

A.B.M. College, Golmuri

English Core

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An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum

- Stephen Spender

About the Poet

Sir Stephen Harold Spender (28 February 1909 – 16 July 1995) was an English poet, novelist and essayist who concentrated on themes of social injustice and the class struggle in his work. He was appointed Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the United States Library of Congress in 1965.

Summary

This poem by Stephen Spender gives a vivid description of a school classroom in a slum and the children in the class.

The faces of the children are dull. Their appearance shows that they are unwanted. The children have gloomy faces. Their heads hanging low in sadness due to being poor. They have diseased bodies inherited from their parents and are victims of poverty. At the dim end of the room, sits one child who has bright eyes which seem to dream - of playing outside with squirrels. He is different from the others in the dim, dark room.

The walls of the classroom are dirty. People have donated different charts and images which have been put up on them. One of them is a picture of the great playwright Shakespeare. His head is bald and resembles the rising Sun. The next poster is of the Tyrolese valley, full of churches and flowers which symbolize the beautiful creations of nature. Another one is a map of

the World. To these children the world is not the one shown in these pictures, but it is the one they see out of the class room window. They are trapped in the slums. Their future is dim and hopeless. They have a dark future as their options in life are limited and are covered with dismay. They are far away from the bright light of knowledge.

Comprehending these pictures is beyond their abilities. They hate everyone and for them, Shakespeare is a wicked man. As no one loves them, they dislike everyone. The desire for love and acceptance forces them to do crimes like stealing. The children are so skinny that their clothes are like a skin and their skeleton is visible through them. This is due to lack of nutrition. They have worn looking glasses made of steel which are cheap, heavy and uncomfortable. Their chances of fulfilling their dreams and moving out have been further reduced by building bigger slums. Until they come out of the slums, they will never know what the world looks like. The Government system which makes these slums is the cause for these people to live in them. The education system is such that it forces them to live in these slums. They are not given the right to dream beyond these slums. They have been restricted to the slums.

The poet requests the authorities to allow these children to go out of these slums so that the maps on the walls of the class room become a reality for them. They should be taken to the green fields rather than the dim slums. The sunny, warm sand of the beaches and the bright blue sky will instill a hunger for knowledge in their minds. Then they will absorb all of it. Then these children will become economically empowered. The poem ends with a powerful line - those who make history are the ones who shine like the Sun.

Explanation

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum is a beautifully penned down poem by Stephen Spender that exposes the glaring gaps and marginalization that occurs so often in our societies. Spender is publicly a scrupulous objector and a socialist. The poet aims to portray the conditions of the youngsters residing in the slum. The poet compares the conditions of the “haves” (Privileged children) and the “have-nots” (Underprivileged children of slum).

First stanza

The [children](#) staying in slums have a life full of struggle and lack hope and optimism. They are far away from the velvety world outside. They lack those amenities which are available to privileged people. They are as unwanted as the rootless weed. They can only wish for the velvety and comfortable life of the world outside. These children have no hope on their faces. Their faces are tousled and dirty. Their hair is scattered untidily around their pale faces. They lack stability. The tall girl is sitting with her head down because she is depressed and overburdened with poverty. There is a boy who is as lean and thin as paper, his miserable underdeveloped body with eyes bulging out like rat reflects the greed he has felt for an eternity. His growth is blocked, and the body appears underdeveloped and malnourished. He is an unfortunate heir

who has inherited the twisted bones of his father. He is not reciting a lesson from his desk but is enumerating the diseases inherited from his father. At the back of that unlit classroom, is a sweet young boy who goes unnoticed. Dreams seem to be alive in his eyes. His eyes have that spark of dreams to be part of that world outside the classroom. He dreams of squirrels playing games in the hollow of the tree. His dreams are of the places other than his repulsive classroom. He is lost in his imagination creating his own fantasy world where he plays like a squirrel in its tree room. He is not interested in the monotonous environment of the classroom.

