

# The Barefoot Boy

By John Greenleaf Whittier

John Greenleaf Whittier was a Quaker poet who lived almost the entire 19th century and died at 84. He captured Solomon's words "Rejoice young man in the days of your childhood."

Eccles. 12

Blessings on thee, little man,  
Barefoot boy, with cheek of tan! ——— what blessings to be a sun-tanned little fella too young for shoes!  
With thy turned-up pantaloons, ——— ..whistling out of sheer joy tunes made on the spot  
And thy merry whistled tunes; ——— ..and enjoying the fare of wild strawberries  
With thy red lip, redder still  
Kissed by strawberries on the hill; ——— ..and enjoying the fare of wild strawberries  
With the sunshine on thy face,  
Through thy torn brim's jaunty grace; ——— feeling like a man of the world with the elegance of a "jaunty" hat with a torn brim.  
From my heart I give thee joy,—  
I was once a barefoot boy! ——— Mr. Whittier remembers such days with such fondness.  
Prince thou art,—the grown-up man ——— a Prince ..royalty, free to do what he will. It is the grown up who must answer to those he represents.  
Only is republican.  
Let the million-dollared ride! ——— he walks barefoot by the wealthy knowing that no amount of wealth can purchase the delight of nature and childhood's fascination.  
Barefoot, trudging at his side,  
Thou hast more than he can buy  
In the reach of ear and eye,—  
Outward sunshine, inward joy: ——— what more can a man desire?  
Blessings on thee, barefoot boy!

Oh for boyhood's painless play, ——— Whittier now longs for those bygone days  
Sleep that wakes in laughing day, ——— a carefree day of laughter awaiting discovery  
Health that mocks the doctor's rules, ——— abundant health  
Knowledge never learned of schools, ——— the fresh knowledge of nature's fascination with each day  
Of the wild bee's morning chase,  
Of the wild-flower's time and place,  
Flight of fowl and habitude  
Of the tenants of the wood;  
How the tortoise bears his shell,  
How the woodchuck digs his cell,  
And the ground-mole sinks his well;  
How the robin feeds her young,  
How the oriole's nest is hung;  
Where the whitest lilies blow,  
Where the freshest berries grow,  
Where the ground-nut trails its vine,  
Where the wood-grape's clusters shine;  
Of the black wasp's cunning way,  
Mason of his walls of clay,  
And the architectural plans  
Of gray hornet artisans!  
For, eschewing books and tasks,  
Nature answers all he asks; ——— no homework... just knowledge

Hand in hand with her he walks,  
Face to face with her he talks,  
Part and parcel of her joy,—  
Blessings on the barefoot boy!

he sees the little boy as privileged to the private joy of nature's mystery

Oh for boyhood's time of June,  
Crowding years in one brief moon,  
When all things I heard or saw,  
Me, their master, waited for.

the spring! years of knowledge are crowded into that one month of life anew

I was rich in flowers and trees,  
Humming-birds and honey-bees;  
For my sport the squirrel played,  
Plied the snouted mole his spade;

he felt like a Master with all nature serving him

For my taste the blackberry cone  
Purpled over hedge and stone;

like Adam all creation was his servant

Laughed the brook for my delight

Through the day and through the night,

Whispering at the garden wall,

Talked with me from fall to fall;

Mine the sand-rimmed pickerel pond,

Mine the walnut slopes beyond,

Mine, on bending orchard trees,

Apples of Hesperides! ————— a mythological garden cared for by nymphs

Still as my horizon grew,

Larger grew my riches too;

All the world I saw or knew

Seemed a complex Chinese toy,

Fashioned for a barefoot boy!

all seemed mine to discover  
all made for my delight

Oh for festal dainties spread,

Like my bowl of milk and bread;

Pewter spoon and bowl of wood,

On the door-stone, gray and rude!

O'er me, like a regal tent,

Cloudy-ribbed, the sunset bent,

Purple-curtained, fringed with gold,

Looped in many a wind-swung fold;

While for music came the play

Of the pied frogs' orchestra;

And, to light the noisy choir,

Lit the fly his lamp of fire.

I was monarch: pomp and joy

Waited on the barefoot boy!

how he would love to return!  
never had he the delightful food as was his bread and milk  
eaten with pewter from a wooden bowl  
from the stone front door step

the sky for his tent  
and his ornate curtained bed

serenaded by the orchestra of frogs!

the light of fire flies

Whittier says "I was the king of the earth":  
" .. waited on and served by all the earth "

Cheerily, then, my little man,  
Live and laugh, as boyhood can!

he now speaks to the little boy.  
" Enjoy life now as only a boy can "

Though the flinty slopes be hard,  
Stubble-speared the new-mown sward,  
Every morn shall lead thee through  
Fresh baptisms of the dew;  
Every evening from thy feet  
Shall the cool wind kiss the heat:  
All too soon these feet must hide  
In the prison cells of pride,  
Lose the freedom of the sod,  
Like a colt's for work be shod,  
Made to tread the mills of toil,  
Up and down in ceaseless toil:  
Happy if their track be found  
Never on forbidden ground;  
Happy if they sink not in  
Quick and treacherous sands of sin.  
Ah! that thou couldst know thy joy,  
Ere it passes, barefoot boy!

*Though the upward climb of maturity will be painful  
The new-mown field may pierce your feet...  
But each morning's dew will freshen them and heal them...  
And the evening's wind cool them*

*Enjoy youth because someday you can't go innocent, un-presuming,  
and humble. You will have to put on shoes and  
and locked up in the cell of "how you look."  
(or "you'll become a teen-ager")  
like a farm animal  
You will be shod for work*

*Back and forth in ceaseless labor. It's as if the curse of Eden will find you*

*And those same blessed feet will be tempted to wander somewhere that  
they shouldn't...*

*.. and end up in the tragedy of quicksand!*

*Oh that you knew what you had while you could appreciate it!*

*.. because it will pass..*

*But does it really have to? Does responsibility and labor and  
rising infirmity of old age mean that I must lose my fascination with  
nature and learning and discovery when all of eternity will be that  
very thing?*

*I choose not.*