

CLASS - XI

SUBJECT-ENGLISH

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum

Notes

1. Explanation of the poem-

Stanza 1

Far far from gusty waves these children's faces.
Like rootless weeds, the hair torn around 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 the tree room, other than this.

-The poet Stephen Spender visits a school in a slum area and he is shocked to notice the measurable condition of children studying there. Even the condition of the school was pitiable. Then he goes on depicting the picture of these children in vivid imagery contrasting the rich world outside their slum.

- ❑ He says these children are “far far away” from the gusty waves, from the lap of nature, from the enjoyment of nature. He repeats the word “far” to put an emphasis on the distance between the children and the “gusty waves”. This kind of poetic device is called repetition.
- ❑ By gusty waves poet symbolise the bright, energetic side of life that is so lively and full of enjoyment. The word gusty means “blowing strongly”. We enjoy seeing the strongly blowing wind over the sea, waves produced dashing against the sea shore. This energetic life delights us. But the poor children of the slum are far away from this bright, hopeful life of rich world outside their slum.
- ❑ In contrast the slum children live a life of hopelessness. Their face is unkempt and dirty. Their hair is untidily scattered around their pale faces. Pale face represents both unhealthy life style and hopelessness.
- ❑ These children are compared to rootless weeds. Because weeds are some unwanted wild plants grown in our paddy fields. These weeds are called rootless because they are not welcomed by us. We they don't belong to the paddy fields which we grow. So, we try to pluck them out. These children of slum are also like these weeds, unwelcomed and unwanted by the rich world outside their slum. They are pale because of malnutrition and unhealthy life style. The poet perfectly compares the insecure life of the weeds to the insecure life of the slum children.
- ❑ Then poet goes on describing children present in the classroom. First he says of a girl who is tall and sitting with her bowed down head. The poet perhaps tries to present the depressed girl with bowed down head because she was over loaded and overburdened with the difficulties and struggle of life. So she is exhausted and tired. She can't even sit straight.
- ❑ He mentions another boy who is light weighted like a paper. His eyes are like rat's small and scared, scared of world outside. He is weak and meek. He is in search of something, may be food, shelter or a better life that he can't get in his slum.
- ❑ The boy reciting a lesson from his book who is having twisted bones. Perhaps he is affected with some genetic disease. His growth is stunted (underdeveloped).
- ❑ Poet calls him “unlucky heir” because unlike other children he got nothing from his parents except poverty, struggle, a genetic disease that is carried on generation to generation and a life in a slum full of dirt and filth.

- ☐ Through all these children poet tries to present the hell like life of the slum children with no hope and future. At the same time poet also says of a boy in that dim classroom who is unlike these children lives in hope and dream. He dreams of squirrel game in trees. He dreams of nature, life and energy. Squirrel game's here represents nature and life outside.
- ☐ This unnoticed boy represents a ray of hope and life in that dark and dull classroom.

Questions based on this stanza

- a) **What are the children compared to? Why?**

Ans. The children in the above stanza are compared to the rootless weeds because just like the weeds even the children of slum lead an insecure and unstable life. They lack stability.

- b) **Why do you think the tall girl is sitting with a weighed down head?**

Ans. Perhaps the tall girl is tired of her struggled life. She is overburdened of poverty. So, she keeps her head down.

- c) **Give two phrases that suggest children are under nourished.**

Ans. "Paper-seeming" and stunted" are two phrases that suggest children's undernourished condition. Both represents under developed physique of the children due to malnutrition.

- d) **What does "gusty waves" mean?**

Ans. By gusty waves poet means the fast, bright, energetic and hopeful life of people outside the slum. That is too close to nature and enjoying its richness.

- e) **Why the poet calls the child "unlucky heir"? What does he inherited?**

Ans. The poet calls the boy unfortunate successor because unlike other children he inherited no richness of life.

Instead, this boy inherited his father's twisted bones and poverty.

- f) **How does the face of these slum children look?**

Ans. The face of these slum children looks pale because of malnutrition and lack of proper care. Their hair is shabby and uncombed.

- g) **What is the dream of unnoted child in the dim classroom?**

Ans. Unlike other children the unnoticed child of the class dreams of squirrel's game. He dreams of life outside that hopeless dim classroom.

- h) **Why is the child reciting his father's gnarled disease?**

Ans. The boy is reciting a lesson from his desk but his underdeveloped growth and twisted bones are so prominent that everyone's attention is to his physique than his recitation.

