

MAHESH PUBLIC SCHOOL

TEXT BOOK: FLAMINGO

SUBJECT: ENGLISH CORE

POETRY: 2 An Elementary school classroom in a slum

CLASS : XII

About the poet



Stephen Spender (1909-1995) was a poet and English essayist. Spender had keen interest in politics and so, he declared himself as socialist and pacifist. His work concentrated on themes of social injustice and the class struggle.

Introduction

The poem is composed by Stephen Spender describes the social inequalities which are prevailing in the society. In the poem he describes the condition of the students of an elementary school which is situated in a slum area. The poet wants to draw attention of everyone towards these kids so that their life can be improved and they may get trained to become good citizens rather than criminals.

Rhyme scheme of the poem

The poem has been composed in free verse. It does not have rhyme scheme.

An Elementary school classroom in a slum

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.

Poem and Explanation

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.

Gusty waves: breezy winds

Pallor: pale, dull face

Stunted: not fully grown due to malnutrition

Gnarled: Knotted, rough

weeds: unwanted plants that grow on their own

Paper seeming boy: Very thin boy, as thin as a sheet of paper

hair: Successor

The poet describes the children who study in an elementary school which is setup in a slum area. The poet says that the faces of children are dull and without any energy. They are not full of energy like other kids of their age. These children are compared to unwanted weed. Here the writer wants to say that these children seem to be unwanted like the unwanted weeds which grow on their own in the fields. Their hair is not neatly done. It falls on their pale faces as if they have been torn apart. The children are untidy, they haven't combed their hair. Then he describes a tall girl who seems to be burdened by poverty. Her head is bent maybe because of tiredness or shame. There is another boy who is so weak and thin that he has been compared to a sheet of paper. The boy's eyes reflect greed and he wants to achieve everything. Then he describes another student who is physically disabled. The poet says that this boy is unlucky because he inherited a disease from his father due to which he has a deformed body. Instead of getting any facility from his father, he has received a disease in heritage. This disabled boy is sitting on his bench and is reciting his lesson. At the back of the class, in dim, dark area, was 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. It seemed as if he was rather interested in playing with squirrels in the tree house.

Literary devices:

Simile: children are compared with rootless weed (like rootless weed)

Metaphor: boy is compared with paper as he is thin (paper seeming boy)

Repetition: use of far to stress on the distance

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.

Sour: unpleasant, here refers to the colour of sour cream -off white or creamish

Donations: things given or received in charity

Dawn: early morning, sunrise

civilized dome: here, it means rising sun at the horizon which is in the shape of a dome (semi - circle)

Tyrolese valley: A beautiful ice-free valley in Austria

Sealed: shut or locked

lead: here, dark future of kids

Capes:A large piece of land that sticks out into the sea from the coast

The poet describes the walls of the school. They are cream in colour like the color of sour cream. This means that the walls are not clean, they have not been painted recently. The walls are covered with different charts and images that must have been donated by different people. There is a picture of Shakespeare on the wall. His head which is bald looks like the rising sun at the horizon. At the time of daybreak, the Sun is rising at the horizon and is semi circular like a dome shape. It seems to be behind all the cities. 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. But for these children the map of the world is irrelevant because the slum where they live is different from what is shown in the map. Their world is only what they see out of the window of the classroom - the slum. Their future is full of darkness. Their future is compared to a narrow street which means that there is no wide scope available for their future growth. These children are far away from the radiant light of knowledge and education.

