

## **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.

**Q1. Have you ever visited or seen an elementary school in a slum? What does it look like?**

Answer

Yes, I have visited an elementary school in a slum. The school was in a pitiful state. Its dingy and neglected classrooms were devoid of even basic amenities like fan and lights. Every single

window was broken and bore marks of rust. How the students in the classroom dealt with the outside noise or the winters was anybody's guess. The ceilings too were full of cobwebs. The furniture was broken and almost unusable. The walls of the classrooms were as shabby, malnourished and disinterested as the students sitting in their enclosures. Even the teachers seemed to have lost their concern both for the students and their education. Moreover, I was shocked to know that the usage of toilets was restricted to the school staff.

**Tick the item which best answers the following.**

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

(i) is ill and exhausted

(ii) has her head bent with shame

(iii) has untidy hair

(b) The paper-seeming boy with rat's eyes means the boy is \_\_\_\_\_.

(i) sly and secretive

(ii) thin, hungry and weak

(iii) unpleasant looking

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

(i) has an inherited disability

(ii) was short and bony

(d) His eyes live in a dream. A squirrel's game, in the tree room other than this. This means the boy is \_\_\_\_\_.

(i) full of hope in the future

(ii) mentally ill

(iii) distracted from the lesson

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

\_\_\_\_\_.

(i) are insecure

(ii) are ill-fed

(iii) are wasters

Answer

(a) (ii) is ill and exhausted

(b) (ii) thin, hungry and weak

(c) (i) has an inherited disability

(d) (iii) distracted from the lesson

(e) (iii) are wasters

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

Answer

Sour cream indicates the colour cream or dirty white. The poet has used this expression to describe the poor dull and ill-equipped environment of the classroom. The walls were painted long ago by donations and since then no attention has been given to them. We see the neglect these children face. It adds to the dull ambiance.

**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?**

Answer

All these totally contrast with the world of the children in the slum. They get half education, the value of education for the children is minimal and to have these pictures which are symbols of high quality education is incongruous here. The buildings with domes are examples of a civilised world, the world unknown to them. The world map is irrelevant to them because the slums, their world cannot be located by them. Finally, the beautiful valley with rivers and capes is meaningless to them. They just have the polluted sky to watch from the broken window panes. These children are deprived of natural beauty.

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

Answer

He wants the children of the slums to venture into the outside world, beyond the boundaries of their slums, and experience a better present and future life.

The elementary school in the slum does not serve any purpose with its poor infrastructure and disinterested students. The poet feels that the governor, inspector and visitors should take initiative to bring about a real change in their situation. To ensure a better way of living for them, they need to be given proper education and freedom from their present confines. They need opportunity, encouragement and optimism to be able to live life with purpose and zest.