

2. An Elementary School Classroom In A Slum

About the Author: Stephen 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 the seventeenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the United States Library of Congress in 1965.

Theme/ Central Idea of the poem: The poem touches upon themes of social injustice and class inequality. It questions the value of education in a slum. It exposes the widespread neglect of these children who are uncared for, like rootless weeds. It gives the readers a description of malnourished children with pale faces, stunted growth and twisted bones. The poem deals with the social injustice and class inequalities and attacks on the capitalistic economies in which the rich are becoming richer and even as more and more problems and miseries mire the lives of the poor. They are devoid of any opportunity and have become prey to social injustice. In this poem, Spender demands equal opportunities for education for the poor and the underprivileged. But the poem does not dwell upon pessimism. It highlights the role of the educators and the more privileged class in society to liberate the children and infuse them with human creativity.

Message conveyed by the poem: The poem appeals to the rulers, the law enforcing bodies and the philanthropists represented by the 'governor, inspector, visitor' to improve the condition of the children in the slums which can be done through education. The poem ends on an optimistic note with the message that there are solutions to this problem and a lot of these children can be improved. The poem raises concerns like sensitivity towards the underprivileged, equity, equality, awareness, philanthropy, optimism, determination, and the need to change the condition of these children.

Poetic devices used in the poem:

- **Metaphors:**

'gusty waves' — the privileged children are compared to gusty waves — energetic and exuberant.

'future's painted with a fog' — refers to the future of the slum children which has been compared to the fog because it is uncertain and unclear.

'sealed in with a lead sky' — refers to the dull and grey colour of the sky and also the depressing future of the slum children

'stars of words' — refers to the words or literature written by writers like Shakespeare that create images which are as bright, beautiful and inspiring like stars

'from fog to endless night' — refers to the future of the slum children which is without any ray of hope, a future that can only go from bad to worse

‘wear skins peeped through by bones’ — refers to the thin emaciated bodies of the children which has been reduced to mere skin and bones

let their tongues /Run naked into books’ — refers to the act of allowing children to go taste/experience the variety life as depicted in the books or giving the children an experience of the beautiful bright world outside the depressing confines of the slum

‘whose language is the sun’ — refers to the children who live in pleasant surroundings and thereby have happier lives

- **Simile:**

‘like rootless weeds’ — the children have been compared to weeds or the unwanted section of society.

‘like bottle bits on stones’ — The spectacles frame their stony-eyed expressions/hard faces.

‘windows that shut upon their lives like catacombs’ — the classroom and the homes in which the slum children live have been compared to underground burial chambers.

- **Imagery:**

‘weighed down’ — refers to the burden of poverty and hopelessness that weighs down the slum children

- **Pun:**

‘reciting’ literal — the boy is reciting the lesson. figurative — he is more prominently reciting his father’s disease i.e. he has inherited his father’s disease of twisted bones and deformity.

‘sour cream’: literal — the neglected walls have turned a dirty yellow figurative — a dismal place where all dreams turn sour (in this case the classroom)

‘lead sky’ literal — sky polluted with industrial fumes figurative: A sky that does not open opportunities.

- **Symbolism:**

‘squirrel’s game’ — something that helps the child to escape the grim reality of his surroundings

‘civilized dome riding all cities’ — cities that show the progress of the civilization and its marvellous architecture (also Personification — riding all cities).

‘open-handed map’ — a map drawn arbitrarily by the people in power and the privileged.

‘map with slums as big as doom’ — the grim reality of the lives of the slum children.

‘fog’ — bleak and unclear.

‘ships and sun’ — adventure and beautiful lands offering opportunities.

‘slag heaps’ — industrial waste, toxic filth and squalor.

‘windows’ — windows of the slum classroom do not open out to opportunities and the wide world. They show only fog covered slums where they are confined.

‘green fields, gold sand’ — colour, happiness, nature and golden opportunities.

‘white and green leaves’ — learning from pages of books and nature.

‘run azure’ — experience the rich colours of the blue waves.

‘sun’ — symbol of enlightenment /clarity/ equality/purity.

- **Repetition:**

Break O break open till they break the town

‘ Far, far’

Summary of the poem:

The children in an elementary school of a slum have faces which are very different from those of other children. They are not exuberant and full of energy (far from gusty waves). Their faces are like weeds in a garden (like rootless weeds [simile]) — They are rootless, unsure and lack stability. Their hair is unkempt around their pale faces. The gusty waves symbolize the energy that is missing in these children.

The poet expands on the theme of the miserable existence of the slum dwellers’ children by listing out some of the typical children who can be found in these schools.

First is the tall girl who is physically and emotionally exhausted. Her head hangs down in exhaustion. All life has been dredged from her body and sapped from her mind. The children are underdeveloped and live almost like rodents. Another child is a very sick and lean boy who has ‘rat’s eye’ symbolizing that he is defensive and scared like a rodent. His prospect for survival, let alone success seems bleak. The ‘rats eye’ also refers to the searching eyes of the boy who appears to be looking for food, acceptance and love. These children are underdeveloped and some of them have inherited their diseased bones from their parents. This implies that diseased generations (father’s gnarled disease) have been living in the slum. A child who is disfigured and ‘trapped in a physically challenged body’ (unlucky heir of twisted bones) is another child attending the elementary school.

