

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM

Stephen Spender

Background:

"An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" was first published in 1964 in Stephen Spender's *Selected Poems*. The poem has since appeared in several collections, including *Collected Poems 1928-1985*, published in 1985. "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" is perhaps the best example of Spender's political voice resonating throughout a poem. In this poem, Spender expresses his ideological positions on government, economics, and education. The students in this classroom are underprivileged and malnourished. The capitalistic government is supposed to supply equal opportunity for education, but the classroom in the slum offers little hope for change or progress for its lower-class students. This poem, written during the time of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, is fitting both in its commentary about race issues in American education and as a Socialist proclamation against capitalism and social injustice in general. Although Spender was British, his extreme left-leaning political ideologies were in response to the global question concerning social injustice. His poem does not explicitly name any country, location, race, or citizenship. Spender's intent was to shed light on social injustices worldwide; regardless of Spender's own ethnicity, the hotbed of this global struggle was the American Civil Rights movement.

Critical Appreciation

The poet makes his point by presenting contrasting pictures. The first stanza contains vivid descriptions of the slum children. They are 'far far' away metaphorically from the mainstream of life, freedom, adventure and a bold future ('gusty waves'). They are like 'rootless weeds' (insecure, unwanted, neglected) caught in the backwaters of life. Their emaciated, undernourished bodies are in need of medical attention. They are pale and have unkempt hair. What hope of progress is there for these victims of a callous

capitalist society? The tall girl seems hopeless, sick and tired, the thin, hungry looking boy looks like a rat, the 'stunted, unlucky heir / of twisted bones' has inherited his father's disease. The stanza ends with a sweet, young, child who sits at the back of the class dreaming of being a squirrel in a tree house. He is neglected at the back of the 'dim' class.

In the second stanza, the poet moves on to describe the classroom. The walls are 'sour cream' in colour – pale, dull, colourless, dirty white. The colour suggests that the children are cynical and disillusioned despite their tender years. It also evokes an unpleasant rancid smell. The walls are filled with 'donations', which seem to taunt the children. The children have no connection with the beautiful, 'cloudless' landscapes, the beauty of Shakespearean language. The map of the world seems to be generously complimenting the outside world with a flattering picture of itself. The children, however, see the world through other windows, their personal experience, – unclear, narrow, heavy and oppressive. This is ironical. The repetition of the phrase 'far far' seems to highlight the point made by the poet that there is a wide gulf between the slum children and the rosy picture presented by the pictures on the wall.

In the third stanza, the poet seems to question the value of the world on the walls which ironically seems to have a negative impact on the children. The children are now compared to rodents that live in a 'cramped hole'. They are lured into crime as they reach out desperately to a world far removed from their own lives which move on from 'fog to endless night' – a metaphor for their dismal prospects. Their immediate environment is now a 'slag heap' upon which the children lie like rubbish. Reality weighs down on them and the children's experience is confined to a 'foggy slum'. They wear skins through which the bones jut out as well spectacles with mended glass which distort their view of the world in all its beauty. The poet seems to be angered by the situation and calls for a more truthful and realistic picture of the world for the children – something to which they can relate. Otherwise, he feels that the slum children are doomed.

The final stanza begins on a hopeful note. It is an appeal to the concerned authorities 'governor, inspector, visitor' to change the lives of the children by becoming their 'map' or their guide, their introduction to the world, to improve the state of the classroom, to make education meaningful and relevant to the slum children. Then the windows through which the slum children observe their world, their personal experiences in the slum, will break open to reveal the outside world in all its natural beauty. The children will then have no restricted or misguided view of the world. They will understand its true beauty. They will enjoy full freedom and a golden future. The poem ends with a burst of colour and light – a sharp contrast to the bleak and dim atmosphere of the classroom.

The poet seems to be suggesting that a shift from the town to the beauties of Nature will benefit the children. They will live and act out history. The poet suggests that power will be bestowed on them in the evocative symbolism – their 'language is the sun'.

Key Points:

Stanza 1: Physical description of slum children – stanza has a sad tone -children neglected and forgotten

Stanza 2: Description of classroom – immediate environment (slum) stark contrast to rosy picture of world depicted by pictures on walls

Stanza 3: Poet questions relevance of Shakespeare and maps, etc. to lives lived in 'cramped holes'

Stanza 4: Poet begins hopefully, appeals to concerned persons to change the lives of the slum children so that their education becomes relevant and meaningful

Model Answers:

1. What is the dream of the 'sweet and young' child? What is Spender trying to say through his example?

The child dreams of being in another room - of being a squirrel in a 'tree room' – in the lap of Nature. Spender suggests that education has not reached out to the child who is lost in his own world, 'unnoted' and forgotten at the back of the 'dím class'.

2. Why does the poet present a contrasting picture of the world of the slum children and the posters on the walls?

The poet draws attention to the lack of relevant education in the slum classroom. He is making an ironical comment on the vast difference between the slums with their 'narrow streets' and 'lead sky' and the beautiful world 'cloudless at dawn' with Shakespeare and Tyrolese sceneries. The 'donations' on the walls seem to mock the children.

3. In what kind of a world do the slum children live?

The slum children live in a gloomy slum enveloped by fog. A narrow street is covered with a dull grey sky. They are far away from the beautiful countryside or the world created by books. Their classroom is dim and uninspiring with sour cream walls covered with pictures that clash harshly with their reality.

4. How can the slum children be helped?

The slum children can only be helped if the governor, inspector, visitor break open the catacombs in which they are trapped and set the children free to explore the beautiful, colourful world. Education has to be meaningful and relevant to them. There will be no barriers between them and their books.

Reference to the Context:

'Surely Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example,
With ships and sun and love teaching them to steal –'

1. What is the setting?

The setting is an elementary school classroom in a slum.

2. Why is Shakespeare 'wicked'?

Shakespeare is wicked because the slum children cannot understand or identify with his beautiful language and thoughts. All that it will do is make them have aspirations for things which are beyond their reach and may lead them to a life of crime.

3. Why is the map a 'bad example'?

The map is a 'bad example' because it gives a picture of a beautiful world which is a stark contrast to the immediate surroundings of the children who live in an urban slum with 'narrow streets' and a 'lead sky'.

4. Why would the children be tempted to steal?

The children are tempted to escape their miserable surroundings into the unreal and beautiful world promised by Shakespeare and the map. They are disappointed by the world they live in and try to reach out to the world shown to them by Shakespeare.

Thus, they are tempted to steal.

'At back of the dim class

One unnoted, sweet and young. His eyes live in a dream,
Of squirrel's game, in tree house other than this.'

1. Where is the class?

The class is in an elementary school in a slum.

2. Why is the child unnoted?

The child is sitting at the back of the class, lost in his own thoughts and inhabits a world of his own. He is not involved in the class activities and is cut off from the others.

3. What does 'dim class' signify?

The 'dim class' stands for the squalor and poverty that surrounds the children. Their education is a sheer waste and there appears to be no hope for them. Their surroundings are dark and dismal in an urban slum.

4. Who are the other children mentioned in the poem?

The other children mentioned in the poem are a tall girl with a weighed down head, a paper-seeming boy and an unlucky heir, a boy with stunted bones.