



INDIAN SCHOOL AL WADI AL KABIR

Class: XII	Department: ENGLISH	Date of submission:
Question Bank NO: 2	AN ELEMETARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM- STEPHEN SPENDER	Note: To be written in notebook

Summary of the poem

In this poem, Stephen Spender has brought out the miserable condition of the children studying in an elementary school in a slum. The children in the classroom are pale and unhealthy and some are even diseased. Their unkempt and dull hair has been compared to rootless weeds. One of the girls is apparently burdened with the miseries of poverty. One of the boys has inherited his father's disease and has stunted growth. Another student is sitting unnoticed and he is yearning to play outdoors. The donations given to the school in the form of pictures, paintings and maps are meaningless for the children. They exhibit the world of the elite and the privileged while the children in the slum have a future that is sealed and confined to the slum. Their future is dark and limited. The donations on the walls only add to the frustration of the children. They are tempted to attain what would be unattainable for them. The only hope for them is the support from powerful people like the governor, inspector or an influential visitor. The children in the slum can progress only if they are given good education and the freedom to move into a world of opportunities and progress. The poet also states that history is made only by those people who have the power of knowledge. Hence, educating and letting the children into a free world of opportunities would release them from the suffocating, wretched life in a slum.

Questions and Answers:

1. What is the theme of the poem 'An Elementary School Classroom in a slum'?

(Ans) In the poem, Spender depicts the pathetic life of slum children who are victims of government apathy. He presents social injustice and class inequalities that prevail in society. The poem is a bitter criticism on the state of education in elementary schools in slum areas.

2. What picture of the slum children is depicted in the poem?

(Ans) The slum children in an elementary school look pathetic. Their hair is like the wild weeds. They are undernourished and diseased. They are unwanted and dirty. They are used to dark, dirty, narrow cramped areas closed in by a grey sky.

3. What do slum children receive as inheritance?

(Ans) The children inherit their parents' poverty and disease. A boy has twisted bones like his father. The slum children inherit the disease of their parents as they are subjected to inhuman dirty cramped conditions.

4. Explain 'far from gusty waves'.

(Ans) 'Gusty waves' represent the beautiful natural world. The slum children are unlike the usual children. They are undernourished and miserable and don't even get an opportunity to be in the lap of nature.

5. What is the comparison drawn with squirrel's game?

(Ans) This is suggestive of the world of dreams, the sweet and young boy lives in. He dreams of squirrel's game in trees away from his gloomy classroom. (tree house – hole in a tree where a squirrel lives and plays)

6. Explain 'like bottle bits on stones'.

(Ans) This simile describes the shattered glasses of the spectacles some slum children have to wear. It looks like the bits of glass on stone walls. It highlights the poverty and hardships of people in slums.

7. In spite of despair and disease, the slum children are not devoid of hope. Give an example of their hope or dream.

(Ans) Even though the world of the slum children is dark and their future bleak, their eyes dream of a better future which is distant and beyond their reach. They dream of open seas, green fields and squirrel's game.

8. Explain 'future's painted with a fog'.

(Ans) The future of slum children is uncertain and bleak. Just as fog blurs one's view in winter, poverty and apathy of the officials have dimmed the future of the slum children.

9. How is the ‘map’ a bad example?

(Ans) The map opens before the slum children a beautiful world. The map is a bad example because it tempts them to aspire for a world which is beyond their reach. Their world is confined to the dark narrow lanes in the slums. They are tempted to steal

10. Bring out the optimism in the last stanza.

(Ans) Spender feels education is the instrument of change. It can release the slum children from the miserable life they lead. He appeals to the officials to become sensitive to their needs. This will break down the barriers that hinder their growth.

11. How can powerful people improve the lot of slum children?

(Ans) Powerful people can liberate the slum children. They can do so by removing social injustice and class inequalities. They must provide opportunities to these children so that their childhood does not get lost in dreary ‘foggy’ slums.

12. Explain ‘history is theirs whose language is the sun’.

(Ans) Those people create history who outshine others. Through this metaphor, Spender feels that only those people who have courage can leave their mark. To create history, their language must have the power, brightness and warmth of the sun. (sun symbolizes the light of knowledge)

13. “Far far from gusty waves these children’s faces like rootless weeds, the hair torn round their pallor.” Explain.

