



GCSE

## English Literature

### ‘The Schoolboy’ (William Blake)

#### The Poet – context (AO3)

William Blake (1757–1827) had little formal education, leaving school at the age of 10, then studying drawing in his teens, before becoming an engraver. As an artist and poet, he gained very little recognition in his own lifetime; however, his influence grew after his death, and he is now considered to be a key figure in the Romantic movement. Although a Christian, he disagreed with the established church and was critical of authority, supporting both the French and American revolutions.

#### The Poem – context (AO3)

Blake originally included the poem in his Songs of Innocence in 1789, but he moved the poem to Songs of Experience when the collections were published together in 1794, perhaps reflecting how the speaker’s natural innocence and joy are destroyed by the experience of school. Influenced by the pastoral tradition, which idealised nature, its themes of childhood, nature and personal freedom are typical of the Romantic movement.

#### The Poem – content (AO1)

A schoolboy recalls the joy of waking up in the freedom of nature on a summer morning, while he sits in a classroom feeling imprisoned and miserable. He believes his ‘youthful spring’ is being wasted in school and that his formal education is unnatural: it kills his joy and limits his potential.

#### Key quotations (AO1)

‘I love to rise in a summer morn,  
When the birds sing on every tree;’

‘And the sky-lark sings with me.’

‘But to go to school in a summer morn,  
O! it drives all joy away;’

‘Under a cruel eye outworn.  
The little ones spend the day.’

‘Nor in my book can I take delight,’

‘How can the bird that is born for joy,  
Sit in a cage and sing’

‘How can a child when fears annoy.  
But droop his tender wing.’

‘O! father & mother, if bud are nip’d,  
And blossoms blown away.’

‘How shall the summer arise in joy...  
When the blasts of winter appear.’

“ ”

#### Language and imagery (AO2)

The poem uses a series of metaphors, mainly related to nature and the seasons. The schoolboy is compared to a caged bird; the teacher is ‘a cruel eye outworn’.

#### Example of analysing a quotation:

The metaphor ‘How can the bird that is born for joy, / Sit in a cage and sing’ suggests that, just as it’s cruel to lock up a bird, it’s also unnatural and harmful to separate a child from nature and limit its freedom. Although this is a rhetorical question, Blake omits the question mark, perhaps suggesting he sees this is a statement of fact.



### Thinking more deeply about 'The Schoolboy'

1. What is the overall mood of the first stanza? (AO1)
2. What might 'the huntsman' and his 'horn' foreshadow later in the poem? (AO1)
3. How might the content of the first stanza link to Blake being a Romantic poet? (AO3)
4. How does the second stanza contrast the first? (AO1)
5. What is the effect of the image 'under a cruel eye outworn'? (AO2)
6. In the third stanza, how do we know that the schoolboy wants to learn? (AO1)
7. What do the words 'drooping' and 'dreary' suggest about the schoolboy's day in school? (AO2)
8. What is the effect of the two rhetorical questions in the fourth stanza? (AO2)
9. To whom does the schoolboy appeal for help in the fifth stanza? (AO1)
10. Why does Blake compare school children to 'buds' that are 'nip'd' and 'blossoms' that are 'blown away'? (AO2)
11. Can you sum up Blake's argument expressed through the extended metaphor in the final two stanzas? (AO1)
12. After originally publishing this poem in his collection Songs of Innocence, why might Blake have later moved it to Songs of Experience? (AO3)

### Form and structure (AO2)

It is a lyric poem written from the point of view of the schoolboy, with the final two stanzas directly addressing his parents. The first stanza establishes the ababb rhyme scheme, which does not vary throughout the poem, perhaps reinforcing the idea of the drudgery of the school day.

### Connections and contrast

#### This list is not exhaustive and other comparisons are valid.

'The Schoolboy' could be compared and/or contrasted with these poems from the Anthology:

- 'Blackberry-Picking' – themes of nature and childhood; memory; personal emotions.
- 'Drummer Hodge' – themes of nature and childhood; a lack of power.
- 'I Shall Return' – themes of nature and childhood; personal emotions; memory.
- 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' – theme of nature; personal emotions; freedom.

### Links for Further Research

- [The Schoolboy Wikipedia page](#)
- [Zoomorphosis - a William Blake blog](#)
- [An online video biography of William Blake](#)
- [The Romantics - A BBC Documentary Series by Peter Ackroyd](#)

