

## **FLAMINGO**

### **POETRY SECTION**

#### **POEM: AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM**

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#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Stephen Spender (1909-1995) was a poet and English essayist. Spender had keen interest in politics and so, he declared himself as socialist and pacifist. His work concentrated on themes of social injustice and the class struggle.

#### **THEME:**

This poem deals with the social injustice and class inequalities and attacks on the capitalistic economies in which the rich are becoming richer and even as more and more problems and miseries mire the lives of the poor. They are devoid of any opportunity and have become prey to social injustice. In this poem, Spender demands equal opportunities for education for the poor and the underprivileged.

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#### **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 Tyrolean 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.

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### WORDS/PHRASES AND THEIR CONTEXTUAL MEANINGS:

**Rootless weeds** : unwanted plants

**Unnoted**: not noticed

**Future's painted with a fog**: (their) lives seem dark or without hope

**Gusty waves**: breezy winds

**Pallor**: pale, dull face

**Stunted**: not fully grown due to malnutrition

**Gnarled**: Knotted, rough, twisted

**weeds**: unwanted plants that grow on their own

**Paper seeming boy**: Very thin boy, as thin as a sheet of paper

**heir**: Successor

**Sour**: unpleasant, here refers to the colour of sour cream -off white or creamish

**Dawn**: early morning, sunrise

**civilized dome**: here, it means rising sun at the horizon which is in the shape of a dome (semi - circle)

**Tyrolese valley**: A beautiful ice-free valley in Austria

**Sealed**: shut or locked

**lead**: here, dark future of kids

**Capes**: A large piece of land that sticks out into the sea from the coast

**Wicked**: evil

**Tempted**: persuade

**Cramped**: confined

**Slag**: weak

**Mended**: repaired

**Blot**: to mark with a spot

**Doom**: disaster

**Azure**: deep blue

**Slyly:** very cleverly; cunningly

**Catacombs:** a long underground gallery with excavations in its sides for tombs. The name catacombs, before the seventeenth century was applied to the subterranean cemeteries, near Rome

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## POETIC DEVICES:

### Rhyme scheme of the poem

The poem has been written in free verse. It does not have rhyme scheme.

### Figures of speech:

#### Stanza 1.

**Simile:** children are compared with rootless weed (like rootless weed)

**Metaphor:** boy is compared with paper as he is thin (paper seeming boy)

**Repetition:** use of far to stress on the distance

#### Stanza 2.

##### Metaphor:

1. Walls are described to be dull as sour cream (sour cream walls)

2. The future of the kids is described as limited (Narrow Street sealed with a lead sky)

**Assonance:** repetition of vowel sound 'e' (Belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley)

**Allusion:** Reference to well known person or place ( Shakespeare's head, Tyrolese valley)

**Repetition:** 'far' repeated

#### Stanza 3.

**Metaphor:** Their homes are very small like holes (cramped holes)

**Simile-** their repaired spectacles (like bottle bits on stones)

**Alliteration:** Use of 'f' sound (From fog)

#### Stanza 4.

**Metaphor:** books and nature are expressed in form of white and green leaves (the white green leaves open)

**Anaphora:** Use of repeated words in two consecutive lines (Run azure...And Run naked)

**Repetition:** "Break O break open"

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## TEXTUAL QUESTIONS & THEIR ANSWERS

Think it out (NCERT)

**Q1-Tick the item which best answers the following:**

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

- Is ill and exhausted
- Has her head bent with shame
- Has untidy hair

Ans: is ill and exhausted

(b) The paper seeming boy with rat's eyes means the boy is

- Sly and secretive
- Thin, hungry and weak
- Unpleasant looking

Ans. Thin, hungry and weak

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

- Has an inherited disability
- Was short and bony

Ans. has an inherited disability

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

- Full of hope in the future
- Mentally ill
- Distracted from the lesson

Ans. Distracted from the lesson

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

- Are insecure
- Are ill-fed
- Are wasters

Ans. Are insecure/wasters

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

A2- The color of sour cream is pale and dull. The poet used this expression to describe the classroom walls because the walls were not freshly paint. The walls of the classroom were dull and were not beautiful.

**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?**

A3- The various pictures on the wall are not similar to the world of these slum dwelling children because they have never got adequate facilities and education. They have always seen crime happening around them. That is why it is said in the poem that for these children Shakespeare is a wicked man. Not only this, their world is the dirty slum area in which they live which is continuously expanding. Hence, the world maps which never show slums and the beautiful valley which is never seen and is out of reach of such children are in total contrast wto what they see as their world.