(Ans) The children in an elementary school of a slum have faces which are very different from those of other children. They are not exuberant and full of energy. Their faces are like weeds in a garden (like rootless weeds-simile) – They are rootless, unwanted, unsure and lack stability. Their hair is unkempt around their pale faces. The gusty waves symbolize the energy that ought to be in children.

14. “The tall girl with her weighed-down head. The paper-seeming boy, with rats’s eyes.” Explain.

(Ans) The poet expands on the theme of the miserable existence of the slum dwellers’ children. The tall girl is physically and emotionally exhausted. Her head hangs down in exhaustion. The children are underdeveloped and live like rodents. A very sick and lean boy has “rat’s eye” symbolizing that he is defensive and scared like a rodent. He looks for food, satisfaction of achieving what the rich children have and happiness. His prospect for survival, let alone success, seems bleak.

15. “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.” Explain.

(Ans) The classrooms are equally dim and pathetic. There is a child who is sweet and young but his “eyes live in a dream” .This phrase has various interpretations:

1) He wants to get out of the dull and monotonous class as he is bored and distracted.

2) He is an escapist and he lives in a dream world and not in a real one. The child’s desire is to be a squirrel playing in a hollow tree. This ironically reflects his current life and is also suggestive of the world of dream he lives in; he does not live in a world of reality like the others but lives in a world that he himself has created. Infact, being young, he still has the ability to dream.

16. “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.” Explain.

(Ans) The walls of the classroom are off white or yellowish (sour cream). This dull colour echoes the situation of the children and underlines the neglect in their lives. The walls are decorated with pinups/portraits of Shakespeare’s head, domes of the institution of the civilized world, photographs of the alpine valleys; etc. The life of the slum children is far removed from all that is represented in maps, books and pictures. These are contrasted with the reality of the situation. ‘Open handed maps’ suggest the map drawn by powerful people – ‘Awarding the world its world’ suggests how the world is determined by the powerful leaders. The poet thus hints at two worlds: the world of poverty, misery, depravity represented in the slums which is contrasted with the world of progress and prosperity peopled by the rich which is shown in the pictures on the wall. This world is far removed from the lives of these slum children.

17. “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.” Explain.

(Ans) The world of stinking slums is the world that belongs to these poverty stricken, ill fed and under-nourished children. ‘These windows’ reflect the world exposed on the maps. Education opens doors and windows to the ‘other worlds’ but it has failed in this instance to liberate these children both physically and intellectually from their restricted and impoverished existence. Their world has unpleasant surroundings. The dirty windows figuratively and literally are their world. The fog of uncertainty dominates their future. They are doomed to live in narrow streets (symbolic of restricted life desolation) which do not lead them to a better future. Their landscapes have no rivers or lakes. In the second stanza – all the positive symbols are far removed from the lives of the children – cloudless dawn, Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley. The children’s future is bleak – painted with a fog

and covered with a lead sky (of industrialization).

18. “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?” Explain.

(Ans) These lines are in the form of a poignant question. The poet questions the study of Shakespeare to these slum children. It is “wicked” because it can liberate them from their mundane life. The map shows a world which is not theirs. Therefore it is a ‘bad example’. It tempts the children with ideas of escape in the ships from their miserable world with ‘lead skies’ to a sun filled world, and a love for life rather than an existence full of dread and disillusionment. It raises false hopes in the children.

19. “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.” Explain.

(Ans) ‘On their slag heap’ represents the physically diseased children who wander with bones peeping out of their skins. “Wearing spectacles of steel” is a symbol of industrialization in which they are all doomed. They wear spectacles with mended glass which look like pieces of broken bottles on stone. Stones also reflect the expression on their faces. This image highlights their impoverished existence. Their existence is restricted to the “foggy” slums. Foggy is symbolic of ignorance. Fate has charted out a bleak path as the future holds no promise for them. Their life is an endless fog till they die. The maps of their future are already blotted.

20. “Unless, governor, inspector, visitor, this map becomes their window and these windows that shut upon their lives like catacombs.” Explain.

