

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM

by Stephen Spender

Main Theme

Stephen Spender is proclaimed as a socialist and a pacifist. In this poem, he concentrates on the theme of social injustice and class inequalities. The poet, is writing about an elementary classroom in a slum, questions the value of education in such a context, suggesting that maps of the world and good literature may rise hopes and aspirations, which will never be fulfilled. The poor, emaciated slum children are like captives in the world of darkness, poverty and hopelessness. Through this poem, the poet expresses his outrage at the insensitive attitude of the rich & privileged people, towards the unfortunate children of the slum school. But he is not pessimistic. He qualifies it saying that all the learned people of the society are able to transport the education beyond boundries of the classroom will spell hope for the future.

Stanza wise word-meaning and explanation

Stanza -1

Far far from gusty waves these children's faces
 Like rootless weeds, the hair torn round their pallor:
 The tall girl with her weighed-down head. The paper-
 seeming boy, with rat's eyes. The stunted, unlucky heir
 Of twisted bones, reciting a father's gnarled disease,
 His lesson from his desk. At back of the dim class
 One unnoted, sweet and young. His eyes live in a dream,
 Of squirrel's game, in the tree room, other than this

Words / expressions with their meanings–

- | | | |
|-----|------------------------|--|
| 1. | gusty | blowing strongly |
| 2. | weeds | useless wild plants |
| 3. | <i>torn round</i> | <i>scattered around in disorder</i> |
| 4. | <i>weighed down</i> | <i>bent down due to depression and burden of poverty</i> |
| 5. | <i>paper seeming</i> | <i>looking lean and thin</i> |
| 6. | stunted | under developed |
| 7. | heir | successor |
| 8. | reciting | repeating |
| 9. | gnarled | knotty, twisted |
| 10. | unnoted | not noticed |
| 11. | <i>other than this</i> | <i>other than this room of the school</i> |

Explanation –

The slum school children are far away from the fast, bright and hopeful life of the rich world outside. These children have no hope on their faces. Their faces are unkempt and dirty. Their hair are scattered untidily around their pale faces. The children appear like rootless weeds (implying they are unwanted and lack stability). The tall girl who is sitting there is depressed due to the burden of poverty and keeps her head down. The boy who is sitting there is very thin and his eyes are bulging out like that of the rat

(implying hungry eyes). His growth is blocked and the body appears under developed. He is an unfortunate heir who has inherited the twisted bones of his father. Actually, he is not reciting a lesson from his desk. He is enumerating the disease inherited from his father (the boy only has his crippling disease to show in the class). A sweet young boy sits at the back of the dim class. He is unnoticed. Dreams seem to be alive in his eyes. He dreams of outdoor games, outside his dull classroom in a dirty slum. He dreams of squirrel playing games in the hollow of the tree. His dreams are of the places other than his repulsive classroom (Young boy lost in the world of his dreams. He creates his own fantastic world where he plays like a squirrel in her tree room. The dull & monotonous environment of the classroom does not interest him).

Questions

Q.1 What does gusty waves mean? **(1)**

A.1 _____

Q.2 Why does the poet call the boy, an unlucky heir? What is it that he has inherited? **(2)**

A.2 _____

Q.3 How do the faces of the children of this slum school look like? **(1)**

A.3 _____

Q.4 Explain 'weighed-down head' **(1)**

A.4 _____

Q.5 Why is the child 'reciting a father's gnarled disease'? **(1)**

A.5 _____

Q.6 What is the dream of that unnoted, sweet and young boy sitting at the back? **(1)**

A.6 _____

Stanza - 2

On sour cream walls, donations. Shakespeare's head,

Cloudless at dawn, civilized dome riding all cities.
 Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. Open-handed map
 Awarding the world its world. And yet, for these
 Children, these windows, not this map, their world,
 Where all their future's painted with a fog,
 A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky
 Far far from rivers, capes, and stars of words.