The classrooms are equally dim and pathetic. There is a child who is sweet and young but his “eyes live in a dream”. This phrase has various interpretations. On one hand, it could mean that the boy wants to get out as he is bored and distracted or that he is mentally challenged and lives in a world of dreams far removed from the dark reality of his presence. The child’s desire is to be playing with or watching squirrels playing in a hollow tree. The ‘tree room’ is symbolic of the cramped holes in which the children live. The squirrel, in contrast, is free.

The first stanza evokes pity and empathy reflecting the pathetic and miserable existence of the slum children. There is despondency and pessimism in the first and second stanza but hope and optimism in the last two stanzas. The walls of the classroom are off-white or yellowish (sour cream) in colour. This dull colour echoes the miserable situation of the children and underlines the neglect in their lives.

The walls are decorated with pinups of Shakespeare’s head, domes of the institution of the civilized world, photographs of the alpine valleys, etc. The life of the slum children is far removed from all that is represented in maps, books and pictures and only highlight the pathetic nature of their present condition. ‘Open handed maps’ suggest the map drawn by powerful people and ‘awarding the world its

world' suggests how the world is determined by the powerful leaders. The poet thus hints at two worlds: the world of poverty, misery, depravity represented in the slums which is contrasted with the world of progress and prosperity, the world of the rich which is shown on the pictures on the wall. This world is far removed from the lives of these slum children and a world that they cannot relate to.

Sadly, the world that these children are familiar with is the world of stinking slums, a world that belongs to the poverty-stricken, ill-fed and under-nourished children. 'These windows' reflect the world exposed on the maps as well as the windows of the classroom that open out to the dark and dingy world that they live in. Education which has the ability to open doors and windows to the 'other world' has failed in this instance to liberate these children both physically and intellectually from their restricted and impoverished existence. Their world has unpleasant surroundings. The dirty windows figuratively and literally are their world. The fog of uncertainty dominates their future. They are doomed to live in narrow streets (symbolic of a restricted life, a life of desolation) which do not lead them to a better future. Their landscape has no rivers or lakes.

All the symbols of positivity mentioned in the second stanza, i.e., the cloudless dawn, Belled, flowery, Tyrolean valley — are far removed from the lives of the children. In fact, the children's future appears to be bleak, painted with fog and covered with a lead sky (of industrialization).

Next, the poet questions the wisdom of exposing these children to Shakespeare and terms it 'wicked' because he talks of a world of kings and noblemen which is far removed from their mundane, dismal lives. Similarly, the map shows them a world which is not theirs. Therefore, it is a tad example' as it tempts the children with ideas of escape from their miserable world of 'lead skies' to a sun-filled world, and a love for life rather than an existence full of dread and disillusionment. According to the poet it raises false hopes in the children, which is cruel. These false hopes encourage them to resort to illegal and criminal means to achieve the good things in life.

In the third stanza, the poet talks about their 'slag heap' which represents several things. At one level they refer to the waste left by the industries. Figuratively it refers to these children who are like the waste or the unwanted section of society and also to the slums in which they live and which are ugly unwanted parts of a city or town. The phrase 'wearing spectacles of steel' is a symbol of industrialization in which they are all doomed. They wear spectacles with mended glass which look like pieces of broken bottles on stone. Stones also reflect the expression on their faces. This image highlights their impoverished existence which is restricted to the "foggy" slums. Foggy is symbolic of ignorance. Fate has charted out a bleak path as the future holds no promise for them. Their life is an endless fog until they die. The maps of their future are already blotted with gloom and doom.

The last stanza is full of optimism. There is a touch of magic in its wider connotations. It is an appeal to the governor, teacher, inspector and visitors to transport the unfortunate children beyond the dark boundaries of today into the possibilities of tomorrow, otherwise, these classrooms will become like tombs(catacombs) burying these children in the dark confines of the slums forever. Therefore, only if these people lend a helping hand can the lives of the children be magically released from bondage. It is an appeal to the eminent people to rescue the poor and oppressed from the tomb of class discrimination and to show them the beauty of the world. This map refers to the world of prosperity. Their windows refer to their slums. The children will be able to peep through windows only when the difference between the two worlds is bridged.

The poet desperately wants the children to break out of these catacombs (or near death existence). They should come out to the green fields and breathe in the open air so that they can grow unrestricted and liberated and be creative. The poet 'imagines' the liberated children running on the gold sand, delving into books and exploring the realm of knowledge. The white leaves represent the printed word and the green leaves the natural world which both contribute to educating a child. This will be truly liberating and lead to creativity. According to the poet, only those people create history whose language has the warmth of the sun i.e. — who have clarity of vision, the power of life, brightness and hope.

Thus the poem ends on an optimistic note symbolizing the freedom of the children from their deathlike existence through education and social transformation.

ASSIGNMENT

Short Answer Type Questions:

1. What picture of the slum children is depicted in the poem?
2. What do slum children receive as an inheritance?
3. Explain the phrase 'far from gusty waves'.
4. Why is the comparison drawn with squirrel's game?
5. Explain 'like bottle bits on stones'.
6. Explain 'future's painted with a fog'.
7. How is 'map' a bad example?
8. Why is Shakespeare called 'wicked' by the poet?
9. Bring out the optimism in the last stanza.
10. Explain 'history is theirs whose language is the sun'.
11. How does the poet describe the classroom walls? What do they symbolize?

Or

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?

12. 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?

[NCERT]

13. What, according to the poet, is the only hope for the slum children?
14. Which words/phrases in the poem show that slum children are suffering from acute malnutrition?
15. In spite of despair and disease, the slum children are not devoid of hope. Give an example of their hope or dreams.

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