

Flamingo- Poem-2

An Elementary school classroom in a slum

By- Stephen Spender

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 symbolizes 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.

Read the stanzas given below 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.

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 far away from the winds or waves blowing strongly.
- (b) The faces of these children look pale. Their uncombed and unkempt hair look 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.....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 the tree room, other than this.

Questions

- (a) Who is the 'unlucky heir' and what will he inherit ?
- (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 ?

Answers:

- (a) The lean and thin boy having rat's eyes and a stunted growth is the 'unlucky heir'. He will inherit twisted bones from his father.
- (b) He is reciting a lesson from his desk. He is enumerating systematically how his father developed the knotty disease.
- (c) A sweet young boy sits at back of this dim class. He sits there unnoticed.
- (d) The boy seems hopeful. He dreams of a better time—outdoor games, of a squirrel's game, of a room made inside the stem of a tree. He dreams of many things other than this dim and unpleasant classroom.

3. 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.

Questions

- (a) What is the colour of the classroom walls? What does this colour suggest ?
- (b) What do these classroom walls have ?
- (c) Explain: (i) 'Open-handed map'
- (ii) 'Awarding the world its world'.

Answers:

- (a) The colour of the classroom walls is 'sour cream' or off white. This colour suggests the decaying aspect and pathetic condition of the lives of the children in a slum-school.
- (b) The walls of the classroom have pictures of Shakespeare, buildings with domes, world maps and beautiful valleys.
- (c) (i) 'Open handed-map' suggests the map of the world drawn at will by powerful people/ dictators .
- (ii) 'Awarding the world its world' suggests how the conquerors and dictators award and divide the world according to their whims. This world is the world of the rich and important people.

4.....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 with a lead sky

Far far from rivers, capes, and stars of words.

Questions

- (a) What are the 'children' referred to here?
- (b) Which is their world?

(c) How is their life different from that of other children?

Answers:

- (a) Those children are referred to here who study in an elementary school classroom.
- (b) Their world is limited to the window of the classroom. They are confined only within the narrow streets of the slum, i.e., far away from the open sky and rivers.
- (c) "The slum children spend their life only in the narrow streets of the land. They do not get the basic necessities of life. They are deprived of food, clothing and shelter. But the main thing that they differ from other children is freedom. They do not enjoy the freedom of life.

5. 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?

Questions

- (a) Who are 'them' referred to in the first line?**
- (b) What tempts them?**
- (c) What does the poet say about 'their' lives?**
- (d) Explain: 'From fog to endless night'.**

Answers:

- (a) Here 'them' refers to the children studying in a slum school.
- (b) All beautiful things like ships, sun and love tempt the children of slum school.
- (c) The poet says that the children spend their lives confined in their cramped holes. Their bodies look like skeletons because they are the victims of malnutrition. (d) Their future is foggy or uncertain. The only certainty in their lives is the endless night of their death. In other their life is wrapped in darkness.

6. 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?**
- (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
- (b) In the dirty and unhygienic surroundings the slum children lead very pathetic and miserable lives full of woes, wants and uncertainty.
- (c) 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.

7. Unless, governor, inspector, visitor,
This map becomes their Window and these windows
That shut upon their lives like catacombs.

Questions

- (a) Why does the poet invoke 'governor', 'inspector', 'visitor'? What function are they expected to perform?**
- (b) How can 'this map' become 'their window*?'**
- (c) What do you understand by 'catacombs'?**

Answers:

(a) Governor, inspector and visitor are important and powerful persons in the modern times. The poet invokes them to help the miserable slum children. They are expected to perform an important role in removing social injustice and class inequalities. They can abridge the gap between the two worlds—the beautiful world of the great and rich and the ugly world of slums.

(b) Two worlds exist. This map refers to the beautiful world of prosperity and well-being inhabited by the rich and great. Their windows refer to the lairs, holes or hovels of the dirty, stinking slums where the poor and unfortunate children of slums live. The slum children will be able to peep through windows only when the difference between the two worlds is abridged.

(c) 'Catacombs' means a long underground gallery with excavations in its sides for tombs.

8. Break O break 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 break 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 be opened to them and let their tongues run freely without any check or fear.

QUESTIONS FROM TEXTBOOK

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: The colour of 'sour cream' is off white. The poet has used this expression to suggest the decaying aspect. The deterioration in the colour of the classroom walls symbolises the pathetic condition of the lives of the scholars—the children of this slum school.

Q2. 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?

Ans: The pictures that decorate the walls hold a stark contrast with the world of these underfed, poverty-stricken, slum children living in cramped dark holes. Obstacles hamper their physical and mental growth. The pictures on the wall suggest beauty, well-being, progress and prosperity—a world of sunshine and warmth of love. But the world of the slum children is ugly and lacks prosperity.

Q3. What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change?

Ans: The poet wants the people in authority to realise their responsibility towards the children of the slums. All sort of social injustice and class inequalities be ended by eliminating the obstacles that confine the slum children to their ugly and filthy surroundings. Let them study and learn to express themselves freely. Then they will share the fruit of progress and prosperity and their lives will change for the better.