Words / expressions with their meanings–

- | | | |
|----|------------------------|--|
| 1. | sour | unpleasant |
| 2. | Tyrolese valley | valley in Tyrol in Austria |
| 3. | sealed in | closed in |
| 4. | lead sky | bluish grey sky (representing sorrow and hopelessness) |
| 5. | cape | a part of land projecting into a sea |
| 6. | <i>civilized dome</i> | <i>institutions of the civilized world! Society</i> |
| 7. | belled | having bells |
| 8. | <i>open handed map</i> | <i>map hung on the classroom wall representing important rich and civilized people</i> |

Explanation –

The gifts given as donations and the picture of Shakespeare are hung on the unpleasant creamy walls (reflecting despondency). But they are useless. Shakespeare and literature are no good to them. The other things are also hung on the classroom walls like the picture of a clear sky at dawn and a beautiful Tyrolese valley (indicating beauty and hope with its bells and flowers) along with a dome of an ancient city building standing for civilization and progress (the rich people pretend to be generous by donating these things to the children, they feel they have gifted them the beautiful world through these donations). But for the slum children, their limited world is what they can see through the windows of the classroom. Their future is foggy, bleak and dull. Their life/world is confined within the narrow streets of the slum enclosed by the bluish grey sky. Their world is far from rivers, seas that indicate adventure and beautiful world, they are also far away from stars which symbolizes wisdom that can empower their future.

Questions

Q.1 What is the poet's opinion of the map, pictures and the portrait of Shakespeare that adorn the walls of the classroom? (2)

A.1 _____

Q.2 Explain: 'Awarding the world its world' (1)

A.2 _____

Q.3 Why are the walls of the classroom described as being 'sour cream'. (1)

A.3

Q.4 Which world is of the children in a slum school and which world is not their world? (1)

A.4

Q.5 What is the future of these children? (1)

A.5

Q.6 What do they crave for – a narrow street or rivers and capes? (1)

A.6

Q.7 What are the narrow streets symbolic of? (1)

A.7

Q.8 What does the map on the wall seem to proclaim? (1)

A.8

Stanza - 3

Surely, Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example,
With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal
For lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes
From fog to endless night? On their slag heap, these children
Wear skins peeped through by bones and spectacles of steel
With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.
All of their time and space are foggy slum
So blot their maps with slums as big as doom

Words / expressions with their meanings–

- | | | |
|----|---------|----------|
| 1. | slyly | secretly |
| 2. | cramped | narrow |

- | | | |
|----|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 3. | slag | waste material |
| 4. | <i>peeped through</i> | <i>emerging</i> |
| 5. | foggy | full of fog / uncertain |
| 6. | doom | hell |
| 7. | <i>their maps</i> | <i>maps with places for the rich</i> |

Explanation –

Shakespeare is described as wicked as he holds the key to charmed world of letters and unfortunately for these children, there is no way that they can enter that world and the map is bad example for them as it does not hold any place for these slum children. They are cruel temptations for the slum children. These poor innocent children long to have adventure (ships), a better life (sun) and love, as they are depicted on the classroom walls. These children's lives are confined to the narrow holes (dark slums) that they are living in and their lives secretly turn around in their pitiable state.

They only have uncertainty (fog) and hopelessness (endless night) with themselves. The poet has compared their emaciated wasted bodies to slag (waste) heaped together, their bones peep out of their flesh (because of malnourishment). These children wear steel spectacles with cracked glasses looking like repaired pieces of a glass-bottle lying on stones (suggesting immense poverty). All their time and space is confined to the uncertain world of slums. These slums are living hells and they are a blot on the progress of the rich and civilized world.

Questions

Q.1 Why is Shakespeare described as wicked? What effect does he have on the children? (2)

A.1

Q.2 Describe the world of the children as shown in this stanza. (2)

A.2

Q.3 Explain, 'from fog to endless night'. (1)

A.3

Q.4 What does the reference to slag heap mean? What does it indicate about the life of the children? (2)

A.4

Stanza - 4

Unless, governor, inspector, visitor,

This map becomes their window and these windows
That shut upon their lives like catacombs,
Break O break open till they break the town
And show the children green fields, and make their world
Run azure on gold sands, and let their tongues
Run naked into books the white and green leaves open
History theirs whose language is the sun

