

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum

-Stephen Spender

(1909-1995)

Theme

Social injustice and class inequalities

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Importance Of Education

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum



-Stephen Spender

(1909-1995)



About the Poet : Stephen Spender was an English poet and an essayist. He left University College, Oxford without taking a degree and went to Berlin in 1930. Spender took a keen interest in politics and declared himself to be a socialist and pacifist. Books by Spender include *Poems of Dedication*, *The Edge of Being*, *The Creative Element*, *The Struggle of the Modern* and an autobiography, *World Within World*. In, *An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum*, he has concentrated on themes of social injustice and class inequalities.

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Background :



In the poem Spender describes the sad plight of children of an elementary school classroom in a slum. The children are destined to be poor with no escape from it. The poet distinguishes the elite from the poor. He says that the fruits of education and freedom should reach this downtrodden society.

In the poem Spender exposes a widespread neglect of children of all nationalities, races & ethnicities. In the poem mal-nourished students reveal a sad & hidden segment of society, prevalent throughout the world. There is no mention of a particular country in the poem.

Children are innocent beings dependent on the helping hands of humanity.

Although future holds little promise of fortune for the children, Spender sees a glimmer of hope in education.

The students in the classroom represent the working-class, but they hold the answer to the changed society.

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The poem is allegorical. An allegory is a narrative, whether in prose or verse, in which a character, place or event is used to deliver a broader message about real-world issues and occurrences.

In the poem Spender uses the classroom & the children as an allegory about the struggle between proletariat & bourgeoisie.

CHARACTERS :

A narrator - Spender delivers the crux of his message on poverty & education through a narrator, who is unidentified, difficult to pinpoint, may be a teacher. The narrator fuels a desire for change.

A tall girl – Weighed-down head (depressed due to burden)

A paper-seeming Boy – Eyes like that of a rat

An unfortunate boy - Stunted (not fully grown), inherited his father's gnarled disease that he displays while reciting his lesson

One unnoted, sweet & young boy – Dreams of squirrel's game other than the dull classroom.

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SUMMARY

Stanza - 1 :

A clear, dreary depiction of unfortunate & neglected students in a classroom



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 tree room, other than this.

These children have pale and lifeless faces and some are even diseased. They are like rootless weeds which are uncared and unwanted with their disorderly hair torn around their faces. They are depressed with burdens of miserable life and keep their heads down. They have stunted growth. One of the girls is apparently burdened with the miseries of poverty. One of the boys has inherited his father's disease and has stunted growth. A sweet young boy is sitting at the back of the dim classroom. He dreams of a squirrel's game in the trees. He yearns for a carefree life.

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SUMMARY

Stanza – 2 :

Children are trapped crushed by poor socio-economic conditions – Division of the world into two



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.

The off-white colour reveals crumbling and decaying walls on which are hung the donations given to the school in the form of pictures, paintings, Shakespeare's portrait and maps which are meaningless for the children. They exhibit the world of the elite and the privileged while the children in the slum have a future that is sealed and confined to the slum. Their future is dark and limited. The donations on the walls only add to the frustration of the children. They are tempted to attain what would be unattainable for them. The children studying in these schools do not have the means to go and explore the world. For them what they see through their classroom windows, the narrow street and the lead sky is the world.

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SUMMARY

Stanza – 3 :

Pitiable condition of the children & the poet's jibe at the upper class



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.

Shakespeare is wicked for them as he has written only about the rich, beautiful world tempting them to steal. The map is of no interest to them because it does not reflect the world they live in cramped and dark lanes. Their lives start in darkness and ends in utter darkness. They are undernourished and their poverty has distorted their vision as they spend their whole time in foggy slums. Their slum is considered a disaster that tarnish the beautiful world.

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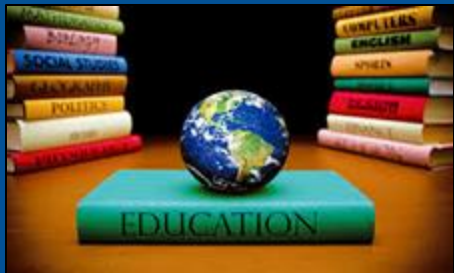
SUMMARY

Stanza – 4 :

The poet replaces pessimism with hope and appeals for a helping hand and change



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 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.



Unless the governor inspector and visitor play a vital role in bringing about a change, their lives will remain in dark. The slum children will experience a brighter future only when the gap between the two worlds is bridged. They should break the barriers till the children come out of the dirty surroundings and their world should be extended into the green fields, golden sands and bright world. They should have the freedom of expression and their outlook be broadened. Thus, the children in the slum can progress only if they are given good education and the freedom to move into a world of opportunities and progress. The poet also states that history is made only by those people who have the power of knowledge. Hence, educating and letting the children into a free world of opportunities would release them from the suffocating, wretched life in a slum.