Second stanza

The poet depicts the critical condition of the pale and dingy yellow walls of the classroom. He compares the colour of the walls to “sour cream”. The classroom has a picture of Shakespeare which was probably donated. The poet further compares the gifts given as donations and the picture of Shakespeare hung on the unpleasant creamy walls depicting dejection. To them, they are of no use. Shakespeare and literature have no place in their lives. There is also a picture of a clear sky hung on the classroom walls which depict dawn and a beautiful Tyrolean valley, which indicates beauty and hope with its bells and colourful flowers representing the world that celebrates civilization, progress and heavenly splendour. There is also a world map hung on the wall which is of no use to them as their world is narrow and stuck in the boundaries of poverty and misery. Their future is shaky, dark and foggy. Their world is confined within the narrow streets of the slum enclosed by the bluish grey sky. They are far away from rivers, seas that resemble adventure, excitement and beauty as well as from the stars that symbolize wisdom that can brighten their future.

Third Stanza

The poet feels that *Shakespeare is ‘wicked’ as he is misleading those naïve children through his words portraying the world* of ships, sun and love which is not only unreal for them, but it has a negative impact on their minds. He feels that this would instigate them to steal or take unfair means as they desperately make attempts to escape from their cramped holes. Their existence is indeed, very sad. These deprived children are so skinny that it appears that they are ‘wearing’ skins. The spectacles they are wearing have glass which has been broken and mended. Their entire appearance reflects their misery and deprivation. The poet shows his indignation by suggesting that the maps on the classroom walls should show the reality of their life, it must show the huge slums instead of beautiful scenic graphics.

Fourth Stanza

The poet tries to appease and appeal to the teachers, governor, inspector and visitor to become aware and sensitive and do something to improve the conditions of these deprived children. They must try to align the world and transform their map unlike the map of children with amenities. The poet hopes that the bureaucrats and authorities

understand their moral responsibilities and free these deprived ones from traps of their graves (A metaphor for the slum). He wants all the barriers that keep them away from achieving the true education to be broken down. They should be given an opportunity to come out of their narrow and shabby lanes and extend to the blue sky & waves rising over the golden sands. The children must be given the freedom to experience the wholesome bounties of nature's fields. These deprived children must be taught to express themselves freely. He wishes that all distinctions that separate them from merging with the outside world be removed from their lives and that they too may have hope of a better, more secure future.

Theme

In this poem, Stephen Spender deals with the theme of social injustice and class inequalities. He presents the theme by talking of two different and incompatible worlds. The world of the rich and the civilized has nothing to do with the world of narrow lanes and cramped holes. The gap between these two worlds highlights social disparities and class inequalities.

Central Idea

Stephen Spender has presented a true picture of the life of the school children living in the slum of Tyrolean Valley of Austrian Alpine Province. The children are in a very miserable condition due to their poverty and illiteracy. They are depressed. Their pale faces express sadness. They look lean, skinny and bonny. They are like rootless weeds which can't resist anything for their existence. They are physically very weak and under nourished. Spender voices his concern for these children who live all their life in slums and have no opportunity to enjoy the real blessings of life. He makes a frantic appeal to the educated and affluent sections of the society to better the lot of the slum children through education. It will remove social injustice and class inequality.

Q1. Read the stanzas given below and answer the questions that follow each:

1. Far far from gusty waves these children's faces.

Like rootless weeds, the hair torn around their pallor:

The tall girl with her weighed-down head. The paper seeming

Boy, with rat's eyes.

Questions

(a) Where, do you think, are these children sitting?

(b) How do the faces and hair of these children look?

(c) Why is the head of the tall girl 'weighed down'?

(d) What do you understand by 'The paper-seeming boy, with rat eyes'?

Answers:

(a) These children are sitting in the school classroom in a slum which is far away from the winds or waves blowing strongly.

(b) The faces of these children look pale. Their uncombed and unkempt hair looks like rootless wild plants.

(c) The head of the tall girl is 'weighed down' by the burdens of the world. She feels depressed, ill and exhausted.

(d) It means that the boy is exceptionally thin, weak and hungry.

2.....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.

Questions

(a)What are the two images used to describe these slums? What do these images convey?

(b)What sort of life do such children lead?

(c)What blot' their maps? Whose maps?

