

MIND MAP

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

In the first stanza, Spender describes the miserable condition of the children. The faces of the children are unlike the usual children of schools. Instead of being exuberant and energetic, they are like rootless weeds, unwanted and cast out. A particular tall girl is described by the poet as having a bowed down head which shows the burden of the stressed life she leads. Another boy who is as thin as a paper also has the same undernourished look on his face. He has a scared expression in his eyes. The poet says there is one particular boy who is a little younger than the rest but still has 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.

In the second stanza, 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. The walls have pictures of the great poet Shakespeare, a cloudless city skyline and the splendid Tyrolean valley which are in sharp contrast to the dark atmosphere of the classroom. There is a world map on the wall which is their window to the outside world; their classroom windows show their dark future in the dirty alleys only.

In the third stanza, the pensive poet suddenly turns belligerent and feels that Shakespeare is 'wicked' as he is misleading those naïve children through his words which is not only unreal for them, but has a negative impact on their minds. He feels that this would instigate them to steal or take unfair means as they desperately make attempts to escape from their cramped holes. Their existence is indeed, very sad. These deprived children are so skinny that it appears that they are 'wearing' skins. The spectacles they are wearing have glass which has been broken and mended. Their entire appearance reflects their misery and deprivation. The maps displayed in their classroom are no reality for them. Their world is slum; their doom is in the slum.

In the final stanza, 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 of these children and wants the authorities to realize their responsibilities and free the children from such grave-like confinements. The children must break away from the school boundaries and enjoy the world beyond.

2. AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM

ABOUT THE POET

Stephen Spender was born on February 28, 1909, in London. The son of a journalist, he grew up steeped in the art of writing. His life as a poet and writer began in the 1920s while he was at Oxford, where he surrounded himself with respected writers, such as W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. He was a prolific writer, authoring and editing many books. Besides poetry, he published several plays, novels, and short stories and many nonfiction works. His books of poetry include *Poems of Dedication* (1946), *The Edge of Being* (1949), *The Generous Days* (1969), and *Dolphins* (1994). His non-fiction works include *The Creative Element* (1953), *The Struggle of the Modern* (1963), and *Love-Hate Relationships* (1974).

Spender's poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" first appeared in 1964 in his *Selected Poems*.

POETIC DEVICES/FIGURES OF SPEECH IN THE POEM

1. Simile

Example:

- like rootless weeds

This expression is used to describe the health of children, how much malnutrition affected them.

- Like catacombs

These children live in cramped lines of houses where only darkness is there, same are the catacombs where dead bodies are buried. Their life is also in darkness, their aim, their ambition all are in darkness.

- slums as big as doom

Living in slum is like living in hell.

2. Metaphor:

Example:

- rats eyes

Boys anxiety and timidity is like that of a rat.

- reciting a father's gnarled disease

The boy's body speaks of gnarled disease inherited from father.

- tree room abode in a tree

- future's painted with a fog

Just as fog limits our visibility during winters, the children future is always blocked by hopelessness.

- spectacles of steel

This suggests that they are wearing spectacles made of steel, and this suggests that they see only darkness; their future is dark.

3. Alliteration

- far far from gusty waves
- surely Shakespeare
- bottle bits

Reference to Context

Read the extracts given below and answer the questions that follow.

I. 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 paperseeming boy,
with rat's eyes.**

- What are the children compared to?
- Why do you think does the poet mention only the faces of the children?
- Why do you think the tall girl is sitting with a weighed-down head?
- Give two phrases which tell us that the children are undernourished.

II. The stunted, unlucky heir

of twisted bones, reciting a father's gnarled disease,

His lesson, from his desk. At the 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.

- Who is the 'unlucky heir' and what has he inherited?
- Who is sitting at the back of the dim class?
- What is the stunted boy reciting?
- Explain, 'in tree room, other than this'?

