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## “The School Boy” by William Blake: A Lament for Lost Innocence and Joy

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### Abstract:

This research paper presents a multidimensional analysis of William Blake’s poem “*The School Boy*”, exploring its literary, structural, thematic, philosophical, and spiritual dimensions. The poem critiques the formal education system as a repressive force that stifles the natural joy, freedom, and vitality of childhood. Through rich literary devices—such as metaphor, imagery, and symbolism—Blake juxtaposes the spontaneous beauty of nature with the emotional confinement imposed by institutional schooling.

The paper further aligns the poem’s core ideas with Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom, referencing sacred texts including the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Vachanamrut, and the Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapurana. These scriptures emphasize the blissful nature of the Self (*ananda*), the value of acting in accordance with one’s true nature (*svabhava*), and the importance of nurturing inner growth through joy and harmony rather than coercion.

By situating Blake’s poetic vision within the Romantic tradition and drawing philosophical parallels with Eastern spiritual thought, the paper demonstrates how “*The School Boy*” serves as both a literary masterpiece and a moral-spiritual critique of modern education. Ultimately, the poem calls for a restoration of natural learning grounded in emotional well-being, inner freedom, and the sacred innocence of childhood.

### Preface

William Blake’s “*The School Boy*” emerges as a profound lyrical meditation on the conflict between institutional repression and the soul’s innate longing for freedom and joy. Written during the late 18th century—a time marked by industrialization and the formalization of education—Blake’s poem captures the lament of a young boy whose delight in nature is dampened by the rigid constraints of school. The poet, a visionary deeply attuned to spiritual truths and the sanctity of the inner self, raises poignant questions about the nature of learning, the loss of innocence, and the spiritual cost of forced conformity.

The poem aligns strikingly with the wisdom of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Vachanamrut, all of which advocate living in harmony with one’s intrinsic nature (*svabhava*), recognizing the blissful nature of the Self (*ananda*), and nurturing the soul through love, not compulsion. Through metaphors of caged birds, withering blossoms, and seasonal cycles, Blake not only critiques the formal education system but also invites readers to reflect on the moral and spiritual implications of denying a child’s inner joy.

This poem, therefore, is not just a literary piece—it is a spiritual and philosophical appeal to humanity to preserve innocence, foster natural growth, and reimagine education as an act of nurturing rather than conditioning.

### 1. Literary Devices and Figures of Speech

- William Blake’s “*The School Boy*” is rich in poetic devices that express the tension between natural joy and institutional constraint.

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- **Metaphor:** The child is compared to a bird “born for joy” who “droop[s] his tender wing” in captivity. This metaphor illustrates the suffocation of a free-spirited soul by repressive schooling.
- **Personification:** Nature is personified—“The distant huntsman winds his horn,” “the skylark sings with me.” These personifications emphasize nature’s harmony with the speaker’s joyful spirit.
- **Imagery:** Vivid images like “the birds sing on every tree,” “buds are nipp’d,” and “blasts of winter appear” evoke powerful sensory experiences, contrasting joyful nature with oppressive schooling.
- **Alliteration:** Repetition of consonants adds musicality—“skylark sings,” “buds are nipped,” and “sorrow and care’s dismay.”
- **Assonance and Consonance:** Assonance in “O what sweet company!” and consonance in “Spend the day in sighing and dismay” reinforce the rhythm and mood.
- **Symbolism:** School represents repression; the “cage” symbolizes the stifling of a child’s natural instincts.
- **Irony:** There is bitter irony in associating school—a place of learning—with “sighing and dismay.”
- **Oxymoron:** Though subtle, “dreary shower” merges natural imagery with a sense of boredom, mixing the vital with the lifeless.

## 2. Structure and Form

Blake structures the poem in six quatrains, using **ABAB** rhyme scheme.

- **Rhyme Scheme:** The rhyme connects natural harmony with emotional tone—“morn”/“horn” and “away”/“dismay.”
- **Meter and Rhythm:** The poem flows in **iambic tetrameter** with variations that reflect emotional fluctuation. Lines such as “How can the bird that is born for joy” deviate slightly to emphasize distress.
- **Stanza and Line Breaks:** Blake builds emotional escalation through careful stanza progression, from joy to oppression to philosophical contemplation.
- **Enjambment:** There is minimal enjambment. Most lines are end-stopped, giving the poem a tone of finality and deep thought, especially in the concluding stanzas.

