

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum

–*Stephen Spender*

Points to Remember

- The poet describes the miserable condition of the children in a school located in a slum. They are malnourished, ill and exhausted.
- They are thin, hungry, weak and insecure. One of them has inherited disability.
- Their physical and mental growth are stunted.
- The walls of the classroom give us a glimpse of prosperity which is in sharp contrast to their weak, grim, hollow and pathetic lives.
- Even Shakespeare's portrait, images of world maps, buildings with domes or beautiful Tyrolean do not offer any hope for these children as they are poor, underfed and deprived in every way.
- The poet wants improvement in the quality of lives of slum children.
- They must be provided quality education also so that they can make use of this opportunity but this cannot be achieved unless the inspectors and other policymakers make serious efforts towards this end.
- Catacombs symbolise darkness and illiteracy which surrounds these children but through proper education will enlighten their lives.
- The map is a bad example; it tempts them to aspire for the world which seems unreachable for them. The maps on their walls should show huge slums instead of beautiful scenic graphics.
- They look like captives within the dirty walls of the classroom, however, their real world is outside the windows of this classroom and they need an exposure to the outside world.
- In the long run, these children will be able to reap the benefits and rewrite the history of poverty with development and prosperity.
- The poet says if students studying in slum are truly allowed

education in the form of free exploration, their language will gain the power and warmth of the Sun. They will acquire freedom of expression which will change their future and recreate history.

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.

Questions

- (a) Which children are referred to here?
Ans. The deprived and impoverished children are referred to here. They study in a slum.
 - (b) Why are the children compared to 'rootless weeds'?
Ans. They are ill-fed and not looked after. They are unwanted like weeds.
 - (c) What does the 'paper seeming boy, with rat's eyes' imply?
Ans. It implies that the poor boy is as lean and thin as a paper. He is under developed like a rodent.
 - (d) What is the tone of the poet?
Ans. It suggests despair and misery.
2. And yet for these
Children, these windows, not this map, their world,
where all their future's painted with a fog,
A narrow street in with a lead.... sky.
 - (a) Name the poem and the poet.
Ans. The name of the poem is 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum' and the poet is 'Stephen Spender'.
 - (b) What do the 'windows' signify here?
Ans. The windows are a symbol of connections between the two world – the inside and the outside.
 - (c) Who are these children? What is their world like?
Ans. They are slum children. Their world is like a narrow street with a lead sky?

(d) What are the words that imply a bleak future?

Ans. Phrases like 'future's painted with a fog, narrow street sealed in with a lead sky imply a bleak future for these children.

Questions for Practice

1. 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.

Questions

- (a) What has the unlucky heir inherited?
- (b) What is the stunted boy reciting?
- (c) Who is sitting at the back of the dim class.
- (d) "His eyes live in a dream", What dream does he have?

Answer the following questions in about 30-40 words each :

1. How does the poet describe the slum children?
2. What is the social issue that the poet raises in the poem?
3. Which world do the slum children belong to? Which world is inaccessible to them?