

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum



Stephen Spender

ABOUT THE POET

Stephen Spender (1909-1995) was an English poet and an essayist. He left University College, Oxford without taking a degree and went to Berlin in 1930. Spender took a keen interest in politics and declared himself to be a socialist and pacifist. Books by Spender include *Poems of Dedication*, *The Edge of Being*, *The Creative Element*, *The Struggle of the Modern* and an autobiography, *World Within World*. In, *An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum*, he has concentrated on themes of social injustice and class inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

In the poem Spender describes the sad plight of children in an elementary school classroom in a slum. The children are destined to be poor with no escape from it. The poet distinguishes the elite from the poor. He says that the fruits of education and freedom should reach this downtrodden society. Spender exposes a widespread neglect of children of all nationalities, races & ethnicities. In the poem malnourished students reveal a sad & hidden segment of society, prevalent throughout the world.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

Stanza 1 : These children have pale and lifeless faces and some are even diseased. They are like rootless weeds which are uncared and unwanted with

their disorderly hair torn around their faces. They are depressed with the burdens of miserable life and keep their heads down. They have stunted growth. One of the girls is apparently burdened with the miseries of poverty. One of the boys has inherited his father's disease and has stunted growth. A sweet young boy is sitting at the back of the dim classroom. He dreams of a squirrel's game in the trees. He yearns for a carefree life.

Stanza 2 : The off-white colour reveals crumbling and decaying walls on which are hung the donations given to the school in the form of pictures, paintings, Shakespeare's portrait and maps which are meaningless for the children. They exhibit the world of the elite and the privileged while the children in the slum have a future that is sealed and confined to the slum. Their future is dark and limited. The donations on the walls only add to the frustration of the children. They are tempted to attain what would be unattainable for them. The children studying in these schools do not have the means to go and explore the world. For them what they see through their classroom windows, the narrow street and the lead sky is the world.

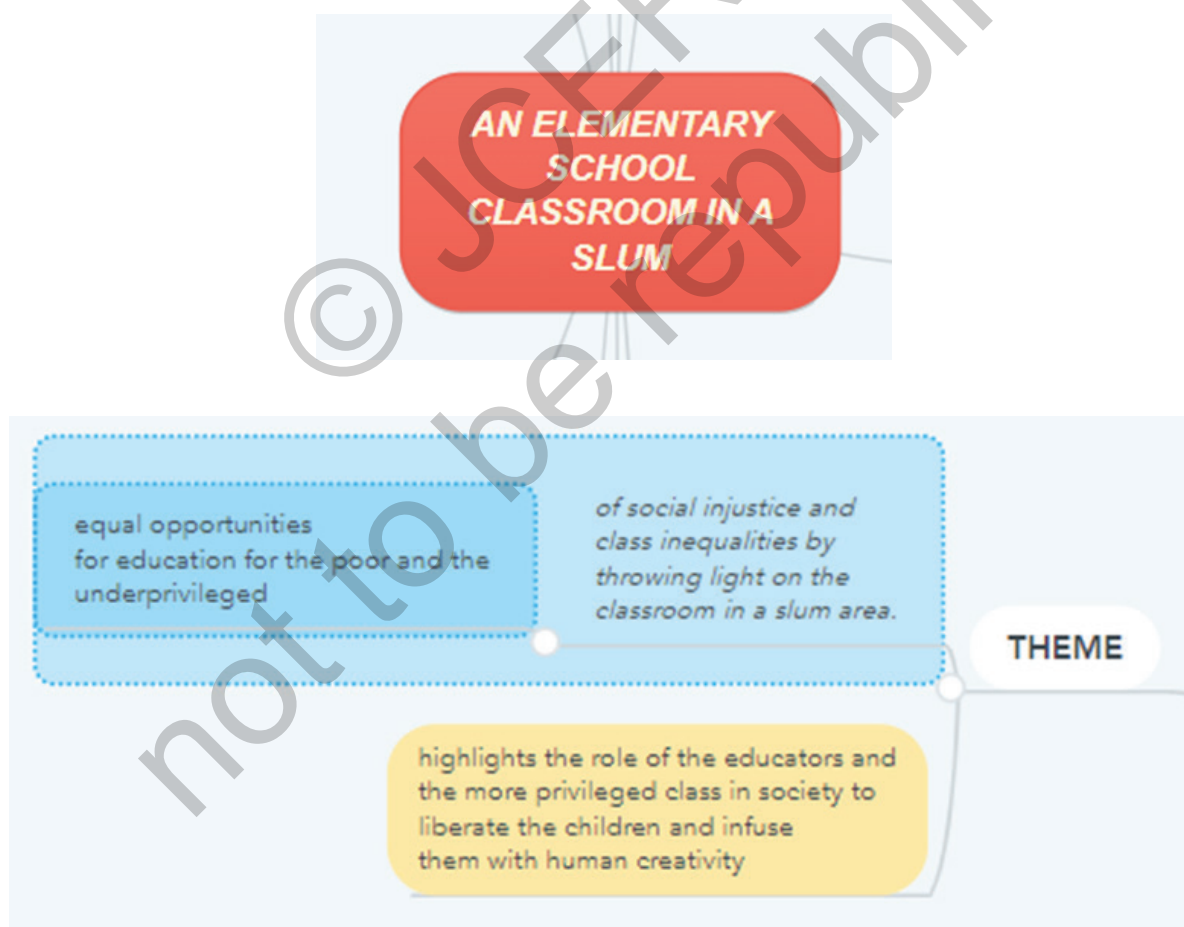
Stanza 3 : Shakespeare is wicked for them as he has written only about the rich, beautiful world tempting them to steal. The map is of no interest to them because it does not reflect the world they live in cramped and dark lanes. Their lives start in darkness and end in utter darkness. They are