III. 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.

- Why is Shakespeare described as wicked?
- How do the slum children look like?
- Why is ship a tempting reality in the lives of the slum children? What else tempts the children?
- Explain: 'from fog to endless night'.

IV. 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.

- Which map is the poet talking about in the above lines?
- Who are 'these children'? What do 'these windows' refer to?
- What kind of future does the poet foresee for them?
- Why does the poet say that the narrow street is sealed?

V. 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.

- Who can improve the lot of the poor slum children?
- What does the poet want his readers break?
- What does the poet want for the children?
- Explain: "History is theirs whose language is the sun".

ANSWER KEY

- I. (a) The children have pale faces and torn and scattered hair all over their faces and hence, they are compared to rootless weeds.
 (b) The poet mentions only the faces of the children in the classroom to bring out the pain they suffer. Their existence is entirely based on sufferings, poverty and want, darkness and death. As one's pain is expressed only on his/her face; therefore, the poet mentions only 'faces' in the poem.
 (c) The girl is sitting with a weighed-down head probably because she is depressed due to abject poverty or family tussles. She also feels humiliated and embarrassed because of the lack of education.
 (d) i. rootless weeds
 ii. rat's eyes
- II. (a) The boy with stunted growth and twisted bones, sitting at the desk, is referred to as 'unlucky heir'. He has inherited the deformity of gnarled disease that makes him a living example of his father's sufferings.
 (b) An unnoted, sweet young boy is sitting at the back of the dim class. He is dreaming of squirrels playing games on trees. He is also dreaming of his future that will be free of sorrow.
 (c) The stunted boy is reciting his lessons, but due to his disease, his voice is weak and sick and thus he recites his diseased inheritance instead.
 (d) The unnoted boy desires to play in the hollows of the tree rather than attending to the lessons in the classroom. He likes the hollows inside the tree. For him, the classroom is very boring.
- III. (a) Shakespearean stories are full of fortunate, beautiful, happy, romantic characters and magical places and palaces. When these stories are told in the classroom, the children are attracted to these stories and try to imitate these heroic characters but in reality they are troubled by disease and despair. Their literary training is a far cry. That is why Shakespeare has been described as wicked.
 (b) The slum children are extremely starved and malnourished. The poet compares their bodies to the large pile of waste metal remains. They are like skeletons wearing broken glasses as spectacles.
 (c) Far away from seas and oceans, the children have not seen a real ship or real sea. They are also tempted by the brightness of the sky and the love in the stories they have heard.
 (d) With reference to the passage, the expression 'from fog to endless night' describes the miserable and pathetic lives of the slum children from start to finish. From foggy mornings till late nights, these children make desperate attempts to live their life, sustaining it despite all odds. Their life is full of misery, hopelessness and suffering.
- IV. (a) The poet is talking about the map which depicts only the world of the privileged and the important, the world that comprises civilised domes, bells, flowers and the scenic beauty of nature.
 (b) These are the children of the Elementary school classroom in a slum. 'These windows' are the windows of the classroom where the children are now sitting and which shows only narrow streets and dark sky symbolising their dark future.
 (c) The future of these children is quite dim. It has been painted with fog. It means the poor children have no bright hopes about their future. As we can't see things in the fog, in the same way the future of these children stares at darkness. There is no one to guide them and hence, it is bleak.
 (d) The poet says that the narrow street is sealed as these provide no opportunity to make an access to the vast outer world of wisdom.
- V. (a) The ruler, the educationists, the teachers and the general public by their efforts can improve the lives of the slum children.
 (b) The poet wants his readers to break the windows of the classroom that shut out their freedom in the classroom. The windows always remain closed and restrict light from entering the classroom making it a catacomb for the children.
 (c) The poet wants that these children should be properly educated, so that they get the energy and warmth of the sun which is symbolic of light and knowledge.
 (d) According to the poet, history is made by those people who speak the language of the Sun. It means those who are given access to the world of opportunities are the ones who accomplish feats.