Words / expressions with their meanings–

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. | <i>this map becomes their windows</i> | <i>the map of the world becomes their map and may include places like the little school in a slum,</i> |
| 2. | <i>shut upon their lives</i> | <i>block their progress</i> |
| 3. | <i>catacombs</i> | <i>burial chambers (implying the near death existence of these children)</i> |
| 4. | <i>azure</i> | <i>sky-blue</i> |
| 5. | <i>gold sands</i> | <i>golden sand on the coast</i> |
| 6. | <i>tongues run naked</i> | <i>express themselves freely</i> |

Explanation –

There is no coordination between the map of the civilized world and the world of the children. Governors, teachers, inspectors and visitors must abridge this gap. They must peep into the world of the children living in slums and make their world the world of the children too. Their unsuitable environment of the slums has shut all their gates of progress. Their slums are like the internal dark part of graves. He uses the words ‘Break O break open’ to say that they have to break out from the miserable hopeless life of the slum world so that they can wander beyond the slums and their town on to the green fields. These obstacles should be broken. Everything that binds them should be broken and they must be allowed to breathe in the open air. Let them come out of their narrow lanes and dirty slums of the town. Their world should extend to the sky-blue & waves rising over the golden sands (indicating the unlimited world). Let the pages of wisdom be open for them. They should also be provided with the opportunity to learn lessons from nature. Let their tongue run freely without any check or fear (they must taste all joys of life). Only those people make or create history whose language has the warmth and strength of the sun (people whose language has the touch of humanity, those who have the true knowledge and through this they can break the chains of prevailing norms, can create history. The poets wants ‘like’ opportunities to be made available to these children).

These deprived children must be taught to express themselves freely.

He wishes that all distinctions of the rich and the poor and all forms of injustice should be wiped out so that no childhood gets lost in the gloomy darkness and ignorance in the slums.

Questions

Q.1 How can ‘this map’ become ‘their window’? **(1)**

A.1 _____

Q.2 What have shut upon their lives like catacombs? (1)

A.2

Q.3 Explain: “....Till they break the town’ . (1)

A.3

Q.4 What does ‘green fields’ and ‘gold sands’ symbolize? (1)

A.4

Q.5 Explain: “let their tongues run naked into books.” (2)

A.5

Q.6 Who create history? (1)

A.6

UNSOLVED QUESTIONS

NCERT Questions

Short answer type questions (Word limit: 30-40 words) [2 marks each]

Q.1 What do you think is the colour of 'sour cream'? Why do you think the poet has used this expression to describe the class room walls?

A.1 _____

Q.2 The walls of the classroom are decorated with the pictures of 'Shakespeare', 'buildings with domes', 'world maps' and beautiful valley. How do these contrast with the world of these children?

A.2 _____

Q.3 What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change?

A.3 _____

Exercise for Practice

Short answer type questions (Word limit: 30-40 words) [2 marks each]

Q.1 What is the social issue that Stephen Spender raises in the poem? What message of hope does he spread across inspite of the injustice prevailing all around?

A.1 _____

Q.2 'History theirs whose language is the sun'. How far does this statement of the poet hold true and good?

A.2

Q.3 What should governors, teachers, inspectors and other important and powerful people do to improve the lot of children living in slums?

A.3

Q.4 Bring out the ironical situation in the system of education of the slum children.

A.4

Q.5 What do the descriptions of the children in the classroom indicate? What is the reason for this?

A.5

Flashback

CBSE 2008

Q.1 Why does the poet, Stephen Spender call the map a bad example? (2)

A.1

CBSE 2009

Q.1 How does the world depicted on the classroom walls differ from the world of the slum children? (2)

A.1

CBSE 2010

Q.1 Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow: (4)

.....On their slag heap, these children
Wear skins peeped through by bones and spectacles of steel
With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.
All of their time and space are foggy slum.
So blot their maps with slums as big as doom.

(i) Which two images are used to describe these slums? (2)

A.i

(ii) What sort of life do these children lead? (1)

A. ii

(iii) Which figure of speech is used in the last line? (1)

A.iii

CBSE 2011

Q.1 Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow: (4)

Break O break open till they break the town
And show the children to green fields, and make their world
Run azure on gold sands, and let their tongues
Run naked into books the white and green leaves open
History theirs whose language is the sun.

(i) To whom does 'they' refer? (1)

A.i

(ii) What would they break?

(1)

A.ii

(iii) What other freedom should they enjoy?

(1)

A.iii