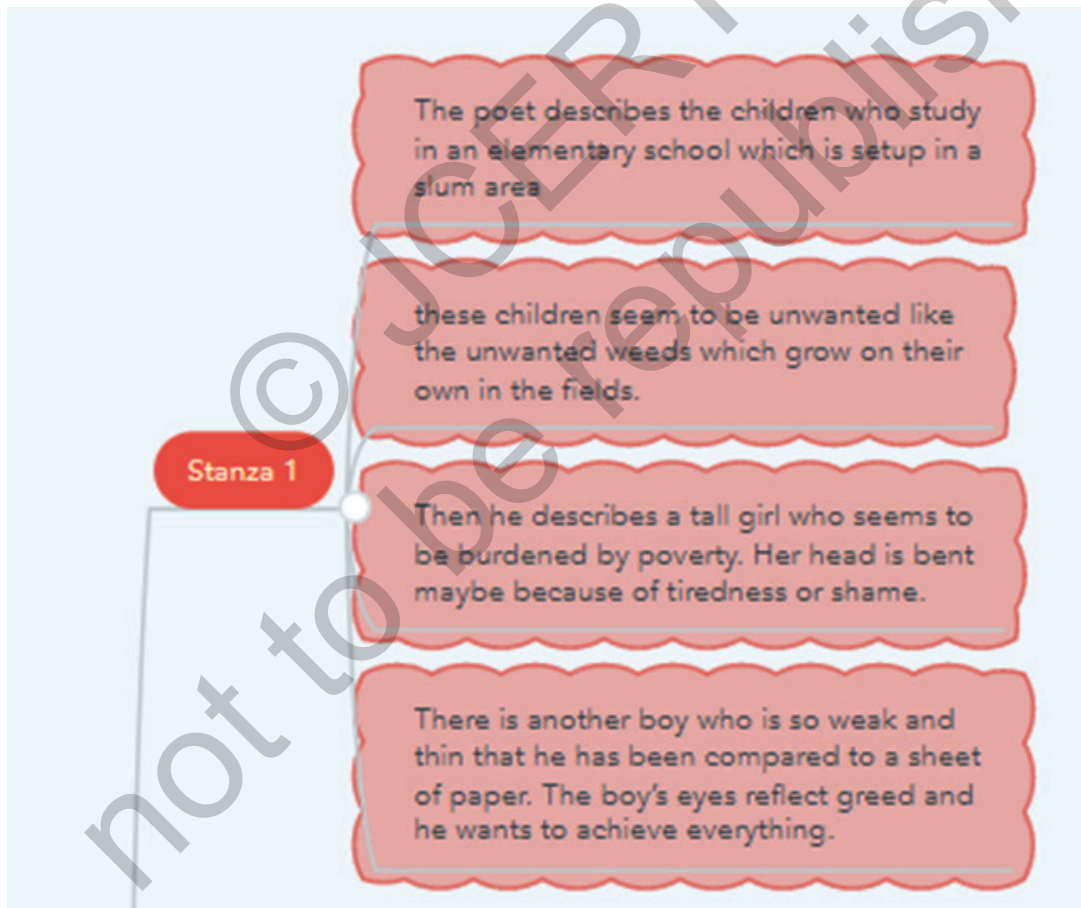
undernourished and their poverty has distorted their vision as they spend their whole time in foggy slums. Their slum is considered a disaster that tarnishes the beautiful world.

