

CLASS XII

FLAMINGO

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM

STEPHEN SPENDER

WORKSHEET

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Stephen Spender (1909-1995) is an English poet and essayist who took active part in politics.

“An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum” by Stephen Spender pictures a classroom in a slum highlighting subtly the plight of the children and the themes of social injustice and inequalities. The poet uses vivid images and appropriate expression to reflect the difficulties faced by the underprivileged children that is still prevalent in the world of ours.

SUMMARY:

Stanza1:

Stephen Spender shows us that the condition of the children in a slum school is pathetic. Their world is far from our healthy, fresh environment. They are like rootless weeds, unwanted and cast out. Their hairs are unkempt and untidy and their faces clearly show the plight of their existence. A particular tall girl is described by the poet. She has a bowed down head which shows the burden of the stressed life she leads. Another boy who is as thin as a paper too has the same under nourished look on his face. He has a scared expression in his eyes. These unlucky children have only acquired diseases and bad luck from their parents. One of them is even not able to get up from his desk to read out the lesson. However, the poet says there is one particular boy who is a little younger than the rest has still his hopes and dreams with him. He waits for the time when he can go out in the open to play. The environment of gloom has not yet engulfed his dreams and hopes.

Stanza2:

In the second stanza, the poet describes the classroom which is also dirty and neglected like its inhabitants. The classroom too exhibits an atmosphere of depression and glum. The walls are cream in colour and on them the names of the donors are engraved. A bust of the great poet Shakespeare with a background of a sky is put on. The walls have pictures of splendid Tyrolese valley which is a sharp contrast to the atmosphere of the classroom. There are maps on the walls which show them the harsh world from their classroom windows. Their world presents a future to them which is dark and cruel. The poet brings out a harsh reality of these children. These children are trapped in a hopeless situation and their world is far from the beautiful nature such as rivers, valleys and seas.

Stanza3:

Stephen Spender suddenly attacks Shakespeare and calls him ‘wicked.’ He says so because he feels Shakespeare has poisoned the children’s mind by misleading them that their world is beautiful; it has corrupted the young minds which in turn had made them to steal and escape from their confinements. The poet feels deep rooted sadness for the condition of the slum children. The children are so skinny that they seem to be wearing skins. The glasses of the spectacles seem to have been mended several times. The total appearance of the children show their deprivation and under nourished conditions. The poet feels that the classroom should have pictures of huge slums instead of those scenic graphics.

Stanza4:

In the final stanza of “An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum” the poet uses a pacifying tone and appeals to the governor, inspector and the visitors to do something about the condition of these slum schools. The map showing the beautiful world can be their reality too if a little will and effort are put together. The poet hopes for a better future of these children. He wants the authorities to realize their responsibilities and free the children from such grave-like confinements. He wants the barriers to be pulled down. The children must break away from the school boundaries and enjoy the world beyond. Only that way they can enjoy the nature- the green fields and the golden sands. The poet wants them to sail, explore and discover the world so that someday their names are found in history books.

The tone of the poem is somber and philosophical. The theme revolves around the profound problem that affects our society at large. The universal gap between rich and the poor is highlighted. It also highlights the irony of the life in the twenty-first century where the world has made so many advancements yet an atmosphere of gloominess prevails.

Explain the following phrases:

1. “gusty waves”- Here the gusty waves means the energetic children who are like strong waves. The slum children, on the other hand, are under nourished and far different from these ‘gusty waves.’
2. “like bottle bits on stone”- the children wear spectacles having shattered glasses and the glasses look like bits of glasses on stone walls. Basically, it shows the deprived condition and the hardships faced by the slum children. This is an example of a simile.
3. “future’s painted with fog”- Just as the fog blurs one’s view during winter, the same way the social injustices have blurred the future of these slum children.
4. “history is there’s whose language is the sun”- to create history, one must possess the characteristics of the sun-brightness, power and warmth.

**Text Book Exercises: Answers: - 2.** 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?

The colour of 'sour cream' is off-white. The poet has used this expression to suggest the decaying aspect. Actually the walls symbolise the pathetic conditions of the lives of these children. However, there is an implied hope in these.

**3.** 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?

They beautifully contrast with the world of these children. These pictures mean progress, prosperity and well-being. But the present conditions of these children are miserable. They are underfed, poor and live in grim poverty.

**4.** What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can change be effected in their lives?

The poet wants these children to be removed from their dirty surroundings. New and open surrounding would provide ideal conditions for their learning. They will then land in a world full of progress and prosperity. There will be no social injustice.

SHORT ANSWERS

Q. 1. What does the poet wish for the children of the slums?

Q. 2. What is the message that Stephen Spender wants to give through the poem 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum'?

Q. 3. Why does Stephen Spender use the images of despair and disease in the first stanza of the poem, and with what effect?

Q. 4. This poem was written against the background of the Second World War. But Spender doesn't describe the lives of generals or heroes but of the poor children of slums. Why and how does he do so?

Q. 5. Crushed under poverty, disease and miseries do the little school children of slums have any dreams or hopes? What are they?

Q. 6. The poet says: 'And yet, for these children, these windows, not this world, are 'world'. What is the real world for them and which is not for them?

Q. 7. 'So blot their maps with slums as big as doom'. Why does the poet express such an angry protest?

Q. 8. What should governors, teachers, inspectors and other important and powerful persons do to improve the lot of children living in slums?

Q. 9. 'History is theirs whose language is the sun'. Justify the veracity of this statement.

Q. 10. Describe the devices used by Stephen Spender in the poem to create the desired poetic effect.

Read the extracts and answer the questions that follow:

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.

- How is the tall girl affected by her poverty?
- Explain 'like rootless weeds'. Identify the literary device.
- What is the comparison drawn with rat's eyes?
- What does the expression 'Far far from gusty waves signify'?

2. 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.

- What is the colour of the walls? What is it symbolic of?
- Which two worlds does the poet hint at?
- What does 'donations', 'Shakespeare's head' and 'Tyrolese Valley' suggest?
- Why has the poet used images of 'cloudless dawn' and 'civilized dome'?

3. ...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.

- a) What is 'their world' for these children?
- b) What future is in store for these children?
- c) What does 'lead sky' symbolize?

4. 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?

- a) Why is Shakespeare wicked?
- b) What tempts these children?
- c) Explain 'From fog to endless night'.

Answer the following in about 30-40 words.

- 1. What do slum children receive as inheritance?
- 2. What is the comparison drawn with squirrel's game?
- 3. Explain 'like bottle bits on stones'.
- 4. In spite of despair and disease, the slum children are not devoid of hope. Give an example of their hope or dream.
- 5. Explain 'future's painted with a fog'.
- 6. How is 'all their time and space' a 'foggy slum'?
- 7. What change does the poet hope for the lives of the slum children?
- 8. Explain 'history is theirs whose language is the sun'.
- 9. 'So blot their maps with slums as big as doom', says Stephen Spender. What does the poet want to convey?
- 10. What images and symbols has the poet used to describe the pathetic condition of the slum children?

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