

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM ***BY-Stephen Spender***

About the poet:

Stephen Spender (1909-1995) along with W. H. Auden and Cecil Day Lewis, who were his contemporaries at the Oxford University, pioneered the poetic movement of 1930s. A product of the modern age, Spender who had been through the devastating effects of the wars, resorted to being a pacifist. A modern man's dilemma of disorientation and alienation was his too. These sensitive individuals were trying to find new values to sustain themselves. Like most of the poets of the 30s, Spender too was influenced by Marxist and Freudian philosophies. His socialist spirit is reflected in his concern for the underprivileged children of the slums. One must remember that during the war of Spain, these poets supported the Republicans against the Monarchy. He longed to abridge the distance between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'.

Summary:

In 'An Elementary....' Spender makes a frantic appeal to the educated and affluent sections of the society, to better the lot of the slum children through education. The style adopted by Spender is simple and lucid which is dominated by the usage of similes, imagery and metaphors. He has done away with the regular rhyme in order to convey the effect of social disorder, confusion and chaos.

The poet begins the poem by giving the image of 'gusty winds' and tells us how these children grow up with pale faces, far from the lap of nature and beauty of nature. He goes on to give a vivid description of the students in the classroom. He compares their hair to the 'rootless weeds', meaning dry uprooted grass. He then focuses on a tall girl whose head is weighed down by the atrocities of abject poverty and misfortune. There is also a paper seeming boy, thin undernourished and famished but with 'rat's eyes' looking for some food. We see one with a stunted growth, whose only inheritance unfortunately is his father's rheumatism. No wealth ironically but a disfigured body. Finally, there is one sweet and young yearning to play the squirrel's game and to escape the drudgery of this classroom in the slum. All images of deprivation and abject poverty.

In the second stanza, the poet gives a touching description of the slum classroom saying how poor and ill-equipped their environment is. The sour cream walls were perhaps painted with donations long ago. This further adds to the sad ambiance of the poem. The mention of Shakespeare's head in an area where the value of education is minimal, the reference to such literary personalities raises hope and aspiration, which will never be fulfilled. The slum is dull and monotonous. It is squeezed and suppressed under the so called civilized domes. The children here are unaware of the beauty of the sky at dawn. The poet goes on to use expressions such as 'belled flowers', 'Tyrolese Valley' to show the natural beauty, the children are deprived of. They spend their entire lives on slag heaps. Unfortunately, their world is untraceable on the map they see. For them what they see from the broken windows is their world. A world covered with fog suggesting their world is bleak and unclear. Their home is a narrow congested stretch with a lead sky (heavily polluted) which is far from rivers, capes and stars.

In the third stanza, the poet calls Shakespeare wicked and the map a bad example as in their life literary training is a far cry. The ships, sun and love symbolise the brighter aspects of life whereas their life is in utter darkness. To reach the world beyond they are even tempted to steal. This existence in cramped holes is foggy and sometimes totally dark. They make a pathetic sight sitting on the slag heaps, wearing skin on bones and spectacles of steel with glass like bits of bottles on the stones. Their future seems blurred and their dreams are shattered. The poet goes on to say that their maps must be blotted with slums which are as big or as worse as doom.

In the final stanza, Spender makes a frantic appeal to the city authorities to liberate them from the existence of a life buried in the debris of discarded waste- to break out of these catacombs and see the azure sky, the green fields, the glittering golden sands, to enable them to educate themselves with it all for "History theirs whose language is the sun." It is only the educated who can change the course of history. The poem ends in an optimistic note.

QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS:

Q1. 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?

Ans. Sour cream indicates the colour cream or dirty white. The poet has used this expression to describe the poor dull and ill-equipped environment of the classroom. The walls were painted long ago by donations and since then no attention has been given to them. We see the neglect these children face. It adds to the dull ambiance.

Q2. The walls of the classroom are decorated with pictures of Shakespeare, buildings with domes, world maps and beautiful valleys. How do these contrast with the world of these children?

Ans. All these totally contrast with the world of the children in the slum. They get half education, the value of education for the children is minimal and to have these pictures which are symbols of high quality education is incongruous here. The buildings with domes are examples of a civilised world, the world unknown to them. The world map is irrelevant to them because the slums, their world cannot be located by them. Finally, the beautiful valley with rivers and capes is meaningless to them. They just have the polluted sky to watch from the broken window panes. These children are deprived of natural beauty.

Q3. What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their life be changed?

Ans. 'History theirs, whose language is the sun.' Only the educated can change the course of history. Hence, the poet wants the children of the slums to be educated so that they are ready to face all odds in their lives. The poet makes a frantic appeal to all the authorities to liberate these children from the darkness of their lives and to bring light into their lives.