(d)What does the poet convey through 'So blot their maps with slums as big as doom'?

Answers:

(a)The images used to describe the slums are:

(i) slag heap

(ii) Bottle bits on stones

(iii) foggy slums

(iv) slums as big as doom. (Any two acceptable)

These images convey the misery of the children and the poverty of their dirty and unhygienic surroundings.

(b) In the dirty and unhygienic surroundings the slum children lead very pathetic and miserable lives full of woes, wants, diseases, poverty and uncertainty.

(c) These living hells i.e. these dirty slums blot their maps. These are the maps of the civilized world—the world of the rich and great.

(d) The poet conveys his protest against social injustice and class inequalities. He wants the islands of prosperity to be flooded with the dirt and stink of the slums.

3. Break O breaks 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.

Questions

(a) 'Break O breaks open'. What should they 'break*?'

(b) Explain: ' . till they break the town'.

(c) Where will 'their world' extend up to then?

(d) What other freedom should they enjoy?

Answers:

(a) They should break all the barriers and obstacles that bind these children and confine them to ugly and dirty surroundings.

(b) Till they come out of the dirty surroundings and slums of the town and come out to the green field and breathe in the open air.

(c) Then their world will be extended to the gold sands and azure waves as well as to the green fields.

(d) They should enjoy freedom of acquiring knowledge as well as freedom of expression. Let the pages of wisdom (contained in the books) be open to them and let their tongues run freely without any check or fear.

Q2- What do you think is the color of 'sour cream'? Why do you think the poet has used this expression to describe the classroom walls?

A2- The color of sour cream is pale and dull. The poet used this expression to describe the classroom walls because the walls were not freshly painted. The walls of the classroom were dull and were not beautiful.

Q3- 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 these children?

A3- The various pictures on the wall are not similar to the world of these slum dwelling children because they have never got adequate facilities and education. They have always seen crime happening around them. That is why it is said in the poem that for these children Shakespeare is a wicked man. Not only this, their world is the dirty slum area in which they live which is continuously expanding. Hence, the world maps which never show slums and the beautiful valley which is never seen and is out of reach of such children are in total contrast to what they see as their world.

Q4- What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change?

A4- The poet wants the governor, inspector and visitors to visit the school. He wants them to see the plight of these kids and do something for their betterment. These kids should be provided with best amenities in order to make their life better. He wants these kids to visit beautiful places which are granted by the nature with its beauty. This will instill a hunger in them to study in order to make their life better.

Q5. What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change?

Ans. The poet wants a better life for these children of the slums. He wants that they should be given better surroundings and better opportunity to study.

Q6. How is the atmosphere inside an elementary slum classroom different from the one outside it?

Ans. The children sitting inside the elementary classroom are sick and undernourished. The atmosphere and surroundings are pale and morose. The world outside is filled with beauty and luxuries.

Q7. Which words/phrases in the poem ‘An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum’ show that the slum children are suffering from acute malnutrition?

Ans. The words or phrases in the poem which show that the slum children are suffering from acute malnutrition are, ‘faces like rootless weeds’, ‘the hair torn round their pallor’, ‘paper-seeming boy’, ‘stunted, unlucky heir of twisted bones’ and ‘wear skins peeped through by bones’.

Q8. The poet says, ‘And yet, for these Children, these windows, not this map, their world’. Which world do these children belong to? Which world is, inaccessible to them?

Ans. There is a map on the wall. There are pictures, which show beautiful hills and valleys. But the world of the poor school children is not what is shown in the map. Their world is not sunny. It is darkened with the fog of poverty and pain from their slum only dull and dreary sky can be seen.

Q9. Why does Stephen Spender feel the maps in the elementary school classroom are meaningless?

Ans. Stephen Spender feels that the maps in the elementary classroom are meaningless because the children in the classroom would never be able to reach those places.

Q10. What message does Stephen Spender convey through the poem, ‘An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum’?

Ans. The poet wants freedom from a life of hunger and misery for the poor children. He wishes that the children should be provided with quality education. They should be brought out from their filthy surroundings into the comforting lap of nature.