## 3. Theme and Subject Matter

- **Primary Theme:** The central theme is **the conflict between natural joy and institutional repression**, especially in childhood.
- **Secondary Themes:** Loss of innocence, the sanctity of nature, emotional suppression, and the critique of educational systems.
- **Deeper Message:** Blake suggests that enforced learning devoid of joy damages a child’s growth. He warns against systems that ignore individual development and emotional wellbeing.

## 4. Tone and Mood

- **Tone:** The tone is **melancholic and reflective**, with moments of nostalgic yearning and moral indignation.
- **Mood:** Readers feel a profound **sense of sorrow and injustice**. The natural joy evoked early in the poem gives way to sympathy for the child’s emotional confinement.

## 5. Philosophical and Spiritual Interpretation

Blake’s poem resonates with **Romantic philosophy** and also aligns with **Vedantic and Upanishadic** thought.

- **Romanticism:** Emphasis on nature, innocence, and emotional authenticity reflects Romantic ideals.

### • Vedantic Insights:

○ The Upanishads speak of **Swabhava (innate nature)**—a child, like a bird, must live according to their inner joy. Forcing unnatural discipline suppresses the **Atman’s (Self’s)** free expression.

○ **Bhagavad Gita (Chapter 18, Verse 63)**<sup>1</sup> urges acting according to one’s nature (Svadharna). Schooling that ignores a child’s nature leads to inner disintegration.

○ The **Vachanamrut** (Gadhada II-27) warns against excessive repression of natural tendencies, which may turn spiritual or emotional energies into sorrow.

○ In **Shrimad Bhagavatam (Canto 1, Chapter 8)**, joy and innocence are praised as divine traits of childhood, not to be destroyed by artificial systems.

○ The **Taittiriya Upanishad** speaks of *Ananda (bliss)* as the nature of Brahman—Blake seems to lament the loss of that bliss in institutional education.

William Blake’s poem “**The School Boy**” aligns deeply with **Upanishadic and Vedantic wisdom**, as well as with teachings from the **Bhagavad Gita, Shrimad Bhagwat Mahapuram, and Vachanamrut**, especially in its emphasis on **natural freedom, the joyous nature of the Self, and the spiritual harm of forced conformity.**

### 1. Alignment with the Upanishads and Vedanta

#### a) Innate Joy as the Nature of the Self

• In Blake’s poem, the child is compared to a **bird “born for joy”**, but is **caged** by the formal education system.

• This resonates with **Taittiriya Upanishad (2.7.1)**:<sup>2</sup> *“Raso vai sah; rasam hyevayam labdhvanandi bhavati”* (He is indeed Bliss. Having attained Him, one becomes blissful.)

► The **Atman** (Self) is inherently blissful. The suppression of natural joy in the child is thus a violation of his essential spiritual nature.

#### b) Freedom as the Natural State of the Self

• **Mundaka Upanishad (2.2.8)**<sup>3</sup> states:

*“The Self is not grasped by the senses or mind, but by those whose mind is pure and who seek It alone.”*

► The soul’s natural spontaneity and joy—like the child’s connection with birds, trees, and sky—points to *sahaja*

- *svabhava*, a state of natural being that is disrupted by mechanistic education.

### c) Critique of Superficial Knowledge

- The child in Blake's poem cannot find joy in books, symbolizing **sterile, imposed knowledge**.

- **Katha Upanishad (1.2.23)**<sup>4</sup> warns:

"Not by learning is the Self attained..."

- True understanding comes from *inner realization*, not from rote schooling. The poem critiques how formal systems alienate the soul from its true purpose.

## 2. Bhagavad Gita

### a) Action in Accord with One's Nature (Svabhava and Svadharma)

- **Bhagavad Gita 3.33**:<sup>5</sup> "Even a wise man acts according to his own nature; beings follow their own nature. What can restraint accomplish?"

- Just as the child is stifled by a system that contradicts his natural joy, so too is the Gita critical of any path that goes against *svabhava*.