Stanza 4 : Unless the governor inspector and visitor play a vital role in bringing about a change, their lives will remain in the dark. The slum children will experience a brighter future only when the gap between the two worlds is bridged. They should break the barriers till the children come out of the dirty surroundings and their world should be

extended into the green fields, golden sands and bright world. They should have the freedom of expression and their outlook be broadened. Thus, the children in the slum can progress only if they are given good education and the freedom to move into a world of opportunities and progress. The poet also states that history is made only by those people who have the power of knowledge. Hence, educating and letting the children into a free world of opportunities would release them from the suffocating, wretched life in a slum.

MINDMAP





Stanza 2

The walls are covered with different charts and images that must have been donated by different people.

His head which is bald looks like the rising sun at the horizon.

Their future is compared to a narrow street which means that there is no wide scope available for their future growth.

There is a picture of the famous Tyrolese valley which has beautiful flowers. There is the image of a map which helps all in its own way

Stanza 3

.Shakespeare is wicked for them as he has written only about the rich, beautiful world tempting them to steal.

The map is of no interest to them because it does not reflect the world they live in cramped and dark lanes

Their lives start in darkness and ends in utter darkness

They are undernourished and their poverty has distorted their vision as they spend their whole time in foggy slums

The poet feels that the map which shows beautiful and exotic places should be

replaced with slums as it is not the world they live in.

Stanza 4

The slum children will be able to peep through the window only when the gap between the two worlds is bridged

Unless the governor inspector and visitor play a vital role in bringing about a change, their lives will remain in dark

They should break the barriers till they come out of the dirty surroundings and their world should be extended into the green fields, golden sands and bright world.

They should have the freedom of expression and their outlook be broadened.

For, only the educated and learned people can create history whose language has strength and power.

At the back, in dim, dark area, a small boy who was not visible to the poet as he was sitting in darkness. The poet could see his eyes which were bright and full of a dream. He was not paying attention to the class.

ENDING

OPTIMISTIC

IMPORTANT WORD NOTES

WORDS	MEANINGS
Gusty waves	breezy winds
Pallor	pale, dull face
Stunted	not fully grown due to malnutrition
Gnarled	Knotted, twisted
weeds	unwanted plants that grow on their own
heir	successor
Sour	unpleasant, off-white
Donations	things given or received in charity
Tyrolese valley	A beautiful ice-free valley in Austria
lead	here, dark future of kids
Cape	a piece of land extending beyond the adjacent coast
Cramped	confined
Slag	weak
Wicked	evil
Mended	repaired
Blot	to mark with a spot
Doom	disaster
Catacombs	tomb, cemetery
Azure	deep blue

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

1. Who has written the poem Elementary School Classroom in a Slum?

- A) Kipling
- B) Wordsworth
- C) Kamlanath
- D) Stephen Spender

Ans: **D) Stephen Spender**

2. What theme did the poet concentrate on in the poem?

- A) themes of social injustice and class inequalities.
- B) theme of children and their happiness
- C) theme of insecurities
- D) none

Ans: **A) themes of social injustice and class inequalities.**

3. What does the poet portray in the poem?

- A) young minds
- B) playfulness of the children
- C) questions of children
- D) the plight of young children in the slums

Ans: **D) the plight of young children in the slums**

4. What does the poet compare the colour of walls with?

- A) rotten fruits
- B) stale chapatis
- C) rotten vegetables
- D) sour cream

Ans: **D) sour cream**

5. What do the words "Their future is painted with fog" convey?

- A) no love and care
- B) no warmth
- C) no hard work
- D) no hope of improvement

Ans: **D) no hope of improvement**

6. What do the faces of children in the slum areas reflect?

- A) happiness
- B) their aspirations
- C) their energy
- D) sadness and lack of enthusiasm

Ans: **D) sadness and lack of enthusiasm**

7. What is ironical about the wall hangings and donations in the classroom?

- A) set up in very clean environment
- B) completely opposite to the needs of the children in the classroom
- C) set up in happy environment
- D) set up in gloomy set up

