their situations, they fail to see that in being worked to their deaths, they are already living a sort of hell.

Within both Plath's and Blake's poems, there appears to be a similar way that they deploy their metaphors to create a common concept, or rather, a common place of *blame*. Through their writing, they attempt to communicate that there is a reason for their hurt and misery, be it a person, oneself, or the metaphysical. In "The Jailor", it is quite clear that Plath's reproach for her husband (as he is her jailor within her confining marriage) is the primary cause of her unhappiness, due to the domestic abuse and betrayal described. There is also, however, an underlying blame on herself as well. Plath is upset that she allowed herself to be tricked and she wonders, "How did I get here?" (Plath, 24; l. 32). She states in line 30, "I am myself. That is not enough." This opens up the possibility that Plath's poem, although blaming her jailor and self, also has a more universal message; Plath wasn't alone in this feeling of being trapped. Many women experience abusive behaviour from their intimate partners. It is quite a common concept, especially in her time, for men to have been the primary power in a marriage, and the women would be treated as less than them. As horrible as it sounds, it was a common occurrence, and Plath likely knew that. When she says, "I am myself. That is not enough." (l. 30), she is essentially speaking about her femininity. Being a woman wasn't enough to have your own voice, to do anything about your husband's unfaithfulness, or to avoid the prison cage that he locks you into. Whether this be a warning to women, a cry for help, or simply a woman incensed by her situation, she shows the stereotype of how men abuse their power and are not to be trusted.

Blake deploys blame on the children's parents, as shown in the first stanza when he writes: "my father sold me while yet my tongue, / Could scarcely cry weep weep weep weep" (Blake, 12; ll. 2-3). Children are forced into this laborious life by their guardians because of the prospect of money. Although the speaker seems melancholic because of this betrayal, it is even more clear when reflecting on *The Songs of Experience's* account of "The Chimney Sweeper", that there is even *anger* in the fact that they gave him up for this reason. At this point, the child is now dead, and it describes how the parents have "gone up to the church to pray" (Blake, 37; l. 4). They believe that because he had been happy during his lifetime (due to wanting to be good, so after death he may go to heaven), they "have done [him] no injury" (l. 10). They are ignorant to the hurt that they brought their child, and proceed to "praise God & his Priest & King" (l. 11) that constitute such misery. This is where it turns the blame around to those found superior. His

parents praise the church that has exploited and used their, and the child's, belief for their own gain. God and the church "make up a heaven" (l. 12) out of their labour and hardship, one that doesn't truly exist. This questioning of the church and belief must have provided quite an emotional outrage at the time of Blake's publishing, but that reaction was exactly his intention. He took on a political stance within his poetry, speaking to honest issues that were present and hoping to inspire inquisition about the social injustices that people were promoting.

While "The Jailor" and the first account of "The Chimney Sweeper" do have similarities in how their overall metaphors are utilized, there are some notable differences in how they go about producing them that are essential to their impact. Aside from differences in their sources of blame, it is also important to note how the authors go about producing different tonality in the speakers' voices. Plath's poem embraces a more severe and ruthless narrative, like how she says, "He has been burning me with cigarettes, / Pretending I am a negress with pink paws." (Plath, 23; ll. 18-19) or "I imagine him / impotent as distant thunder ... I wish him dead or away" (Plath, 24; ll. 36-39). Blake, however, produces a fake form of hopefulness, truly demonstrating the innocence of the speaker, a notorious theme for the *Songs of Innocence*. After death, when they are "naked & white, all their bags [would be] left behind" (Blake 12; l. 17) (meaning that their troubles and fears would be gone), and so they lived their lives as willing slaves to their work because they knew death would bring them peace. He demonstrates how sometimes, even when people are faced with a horrible situation, their minds can be so damaged that they almost deny their experiences as a way to cope with the abuse they are facing. This differs from the way Plath reveals the true nit-and-grit of her experiences and plainly states her negative feelings about her husband and the abuse he puts her through.

The two authors deployed metaphors to instill blame, and to evoke an impact on their audience, which is an important component in the verses, providing motive behind their writing. For Plath, she uses her extended metaphor of marriage as a prison cell to show the way she is trapped in an abusive marriage, captive by her jailor and/or husband, to deploy a warning to women, stating that marriage is a way for men to control and abuse the life of their wives. Blake uses metaphors of death and being brought to heaven to represent their only refuge in a life that is already comparable to a death-life purgatory. He outlines the political issues surrounding the labour of the lower-classed children and seems to question the so-called "mercy of god", as well as the intentions of the church. He and Plath raged about topics that were likely quite controversial to discuss at the time and

attempted to bring awareness to these troubling factors. The extended metaphors aided them in doing this and allowed them to leave a lasting impression on their readers.

## References

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