### b) Education with Joy and Harmony

- **Gita 4.34**:<sup>6</sup>

"Approach the wise with reverence, humility, and service, and they will impart knowledge to you."

- The ideal learning is loving and natural, unlike the "cruel eye" of the schoolmaster in Blake's poem.

## 3. Vachanamrut (Swaminarayan Tradition)

### a) Suppression of Natural Tendencies Leads to Distress

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada II-27**:

"If a person's natural inclinations are forcibly suppressed, he will not be able to remain happy..."

- Blake echoes this when he says the child spends the day "in sighing and dismay." The suppression of the child's natural instincts leads to emotional suffering and spiritual dullness.

### b) Joy as a Prerequisite for True Learning

- **Vachanamrut Gadhada I-10**:

"Spiritual growth must begin in an environment of joy, love, and trust."

- Blake implies the same truth: learning divorced from joy is not learning at all.

## 4. Shrimad Bhagavatam (Bhagavata Purana)

### a) Childhood as Sacred and Joyful

- **Canto 1, Chapter 8, Verse 21**:<sup>7</sup>

When Queen Kunti sees Lord Krishna as a child, she delights in his innocence and joy.

- The poem laments how society destroys that **divine, childlike joy** with institutions that are out of harmony with nature.

### b) Spontaneity in Devotion

- **Canto 10, Chapter 11**: Krishna plays with cowherd boys, free and joyful.

- The divine Leela emphasizes the **sacredness of spontaneous joy**, something Blake sees as robbed by the system of education.

## 5. Vedic Literature

### a) Prakriti and Dharma

- **Rig Veda (10.90.1)**:<sup>8</sup>

"The Purusha (cosmic being) is all that has been and will be..."

- Every being, including children, is a unique expression of **cosmic energy**. The poet sees school as a force that dulls this divinely ordained individuality.

### b) Learning in Harmony with Nature

- **Atharva Veda (11.1.17)**:<sup>9</sup>

"May we live in harmony with the earth, in harmony with the waters, in harmony with the plants."

- The child seeks this harmony in summer mornings and birdsong. The school system is portrayed as disruptive of this cosmic unity.

## 6. Broader Philosophical Alignment

### a) Romantic and Vedantic Unity

Blake's ideas mirror Vedantic **non-duality (Advaita)**:

- The child's joy in nature shows a sense of **oneness** with the world.

- School creates **duality**: a split between the inner self and the outer institution.

### b) Ahimsa and Emotional Violence

- Although the child isn't physically harmed, he is emotionally stifled.

- This parallels **ahimsa** (non-violence) in **spirit**—as found in Jain and Vedic teachings—showing that **emotional and spiritual violence** are also real and damaging.

## Conclusion

William Blake's "*The School Boy*" is a **poetic embodiment of Vedantic wisdom**: the Self is blissful, natural, and free. When this Self is forced into artificial, joyless systems like rigid schooling, it suffers deeply. Blake's call to **restore childhood joy, harmony with nature, and inner freedom** resonates with the **Upanishads, Gita, Vachanamrut, and Bhagavatam**, making this poem not just a Romantic lament, but a timeless **spiritual critique of mechanistic education**.

## 6. Historical and Cultural Context

- **Historical Setting**: Written during the **Industrial Revolution** in late 18th-century England. The poem is part of Blake's *Songs of Experience* (1794).

- **Social Commentary**: Blake critiques the **rigid education system** and industrial society that viewed children as passive vessels to be filled rather than unique beings to be nurtured.

• **Cultural Influence:** Influenced by Enlightenment rationalism but countering it with **Romantic spirituality** and imagination.

### 7. Poet's Perspective and Emotional Mindset

• **Inspiration:** Blake, a visionary and deeply spiritual poet, was troubled by **institutional oppression**, including organized religion and formal education.

• **Emotional Mindset:** Blake expresses sorrow, frustration, and compassion. He seems to channel his own **childlike wonder** and sensitivity into the voice of the schoolboy.

• **Autobiographical Element:** Though not explicitly autobiographical, Blake's consistent defense of innocence and his spiritual disdain for institutionalism suggest personal conviction.