Ans: **B) completely opposite to the needs of the children in the classroom**

8. What is the Tree Room in the poem?

- A) A tree – shaped room
- B) A room on a tree where squirrels play
- C) A room on a tree where rats play
- D) A room on a tree where pigeons play

Ans: **B) A room on a tree where squirrels play**

9. How can powerful people help the poor children?

- A) by fighting with the government
- B) by fighting with the powerful
- C) by bridging gaps of inequalities and injustice
- D) by fighting with the rich

Ans: **C) by bridging gaps of inequalities and injustice**

10. Why is the head of the tall girl 'weighed down'?

- A) by the burden of studies
- B) by the burden of work
- C) by the burden of her world
- D) All of these

Ans: **C) by the burden of her world**

11. What kind of look do the faces and hair of the children give?

- A) rich and beautiful faces
- B) bright, neat faces
- C) healthy appearances
- D) pale faces, scattered and undone hair

Ans: **D) pale faces, scattered and undone hair**

12. Who is the unlucky heir and what has he inherited?

- A) a fat boy, has inherited obesity from his mother
- B) a short, thin boy, has inherited stunted growth from his family
- C) an intelligent boy, has inherited intelligence
- D) thin boy with rat's eyes, has inherited a deformed body from his father

Ans: **D) thin boy with rat's eyes, has inherited a deformed body from his father**

13. What does the expression 'Open handed map' show?

- A) power of the poor
- B) the poor can not access the world
- C) the poor are powerless
- D) maps are open to all, they reveal everything

Ans: **D) maps are open to all, they reveal everything**

14. What do the 'governor', inspector, visitor' in the poem depict?

- A) higher officials
- B) Government officials
- C) Political people
- D) Powerful and influential people

Ans: **D) Powerful and influential people**

15. What does the expression 'Break O break open' suggest?

- A) barriers on the road
- B) barriers of garbage heap
- C) barriers of dirty environment must be broken
- D) None

Ans: **C) barriers of dirty environment must be broken**

SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

1. What is the condition of children studying in slums?

Ans: The condition of children studying and living in slums is very miserable. Most of them are underdeveloped and suffering from malnutrition. There is a tall girl who is unable to raise her head due to poverty whereas there is a boy who is too lean to lift his weight. He has hunger in his eyes which has been well compared to rat's eyes.

2. What does the poet want for the slum children?

Ans: The poet wants proper education for the children of the slums as he thinks education is the only weapon that can change the course of anyone's life. He wants neither money nor cash but a perfect environment for children to study.

3. How does the poet describe the classroom walls?

Ans: According to the poet, the walls of the school are not properly painted. Even they have a fading look which resembles sour cream walls. The poet compares the walls to the pale faces of children who are undernourished and underdeveloped.

4. Explain "From fog to endless nights".

Ans: Here the poet wants to convey that these children live under pathetic

conditions. Their whole day is spent in foggy slums and nights are tiresome and full of darkness. They make many futile efforts to survive in those slums. Their life is full of misery, helplessness and suffering.

5. Why does the poet call Shakespeare wicked?

Ans: The poet has no grudges with Shakespeare but he only wants the latter's portrait from there as it has no significance in children's lives who are studying over there. According to him, children of slums don't get to learn anything from him.

6. Why is the map on the wall a bad example for children of slums?

Ans: According to the poet, the map, which is big enough to speak for itself, is useless for the kids studying over there. It allures them to be thieves for running their miserable life wherein they have not seen such things that are present on the map such as ship, sun and love.

7. What can the inspector, governor and visitor do for the children according to the poet?

Ans: The inspector, governor and visitor can bring positive changes in

the lives of these children if they want, according to the poet. If they hold their responsibilities seriously, they can take these children out of their miserable condition. They can help in breaking the slums and building a new world for them.

LONG ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

1. Write the central idea of the poem in detail.

Ans: This poem is about the children who are living in a slum. They are mostly suffering from malnutrition. In their classroom, there are many beautiful pictures. There is an open handed map and a picture of Shakespeare. The poet wants that these children should be taken out of their slum and they should be shown green fields and be allowed to run freely. Therefore, he appeals to the officials to do something for the children.

The poet says that only those people can create history who can enjoy anything under the sun. Therefore, the poet wants that these children should also be provided proper facilities so that they can grow into useful citizens.