- i) **What are two contrastive pictures you find in this stanza?**

Ans. Throughout the stanza poet tries to draw two pictures. First picture is about the classroom in a slum that poet visits. Through various images he gives us an idea of the classroom in slum that is dim, dark and hopeless. On the contrary he depicts the picture of a joyful, energetic life that exists outside the class.

Stanza-2

**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 world, are 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 unpleasant walls of the classroom are decorated with the donations and the picture of Shakespeare. The walls are called unpleasant because they are off-white in colour and show the decayed life of the slum. They are unpleasant because there may be some rotten smell coming from it because of unrepaired condition of the walls. The picture of Shakespeare on the wall suggests the literate world outside.
- ❑ Other pictures hanged on wall includes a picture of a clear sky at dawn, flowery valley of Austria, along with the doom of an ancient civilization representing hope, enjoyment of nature's beauty and progress of human civilization.
- ❑ Poet says the rich people pretend to be generous to these children by donating these things to them. But in reality there is no relevance of these things to the world of slum. The children of slum are limited to the world of their window, to the world they see through the windows of the school classroom. Their future is foggy, uncertain, dull and bleak. They're confined to the narrow streets of the slum enclosed by the polluted sky. They are miles away from the rivers and seas that indicate the adventure and enjoyment of nature. They are also far away from wisdom that can empower their future.

Questions based on above stanza-

- a) **What do you think is the colour of sour cream walls? Why poet used this expression?**

Ans. The colour of the classroom walls are off- white.

Poet used this expression to show untouched, unrepaired decayed condition of the classroom walls. They are off white due to the dust and dirt of the slum. It also represents the unhygienic condition of the school.

- b) **How the speaker feels about the donations? Give reason for your answer?**

Ans. The reach people pretends to be generous to the children living in slum by donating pictures of Shakespeare, cloudless dawn, Tyrolese valley, ancient dooms etc. because the world in these pictures has no relevance to the real life that exist in the slum school. They can just dream of being literate like Shakespeare or getting a clear sky like the picture but they can't really get them. So the poet calls them wicked and a bad example.

- c) **What the windows of the slum school signify?**

Ans. Through the windows of the classroom children can get a glimpse of world outside their classroom i.e. the surrounding of the school in slum, the reality that waits for the children outside the class. This is in contrary to the pictures hanged on the classroom wall representing a world they can just aspire but never achieve.

- d) **Which world is of children's in the classroom and which world not?**

Or

Explain, "For these children these windows are world".

Ans. The world that is depicted on the classroom walls are just a world children can aspire or dream but can't achieve. So, this is not their world. But the world they see through the windows is a part of the slum where they live and whatever they learns in the class is a part of their life that they can't avoid. So, it's the real world and it's theirs.

- e) **What are the two things mentioned in the poem represents civilized world?**

Ans. The Shakespeare's picture and high rising dooms suggests civilised world.

- f) **What the following things represent?**

Shakespeare's statue, cloudless sky at dawn, civilized doom, Tyrolese valley

Ans.

- ☐ **Shakespeare's statue** represents knowledge, education and literate world in contrast to despondent world in slum.
- ☐ **Cloudless sky at dawn** represents clear pollution free sky of world in nature's lap in contrast to the sealed lead sky of the slum
- ☐ **Civilized doom** represents the rich, progressive and civilized world outside the slum in contrast to the stagnant, dull slum.
- ☐ **Tyrolese valley represents** the pleasant beautiful world in contrast to the dirty and filthy world of the classroom.

Stanza-3

**Surely, Shakespeare is wicked, and 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.**

- ☐ Because there is no relevance of the real life in slum to the world depicted in the photos poets calls it wicked.
- ☐ Poet calls Shakespeare wicked because Shakespeare through his writing enlightened whole world but unfortunately for these children there is no hope of entering into that enlightened world. So, poet calls him wicked.
- ☐ He also calls the map a bad example because that map does not hold any place for these slum children. They can just aspire to be there but can't afford to live there. There is no means to go to that world. They are just cruel temptation for these children. They may steal or commit crime to achieve them so they are called bad examples.
- ☐ These children's lives are confined to the narrow holes of that dark slum. Even their fate conspire them to be imprisoned there.
- ☐ They live lives of uncertainty since morning to night and their condition turns from bad to worst.
- ☐ The lives of these children are compared to the slag heap because they are like wastage of refined educated society that is dumped in garbage.
- ☐ Explaining their under nourished condition poet says their bones peep through their skin i.e. they are so skinny because of malnutrition that we can count their bones through skin.
- ☐ They use spectacles not for luxury but because it's their necessity. They use mended glasses, cracked and steel framed. They can't afford a brand new spectacle so they manage with repaired one.
- ☐ They live a life of hell confined to their uncertain, unhealthy, polluted slum.
- ☐ They are like a blot or stain in the progress of civilized life.