Literary devices:

Metaphor:

1. Walls are described to be dull as sour cream (sour cream walls)
2. The future of the kids is described as limited (Narrow Street sealed with a lead sky)

Assonance: repetition of vowel sound 'e' (Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley)

Allusion: Reference to well known person or place (Shakespeare's head, Tyrolese valley)

Repetition: 'far' repeated

Surely, Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example,

With ships and sun and love tempting them to stealâ€”
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

Wicked: evil

Tempted: persuade

Slyly: trickily

Cramped: confined

Slag: weak

Mended: repaired

Blot: to mark with a spot

Doom: disaster

The poet further says that these children living in the slum area have faced so many hardships that they feel every other person to be their enemy. For them Shakespeare is an evil man. They don't find the map to be a good thing. They were never liked or loved by anyone. Therefore they hate almost everyone. Their desire of being loved by others forces them to steal. They live in small homes and they have started adjusting to it. Their life is going towards an endless night. This means that their future is full of darkness. These kids are so thin that one can easily see their bones through the thin layer of skin. Their skin is like the thin layer of cloth and the bones beneath are visible through the skin. These kids suffer from malnutrition. They wear spectacles which are made of steel. They are cheap and very uncomfortable. Even the lenses in the spectacles are repaired. The spectacles look like stones which have been repaired with pieces of glass sticking out of them. Here the poet tries to explain that these kids have to face so many hardships in their lives. As these slums are getting bigger, they will destroy the future of these children and it is very difficult for such kids to escape from them.

Literary devices:

Metaphor: Their homes are very small like holes (cramped holes)

Simile- their repaired spectacles (like bottle bits on stones)

Alliteration: Use of 'f' sound (From fog)

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.

Catacombs: tomb, cemetery

Azure: deep blue

The poet says that the government should take notice of the problems being faced by these kids. He urges them to change the life of these kids and make the world map a reality for them. There is a need to break the restrictions which are put on them due to poverty and lack of resources. He wants the governor and public to help these kids in achieving their dreams. As this will take them away from fog to azure sky, the poet here wants to say that in this way the kids can be taken away from the darkness of their present to a bright future. He wants these kids to experience the sands and the beauty of nature as this will lead to a desire of gaining knowledge. They will then go through the white and green leaves. Here white leaves depict books and green leaves depict nature. This will then result in their progress and they will be able to paint a bright future for themselves.

Literary devices

Metaphor: books and nature are expressed in form of white and green leaves (the white green leaves open)

Anaphora: Use of repeated words in two consecutive lines (Run azure! And Run naked!)

Question and Answers

Q1-Tick the item which best answers the following:

(a) The tall girl with her head weighed down means the girl

- Is ill and exhausted
- Has her head bent with shame
- Has untidy hair

Ans: is ill and exhausted

(b) The paper seeming boy with rat's eyes means the boy is

- Sly and secretive
- Thin, hungry and weak
- Unpleasant looking

Ans. Thin, hungry and weak

(c) The stunted, unlucky heir of twisted bones means the boy

- Has an inherited disability
- Was short and bony

Ans. 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

- Full of hope in the future
- Mentally ill
- Distracted from the lesson

Ans. Distracted from the lesson

(e) The children's faces are compared to 'rootless weeds' this means they

- Are insecure
- Are ill-fed
- Are wasters

Ans. Are wasters

Q2- What do you think is the color of 'sour cream'? Why do you think the poet has used this expression to describe the classroom walls?

A2- The color of sour cream is pale and dull. The poet used this expression to describe the classroom walls because the walls were not freshly paint. The walls of the classroom were dull and were not beautiful.

Q3- 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?

A3- The various pictures on the wall are not similar to the world of these slum dwelling children because they have never got adequate facilities and education. They have always seen crime happening around them. That is why it is said in the poem that for these children Shakespeare is a wicked man. Not only this, their world is the dirty slum area in which they live which is continuously expanding. Hence, the world maps which never show slums and the beautiful valley which is never seen and is out of reach of such children are in total contrast wto what they see as their world.

Q4- What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change?

A4- The poet wants the governor, inspector and visitors to visit the school. He wants them to see the plight of these kids and do something for their betterment. These kids should be provided with best amenities in order to make their life better. He wants these kids to visit beautiful places which are granted by the nature with its beauty. This will instill a hunger in them to study in order to make their life better.