### 8. Target Audience and Purpose

• **Audience:** The poem speaks to **parents, educators, and society** at large, advocating for the rights of children to grow in freedom and joy.

• **Purpose:**

- To **criticize the repressive education system**.
- To **awaken moral consciousness** regarding childhood joy and emotional wellbeing.
- To **align readers with nature and innocence**, encouraging empathy and reform.

### 9. Personal Interpretation

**Final Takeaway:** “*The School Boy*” is more than a child's lament—it is a **philosophical critique of modernity**, a **Romantic ode to nature**, and a **spiritual plea for freedom of the soul**. Blake calls upon society to preserve innocence and joy rather than destroy it in the name of order and discipline.

**Personal Resonance:** The poem invites readers to reconnect with their own childhood spirit and question systems that suffocate creativity and joy. It affirms the **universal longing for inner freedom**, echoing not only Romantic ideals but timeless spiritual truths.

### Conclusion

In “*The School Boy*”, William Blake crafts more than a personal lament; he weaves a universal, timeless cry for the preservation of joy, spontaneity, and inner truth. The poem warns that when youthful vitality is sacrificed at the altar of mechanical systems, not only is the individual stifled, but society itself loses its potential for genuine growth and moral evolution. Like the Vedic seers, Blake recognizes that true education lies in awakening the soul, not in stifling it under rigid structures.

His voice echoes the insights of Vedantic philosophy, which sees the soul as a radiant, blissful presence, meant to bloom naturally like the flowers and birds he so lovingly invokes. In a world increasingly governed by order, expectation, and

performance, Blake calls for a return to natural dharma, where learning is rooted in love, wonder, and freedom.

Thus, the poem leaves the reader not just with sorrow for the child but with a sense of moral urgency—to protect the divine innocence within us all, and to honor the sacredness of a joyful, liberated childhood.

### References:

1. William Blake, *Songs of Experience*, 1794
2. Bhagavad Gita, translated by Swami Sivananda
3. Vachanamrut, Gadhada II
4. Taittiriya Upanishad
5. Shrimad Bhagavatam, Canto 1
6. M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (Romantic Theory)
7. Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake*

### Footnote:

- 1 इति ते ज्ञानमाख्यातं गुह्याद्गुह्यतरं मया |  
विमृश्यैतदशेषेण यथेच्छसि तथा कुरु || 63||
- 2 प्रत्यक्षागमलिङ्गैर्हि यद्यत्कर्मोद्भवं फलम् ।  
तत्क्षयिष्ण्वति विज्ञाय विरक्तो नरकाद्यथा ॥ ७ ॥
- 3 भिद्यते हृदयग्रन्थिश्छिद्यन्ते सर्वसंशयाः ।  
क्षीयन्ते चास्य कर्माणि तस्मिन्दृष्टे परावरे ॥ ८ ॥
- 4 नायमात्मा प्रवचनेन लभ्यो न मेधया न बहुना श्रुतेन ।  
यमेवैष वृणुते तेन लभ्यस्तस्यैष आत्मा विवृणुते तन्नू स्वाम् ॥ २३ ॥
- 5 सदृशं चेष्टते स्वस्याः प्रकृतेर्ज्ञानवानपि |  
प्रकृतिं यान्ति भूतानि निग्रहः किं करिष्यति || 33||
- 6 तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया |  
उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः || 34||
- 7 कृष्णाय वासुदेवाय देवकीनन्दनाय च ।  
नन्दगोपकुमाराय गोविन्दाय नमो नमः ॥ २१ ॥
- 8 सहस्रशीर्षा पुरुषः सहस्राक्षः सहस्रपात् ।  
स भूमिं विश्वतो वृत्वात्यतिष्ठद्दशाङ्गुलम् ॥  
सहस्रशीर्षा पुरुषः सहस्राक्षः सहस्रपात् ।  
स भूमिं विश्वतो वृत्वात्यतिष्ठद्दशाङ्गुलम् ॥
- 9 तच्छ्रुत्वा तेऽतिसन्नस्ता विमुच्य सहसोदरम् ।  
साम्बस्य ददृशुस्तस्मिन् मुषलं खल्वयस्मयम् ॥ १७ ॥