

## An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum

### Details of the poet Stephen Spender –

- Sir Stephen Harold Spender was an English poet, novelist, and essayist who concentrated on themes of social injustice and the class struggle in his work.
- He was appointed the seventeenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the United States Library of Congress in 1965.
- Spender was born in [Kensington](#), London, to journalist [Harold Spender](#) and Violet Hilda Schuster, a painter, and poet, of [German Jewish](#) heritage
- Spender had a keen interest in politics and so, he declared himself as socialist and pacifist. His works concentrated on themes of social injustice and the class struggle.

### Preface to the Poem:

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum is a beautifully penned down poem by Stephen Spender that exposes the glaring gaps and marginalisation that occur every so often in our society. Spender is publicly a scrupulous objector and a socialist. The poet aims to portray the conditions of the youngsters residing in the slum. The poet compares the conditions of the “haves” (Privileged children) and the “have-nots” (Under-privileged children of the slum).

### Teaching Initiation for poetic comprehension:

#### 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.***

- 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 hair is 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 the head which shows the burden of the stressed life she leads.
- Another boy who is as thin as a paper too has the same undernourished 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.

***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. 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.***

- The poet describes the classroom which is also dirty and neglected like its inhabitants.
- The classroom too exhibits an atmosphere of depression and gloom.
- 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 is the image of a map that helps all in its way. But for these children, the map of the world is irrelevant because the slum
- where they live is different from what is shown on the map. Their world is only what they see out of the window of the classroom - the slum
- Their world presents a future to them which is dark and cruel. The poet brings out the harsh reality of these children.
- These children have trapped in a hopeless situation and their world is far from the beautiful nature such as rivers, valleys, and seas.

**STANZA 3**

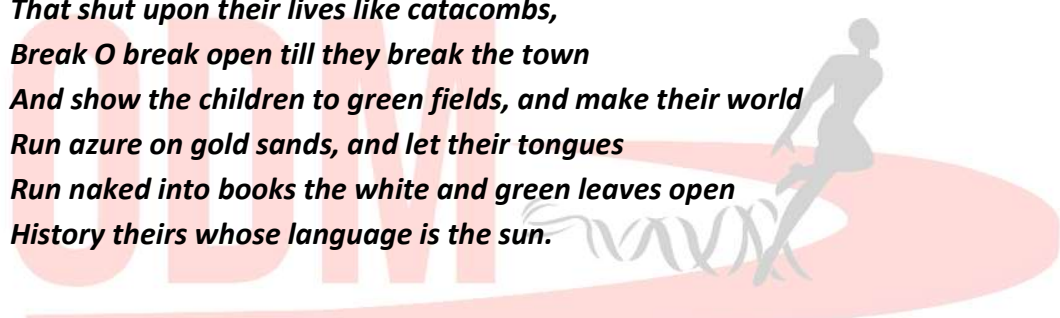
***Surely, Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example,  
With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal  
For lives that slyly turn in their cramped holes  
From fog to endless night? On their slag heap, these children  
Wear skins peeped through by bones and spectacles of steel  
With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.  
All of their time and space are foggy slum.  
So blot their maps with slums as big as doom.***

- 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 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 shows their deprivation and undernourished conditions.
- The poet feels that the classroom should have pictures of huge slums instead of those scenic graphics because that is the reality 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.***

A stylized illustration in the background of the stanza text. It features a grey silhouette of a person sitting on a red, glowing globe. A white DNA double helix is positioned behind the person, extending across the globe. The entire scene is set against a light pink, oval-shaped background.

- 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 for 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 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.

## MIND MAP

**Poet:**  
**Stephen spender**

### POET:

- Stephen Spender (1909-1995)
- An English poet and an essayist .Spender took a keen interest in politics and declared himself to be a socialist and pacifist.
- Prominent Works: Poems of Dedication, The Edge of Being.

**Theme**

- Social disparity between rich & the poor
- Imperative for mitigating poverty
- Call for social change by intervention of intellectuals

**Characters**

- Poet, Stephen Spender
- A tall girl of the slum
- A boy with bone disease
- Other children of the slum

**Topic Contents**

- The poet describes the miserable condition of the children in a school in a slum, malnourished, ill and exhausted, physical and mental growth is stunted.
- Poet wants improvement in the quality of lives of slum children.
- The poet says if slum children are allowed education in the form of free exploration, their language will gain the power and warmth of the Sun.
- They will acquire freedom of expression which will change their future and recreate history.
- In the long run these children will be able to reap the benefits and rewrite the history of power with development and prosperity