

Stephen Spender (1909-1995) is an English poet and essayist who took active part in politics.

“An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum” by Stephen Spender pictures a classroom in a slum highlighting subtly the plight of the children and the themes of social injustice and inequalities. The poet uses vivid images and appropriate expression to reflect the difficulties faced by the underprivileged children that is still prevalent in the world of ours.

Summary and Analysis of An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum

Stanza 1:

Stephen Spender shows us that the condition of the children in a slum school is pathetic. Their world is far from our healthy, fresh environment. They are like rootless weeds, unwanted and cast out. Their hairs are unkempt and untidy and their faces clearly show the plight of their existence. A particular tall girl is described by the poet. She has a bowed down head which shows the burden of the stressed life she leads. Another boy who is as thin as a paper too has the same under nourished look on his face. He has a scared expression in his eyes. These unlucky children have only acquired diseases and bad luck from their parents. One of them is even not able to get up from his desk to read out the lesson. However, the poet says there is one particular boy who is a little younger than the rest has still 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.

Stanza 2:

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 glum. The walls are cream in color and on them the names of the donors are engraved. A bust of the great poet Shakespeare with a background of a sky is put on. The walls have pictures of splendid Tyrolean valley which is a sharp contrast to the atmosphere of the classroom. There are maps on the walls which show them the harsh world from their classroom windows. Their world presents a future to them which is dark and cruel. The poet brings out a harsh reality of these children. These children are trapped in a hopeless situation and their world is far from the beautiful nature such as rivers, valleys and seas.

Stanza 3:

Stephen Spender suddenly attacks Shakespeare and calls him 'wicked.' He says so because he feels Shakespeare has misled the children by showing them that the world is beautiful; it has corrupted the young minds as they cannot enjoy such a beautiful world full of riches and enjoyment that in turn had made them to take a wrong path and to steal and escape from the reality and confinements. The poet feels deep rooted sadness for the condition of the slum children. The children are so skinny that they seem to be wearing skins. The glasses of the spectacles seem to have been mended several times. The total appearance of the children show their deprivation impoverished living and under nourished conditions. The poet feels that the classroom should have pictures of huge slums instead of those scenic graphics.

Stanza 4:

In the final stanza of "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" 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. He wants the authorities to realize their responsibilities and free the children from such grave-like confinements. He wants the barriers to be pulled down. The children must break away from the school boundaries and enjoy the world beyond. Only that way they can enjoy the nature- the green fields and the golden sands. The poet wants them to sail, explore and discover the world so that someday their names are found in history books.

Tone of The Poem

The tone of the poem is somber and philosophical. The theme revolves around the profound problem that affects our society at large. The universal gap between rich and the poor is highlighted. It also highlights the irony of the life in the twenty-first century where the world has made so many advancements yet an atmosphere of gloominess prevails.