(Ans) This stanza is full of optimism. There is a touch of magic in its wider connotations. It is an appeal to the governor, teacher, inspector and visitors to transport them beyond the dark boundaries of today into the possibilities of tomorrow, otherwise these classrooms will become like tombs. The lives of the children are magically released from bondage. It is an appeal to these eminent people to rescue the poor and oppressed from the tomb of class discrimination and to show the children the beauty of the world. This map refers to the world of prosperity. Their windows refer to their slums. The children will be able to peep through windows only when the difference between the two worlds is bridged. The simile: - These windows (slums that shut up their lives and stunt their growth) like catacombs (tombs).

21. 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.

(Ans) Spender desperately wants that the children should break out of these catacombs (or near death existence). They should come out to the green fields and breathe in the open air so that they can grow unrestricted and liberated and be creative. The poet 'imagines' the liberated children running on the gold sand, delving into books and exploring the realism of knowledge. The white represents the printed word and the zeal or natural world, which forms the pages of the book of education. It is then that they will be truly liberated and the inextinguishable spirit of human creativity will awaken in them. Only those people create history whose language has the warmth of the sun i.e. – who have clarity of vision and power of life; these children will have the power of expression "Whose language is the sun" (metaphor). The children's language world is like the sun – indicative of brightness and hope. Thus the end is optimistic, symbolizing the freedom of the children from their deathlike existence through education and social transformation.

22. What is the central theme of the poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" by Stephen Spender?

(Ans) The poem deals with social injustice and class inequalities. The poet describes the plight of the slum children. They are destined to be poor, with no escape from it. He distinguishes the elite from the poor. The poem also discusses about the negligence of the government and authorities etc towards the poor. The poem also highlights the importance of education and the poet says that the fruits of education and freedom should reach this downtrodden society.

**23. 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. To whom does 'they' refer?

Ans. Refers to governor, inspector, visitors-the rich people.

b. What would they break?

Ans. Break the mental and physical barriers / break boundaries of discrimination.

c. What other freedom should they enjoy?

Ans. Enjoy – free and happy life away from slum

– freedom to education

- freedom of speech and expression so as to become responsible citizens and powerful speakers

– freedom to explore the world / gold sand / green fields

– opportunity to prosper

d. What is expected of the governor, inspector and visitor?

Ans. The governor, inspector and the visitor need to take appropriate steps to break the barriers that stand in the way of the progress of the slum children. They need to release the children from poverty, get them educated and give them opportunity to experience the beauty of the world.

e. What are the windows doing in their lives at present?

Ans. The windows offering the view of dirty surroundings have cramped their lives, and blocked their mental and physical development. They have shut the children inside the drab holes like the dead bodies are shut in underground graves.

f. What is meant by white and green leaves?

Ans. White and green leaves refer to the colourful pages of the book which the poet wishes to provide to the students.

g. 'History is theirs whose language is the sun'. Explain.

This statement means that those who have the power and confidence in speech to influence others create history. One can make a mark only if one can outshine others. Education only can give them power and strength like the sun which will bring about a change in the lives of the people.

NCERT QUESTIONS

Q1 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?

Ans. The colour of 'sour cream' is off white. The poet refers to the dull and pale looking walls to suggest dull and dreary atmosphere of the classroom. It also suggests hopelessness and grimness that engulf students' life.

Q2 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?

Ans. The pictures present the world full of richness, beauty and progress. On the other hand the lives of the slum children comprise of small, dim and dingy huts as well as narrow and dirty lanes. The world of these children is full of dullness, hopelessness and hunger.

Q3 Why is the head of the tall girl "weighed down"?

Ans. The head of the tall girl is weighed down because her life might be burdened with poverty, difficulties and responsibilities. Probably she is feeling depressed, ill and exhausted.

Q4. What do you understand by "The paper-seeming boy, with rat's eyes"?

Ans. The phrase "paper seeming boy" suggests that the boy is very thin and emaciated because of undernourishment. His eyes are compared to those of rats because his eyes are timid and searching for food and security like the eyes of a rat are.

Q5 Who is the “unlucky heir” and what has he inherited?

Ans. The underdeveloped boy who is reading the lesson from his desk is referred to as “unlucky heir”. He has inherited twisted bones from his father. Along with his disease, he has inherited his poverty.

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With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones.

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So blot their maps with slums as big as doom.”

- a. Name the poem and the poet.
 - b. Which image is used to describe the poverty of these children?
 - c. What sort of life do these children lead?
 - d. Identify and name the figure of speech used in line 3.
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