

ENGLISH

CHAPTER 2: AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM



AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM

~Summary~

-by Stephen Spender

Stanza- 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. 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."

Explanation: The poet here describes the pathetic and miserable condition of the children sitting in a classroom in a slum school. The children's faces are unlike the usual children of schools. They are far away from the beautiful sights of nature. They look weak and hungry. Their unkempt hair looks like rootless weeds on their pale faces. Unlike other schoolchildren who are usually energetic and full of life, these children seem withered and lifeless. The children of the slum are also unwanted in society, just as weeds are unwanted in a garden. A tall girl in the classroom is very depressed. She keeps her head down, being burdened by sad thoughts. The girl is perhaps physically and mentally exhausted due to her poverty.

The other students of the class are not in a better situation either. Just like the girl who is burdened with the problems in her life, there is a boy sitting in the class who is as thin as paper, undoubtedly because of malnutrition. He has big eyes like those of a rat. Yet another boy in the classroom has inherited his father's arthritis. Because of the disease, he has stunted growth and his bones are twisted. He has inherited this disease from his father and recites his lesson from his desk in a mellow but weak voice. There is another sweet boy sitting at the back of the class. He is sitting there unnoticed, and dreaming of squirrels playing in a tree. The dull and monotonous atmosphere in the classroom is perhaps unable to arrest his attention.

Stanza- 2

"On sour cream walls, donations. Shakespeare's head,
 Cloudless at dawn, civilised dome riding all cities.
 Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. Open-handed map
 Awarding the world its world. 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.

Explanation: In this stanza, the poet describes the dirty classroom. The walls of the classroom are pale and dirty and give a rather unpleasant feeling. On the walls are displayed the names of people who have given donations. There is a picture of Shakespeare on the wall. The pictures of domes of big cities represent the quality of life in those cities. The early morning sky is shown as cloudless in another picture.

There is also a picture of the beautiful Tyrolese valley, a region in the Austrian Alpine province, adorned with flowers, The world map which divides the world into countries, big and small, symbolically gives the children the whole world.

But all these pictures have no meaning to these impoverished children. The world depicted on these walls is not the world of these children. Their world does not contain huge domes or prosperity, or the scenic beauty presented in the picture. Unfortunately, their world is painted with fog, the fog of hopelessness and hunger. Their future is grim and uncertain, and sealed with a dark and dull sky.

The poet again says that their world is far away from the actual world of rivers and capes. These things are like stars in the sky, which they cannot touch.

Stanza- 3

"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? 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."

Explanation: The poet calls the portrait of Shakespeare wicked because it is meaningless for children going to a slum school. There is no quality education in these schools. The children here will never learn about Shakespeare's work. The map is also a bad example, because, for these children, their classroom is the whole world for them. There is no world beyond their poverty, hunger and hopelessness. So, these maps are unreal for these children. The beautiful world with its offerings like the sun, ships, love and care only tempt them to steal because they cannot have all these worldly things. They live in cramped holes-like hutments and there is no end to their misery. There is a perpetual state of gloom, hunger and despair.

Their bodies look like garbage heaps. They are very skinny and their bones are peeping out of their skin. The state of poverty is intensified by the fact that the glasses which these children wear are cracked and look like broken pieces of a bottle.

All of their life is being destroyed here in the slum. The slum is like a blot as big as doom on the maps of these children, i.e., the lives of these children.

Stanza- 4

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

Explanation: These children will continue to suffer this hell unless government officials, like governors, inspectors or educationists who visit such schools, come forward to help them.

The poet wants the civilized world to bridge the gap between them and the world of these children. They should offer these children a glimpse of a better world so that the maps become their window to the beautiful and charming world outside

Then these windows of the elementary school classroom, which confine all their hopes and dreams, must be broken so that these children can be brought out in the green fields away from the filthy surroundings.

The poet desires that these children should be allowed to run freely on the golden sands under a clear sky, i.e., make progress

They should be allowed to have quality education. The poet feels that education can help them immensely because, according to him, history is written by those whose language has the warmth and energy of the sun.

NCERT SOLUTIONS**Questions (Page No. 93-94)
(Think It Out)**

Question 1. Tick the item which best answers the following.

a. The tall girl with her head weighed down means

The girl

- i. is ill and exhausted
- ii. has her head bent with shame
- iii. has untidy hair

b. The paper-seeming boy with rat's eyes means

The boy is

- i. sly and secretive
- ii. thin, hungry and weak
- iii. unpleasant looking

c. The stunted, unlucky heir of twisted bones means

The boy

- i. has an inherited disability
- ii. was short and bony

d. His eyes live in a dream, A squirrel's game, in the tree room other than this means

The boy is

- i. full of hope in the future
- ii. mentally ill
- iii. distracted from the lesson

e. The children's faces are compared to 'rootless weeds'

This means they

- i. are insecure
- ii. are ill-fed
- iii. are wasters

Answer:

a. The tall girl with her head weighed down means

The girl

- i. is ill and exhausted

b. The paper-seeming boy with rat's eyes means

The boy is

- ii. thin, hungry and weak

c. The stunted, unlucky heir of twisted bones means

The boy

- i. has an inherited disability

d. His eyes live in a dream, A squirrel's game, in the tree room other than this means

The boy is

- i. full of hope in the future

e. The children's faces are compared to 'rootless weeds'

This means they

- i. are insecure

Question 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?

Answer: The colour of 'sour cream' is white. This expression used by the poet explains the aspect of decaying. The colour deterioration of the walls of the classroom indicates the pathetic situation of the scholars' life – the students of the slum school.

Question 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?

Answer: The pictures which decorate the walls of the classroom hold a sharp contrast with the world of these poverty-stricken, underfed, slum children who live in cramped dark holes. These obstacles hamper their mental and physical growth. The pictures present on the classroom walls indicate well-being, beauty, prosperity and progress – warmth of love and a world of sunshine. But the world in which these slum children live is ugly and without prosperity.

Question 4. What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change?

Answer: The poet wants the people having authority to understand their responsibility towards the children who live in the slum. All kinds of class inequalities and social injustice should be put to an end by the elimination of obstacles which confine the slum children to their filthy and ugly surroundings. Let them freely learn and express themselves. They will then share the success of prosperity and progress and their lives will change forever.