Questions based on above stanza-

a) **Explain, "Slag heap".**

Ans. Slag heap means wastage here poet refers to the body of each child of the slum. They're like wastage of educated world dumped in garbage.

b) **Explain, "From fog to endless night".**

Ans. The children of the slum live a life of uncertainty. They pass their life in the polluted slum struggling since foggy morning to dark night. It also refers to their lives that move from bad to worst since birth to death.

c) **Why they are called blot in the map?**

Ans. They are called a stain in the map because they don't belong to the civilized beautiful world depicted on the map instead they live an unhealthy undernourished life in filthy slum full of dirt and dust. So they are called a stain on the map.

Stanza -4

**Unless, governor, teacher, 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 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 is theirs whose language is the sun**

- ☐ There is no coordination between the civilized world and the world of children in the school in a slum. So poet asked people from all spheres of life governor, inspector, teacher and visitor to come forward and educate these children so that they can fill the gap. These people must consider the lives of these children as their lives only then there can be a change. Their slum is an enclosed space like internal part of a grave that is dark and suffocating.
- ☐ So, poet urged these people to break through the measurable and hopeless condition of these slum children. And let them see green fields. They are asked to expose the slum children to nature and hope. Where they can breathe in open air that is unlimited just like rest of the world.
- ☐ He also asked them to educate and let open and go wild through pages of wisdom so that they can master them. He says one who can read and write only he creates history.
- ☐ One should possess the strength and brightness of sun only then he can create history.
- ☐ Here, poet wishes to break all kinds of social bonding and inequalities to create a better world.

Questions based on the stanza-

A) Explain, "Run azure on gold sands"?

Ans. Poet says their world should extend to the blue sky rising above the gold sands. By these poet meant to expose these children to hope and to open air where they can run free under the unlimited sky.

B) Explain, "tongues run naked into books"

Ans. It means to go wild through books. They should read without any hesitation or condition only then they can understand the books for progress.

C) Explain, "history is theirs whose language is sun"

Ans. Through this metaphor poet tries to convey the message that those people who outshine others only they can create history. He also feels that only those who have courage can leave their mark. To create history their language must have strength, brightness and warmth of sun.

Some extra questions

A) THEME OF THE POEM

Stephen Spender is proclaimed as a socialist and a pacifist. In this poem, he concentrates on the theme of social injustice and class inequalities. He depicts the pathetic life of slum children who are victims of government's apathy. The poet is writing about an elementary classroom in a slum and questions the value of education in such a context, suggesting that maps of the world and good literature may raise hopes and aspirations, which will never be fulfilled. The poor, emaciated slum children are like captives in the world of

darkness, poverty and hopelessness. Through this poem, the poet expresses his outrage at the insensitive attitude of the rich & privileged people, towards the unfortunate children of the slum school. But he is not pessimistic. He qualifies it saying that all the learned people of the society are able to transport the education beyond boundaries of the classroom will spell hope for the future. So, we can say the poem is a bitter criticism on state of education in elementary schools of slum.

B) **Figures of speech used in the poem**

Poet used various metaphors like “paper-seeming boy” (to mean light weighted), Rat’s eye” (to compare boy’s bulgy eyes to the eyes of rat), “slag heap” (to compare children’s physique to the metallic wastage), “language is the sun” (to present strength of language) etc.

Then poet used simile. They are “like rootless weeds” (to present children’s condition), “shut upon their lives like catacombs” (to present children’s suffocating life confined in slum).

3. **Picture of slum children depicted in the poem**

The slum children in an elementary school look pathetic. Their hairs are uncombed. They look pale and shabby. They are undernourished and diseased. They live in dark, dirty and narrow cramped holes enclosed with polluted grey sky. And forced to sit in a dreary classroom where they don’t get proper education.

4. **Bring out optimism in last stanza?**

Spender feels education is the gate way to the betterment of these children. It’s only the education that can release them from their measurable life. So, he appeals to the officials of all spheres of life to be sensitive to these children and break the barrier that hinders their growth and development.

5. **The children of slum are hopelessly hoping against the hope. Discuss.**

Although the children of slum leads a life of poverty, diseased, dark and hopelessness they dreams of nature, river, open fields and squirrel game. These dreams are nurturing their eyes but there is no hope of fulfilling them.