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The poet appeals for bridging the gap between the rich & the poor



... from poverty to prosperity

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UNDERSTANDING THE EXPRESSION

Far far away from gusty waves	Her weighed-down head
Like rootless weeds	The paper-seeming boy, with rat's eyes
The stunted, unlucky heir of twisted bones	reciting a father's gnarled disease
Squirrel's game, in tree room	sour cream walls
Shakespeare's head	cloudless at dawn
Civilized dome riding all cities	Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley
Open-handed map	Awarding the world its world
These windows, not this map, their world	Future's painted with a fog
far far from rivers, capes and stars of words	sealed in with a lead sky
From fog to endless night	slag heap
wear skins peeped through by bones	like bottle bits on stones
time and space are foggy slum	so blot their maps as big as dooms
shut upon their lives like catacombs	break o break open till they break the town
Run azure on gold sands	Let their tongues run naked into books
the white and green leaves open	History theirs whose language is the sun

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POINTS TO PONDER

- His eyes live in a dream of squirrel's game
- Open-handed map awarding the world its world
- Their future's painted with a fog
- So blot their maps with slums as big as doom
- Break o break till they break the town
- Let their tongue run naked into the books
- History theirs whose language is the sun

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VOCABULARY

Gusty waves: breezy winds

Pallor: pale, dull face

Stunted: not fully grown due to malnutrition

Gnarled: Knotted, twisted

weeds: unwanted plants that grow on their own

Paper seeming boy: very thin boy, as thin as a sheet of paper

heir: successor

Sour: unpleasant, off-white

Donations: things given or received in charity

Dawn: early morning, sunrise

civilized dome: refers to the architectural marvels of the developed world

Tyrolese valley: A beautiful ice-free valley in Austria

Sealed: shut or locked

lead: here, dark future of kids

Cape : a piece of land extending beyond the adjacent coast

Wicked: evil

Tempted: lured, attracted

Slyly: secretly

Cramped: confined

Slag: weak

Mended: repaired

Blot: to mark with a spot

Doom: disaster

Catacombs: tomb, cemetery

Azure: deep blue



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LITERARY DEVICES

Similes:

like rootless weeds, like bottle bits on stones, their lives like catacombs, slum as big as doom

Metaphors :

The paper-seeming boy, civilized dome riding all, open-handed map, their future's painted with a fog, A narrow street sealed in with a lead, lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes, History is theirs whose language is the sun

Symbols:

gusty waves, the sun

Alliteration :

Far far from, Surely Shakespeare

Imagery :

Rootless weeds, lead sky etc

Repetition :

far far



STRUCTURE Of The Poem & RHYME SCHEME

The poem is of 32 lines and divided into 4 equal stanzas of 8 lines. There is extensive use of simile, metaphor, symbolism and imagery. The poem does not have any particular rhyme scheme and is written in **free verse**.

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ASSIGNMENT : QUESTIONS TO TEST COMPREHENSION

Sample Extract-based Questions / Objective

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

- a. Who are these children?
- b. What does the poet mean by 'gusty waves'?
- c. What has possibly 'weighed-down' the tall girl's head?
- d. Identify the figure of speech used in these lines.

2. At back of the dim class

One unnoted, sweet and young. His eyes live in a dream,
Of squirrel's game, in tree room, other than this

- a. Name the poet.
- b. Why was the class dim?
- c. Who was sitting at the back of the dim class?
- d. What was he dreaming about?

3. 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.

- a. What is the condition of the classroom walls?
- b. What aspects show a civilized race?
- c. What is the specialty of Tyrolese valley?
- d. Explain 'Awarding the world its world'.

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ASSIGNMENT : QUESTIONS TO TEST COMPREHENSION

Short Answer Questions (30-40 words)

1. What will happen if the children come out of the bonds that bind them?
2. 'Tongues run naked'. Explain.
3. What according to the poet, the people of the civilized world should do before the children revolt and destroy the town?
4. How does Stephen Spender protest against social injustices and class inequalities in this poem?
5. Why does the poet say "History theirs whose language is the sun?"
6. What do you think is the colour of 'sour cream'? Why do you think the poet has used this expression to describe the classroom walls?
7. The walls of the classroom are decorated with the pictures of 'Shakespeare', 'buildings with domes', 'world maps' and beautiful valleys. How do these contrast with the world of the children?
8. What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be changed?
9. What does the world of the slum children consist of?
10. Why does the poet refer to the slum as 'catacombs'?
11. Mention the poetic devices used in the poem.
12. Why are the children compared to 'rootless weeds'?
13. What does 'squirrel's game' in the poem denote?
14. Why is the boy reciting a lesson from his desk called 'unlucky heir of twisted bones'?
15. 'So blot their maps with slums as big as doom'. Explain
16. Why is 'Shakespeare wicked' and the 'map a bad example'?
17. How do ships and sun and love tempt the children to steal?