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

A4- The poet wants the governor, inspector and visitors to visit the school. He wants them to see the plight of these kids and do something for their betterment. These kids should be provided with best amenities in order to make their life better. He wants these kids to visit beautiful places which are granted by the nature with its beauty. This will instill a hunger in them to study in order to make their life better.

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## **ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FROM EXTRACTS**

### **Stanza 1.**

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

**1. What are "gusty waves" compared to? Why?**

The Expression "gusty waves" is compared to the faces of children in general; both of which are exuberant and energetic.

**2. Who are "these children"?**

By "these children" the poet refers to the children in the slums.

**3. Why are they unlike the gusty waves?**

Because they are underfed and sickly.

**4. What is the point of comparison between the children and the rootless weeds?**

**Name the poetic device.**

Because they are unwanted, badly kept and lacked stability. The figure of speech used is a simile.

**5. Why is the girl's head "weighed down"?**

Because of the physical, mental and emotional exhaustion that has become a part of existence in the slum.

**6. Explain "the paper-seeming boy, with rat's eyes".**

The boy is described as paper thin; sickly and lean with defensive and scared eyes.

**7. What is implied by "reciting father's gnarled disease"?**

The Children have inherited their diseased bones from their parents. The phrase implies diseased generations.

**8. What is the tone of the poet?**

The Poet's tone in the poem is that of desperation and misery much like that of the children in the slum.

**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 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.*

**1. How do the "sour creams walls" reflect the mood of the classroom?**

The walls that have turned yellowish reflect the despondent look of the students. It is also suggestive of the bitter life that the slum children lead

**2. The images on the wall are antithetical to the life of the slum dwellers. Explain.**

The life of slum children consisted of filth and squalor unlike the beautiful images in schoolbooks, maps, photographs of alpine valleys, or a bust of Shakespeare that decorated the classroom wall.

**3. Why is the world of these children like a window?**

The World of these children is like a window as it is restricted and impoverished.

**4. Why is the future 'painted with a fog'? Name the poetic device.**

The future of these children are said to be painted with fog. It implies a bleak (dark, gloomy, not hopeful) future. The poetic device used is a metaphor.

**5. What do the narrow streets symbolize?**

The Narrow roads do not lead the children to a better future. These children are as removed as can be from the beautiful enlightened world. The narrow roads symbolize the restricted quality of the lives of these children.

**6. How does the poet describe the sky?**

The Poet describes the sky as a lead sky implying that even the horizon seemed to be enclosing on the children rather than giving them space to reach out.

**Stanza 3.**

*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. All of their time and space are foggy slum. So blot their maps with slums as big as doom.*

**1. Why is Shakespeare "wicked" and the map "a bad example"? Name the poetic device.**

The Study of Shakespeare is "wicked" because it liberated the slum children from their mundane lives; the maps of foreign lands are "a bad example" because these provided the children with ideas of escape which for them are unattainable. The poetic device used is irony.

**2. What is the effect of the beautiful pictures on these children?**

The Children are tempted to steal or escape to a world that is otherwise distant and out of their reach.

**3. Spender feels that there's no future for the slum dwellers. What are the words that bring out this idea?**

The phrases that highlight these are: "From fog to endless night".

**4. Explain "slag heap".**

Slag heap means a mould of waste.

**5. What do the "maps" represent?**

The "Maps" represent a possibility of escape of deliverance for the slum children. The maps of the future are, however, irreparably "blotted" by fate.

**Stanza 4.**

*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.*

**1. How is the tone and mood change in the last stanza?**

The Tone and mood in the last stanza is optimistic. There is hope for the children.

**2. Who can change the situation for these children?**

The governor, inspector, visitor or any other enlightened person can change the situation for the children.

**3. Where does he want to lead the children?**

The Poet wants to lead the children to the vast open world that awaits them.

**4. What are "catacombs"? How does the word assume significance?**

Catacombs are burial chambers. It implies the near death existence of the children.

**5. How does he view the liberated children?**

The Poet imagines the liberated children running on the "gold sands" and delving into the books.

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## DO-IT-YOURSELF EXERCISES

Answer the following:

1. The pale faces of the children are in contrast to the gusty waves. T/F
2. The children looked like rooted weeds. T/F
3. A sweet and young child sat \_\_\_\_\_ at the back.
4. On the classroom wall there is a head of \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The school is located in a \_\_\_\_\_ street.
6. The map is a bad example for the children as it tempts hopes in the children. T/F
7. What metal is used to make the children's spectacle frame?
8. What has their slum dwelling been compared to?
9. \_\_\_\_\_ in the classroom is an outlet to the world beyond.
10. The windows of the classroom have been compared to \_\_\_\_\_.