

Summary

The poem describes a primary school in a slum. Children studying in the slum classroom depict the social injustice and perpetual poverty, prevailing among the slum dwellers.

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, withered and worn out. They are unclean and untidy, as they are malnourished, sick and hungry. Just as weeds are not wanted in the garden, so are these children of the slum unwanted in the society. They have pale faces. Their hair is uncombed. A tall slim girl has her head bowed down as though she is exhausted physically because of malnutrition and emotionally because of poverty. The other students of the class are also in the same situation. There is a boy, who is as thin as paper, again because of malnutrition and lack of civic amenities. He has eyes like that of a rat, searching for food and betterment. Another child in the class, who is a victim of genetic disorder, has gnarled bones and stunted growth. He has inherited this debilitating disease from his father and recites his lesson from his desk in a mellow and weak voice. In one corner of this poorly-lit and ill-equipped class, is a sweet, unnoticed young child lost in the world of his dreams. The dull and monotonous classroom does not interest him and hence, his mind deviates towards the squirrel in her tree room. He too, dreams of fun and frolic in an open space.

In the second stanza, the poet describes the dirty classroom. On the walls are displayed the names of people who have given donations. The bust of Shakespeare is displayed in the clear

background of the sky. Walls have pictures of the beautiful Tylorese Valley as well as a map of the world. The children's eyes can only view a narrow road enclosed with a dull sky. It is quite a dreary and depressing place for children.

In the third stanza, the pensive poet suddenly turns belligerent (aggressive) and feels that Shakespeare is 'wicked'. This is because he misleads the children. He shows them a beautiful world of ships, sun and love which is not only unreal for them but has a corrupting influence on these children and instigates them to steal and try to escape from their cramped holes. Their existence is indeed very sad. These emaciated children are so thin that it appears that they are 'wearing' only skins. The spectacles they are wearing have glass which has been broken and mended. Their entire appearance reeks of their deprivation. The poet shows his outrage by suggesting that the maps on their walls should show huge slums instead of beautiful scenic graphics.

Finally, in the last stanza, the poet reveals the appalling truth that there can be no change for the better unless a governor, a school inspector or an educationist or a visitor comes to the school. The map in their classroom is the only medium for the children to view the world outside their slums. The windows of their classroom shut them and confine them to their world of poverty and helplessness.

Next, poet appeals to those people who are in power to liberate these slum children from the horrendous life that they are leading. He also exhorts the people themselves, to break open these windows which appear to have sealed the fate of these children. He would like to see these children bask in the educational facilities in this world, and run carefree on the golden sands and enjoy a new lease of life and freedom. The poet earnestly desires that each and every child should be able to enjoy the fundamental right to freedom. They should have access to all kinds of books, new as well as old. They should also be able to learn from nature around them.

Spender ends the poem on a positive note as he expresses his belief that people who are ignited by the spirit of knowledge and learning are the ones who create history. It is the moral liability of everyone to break barriers between the haves and the have-nots, and give a meaningful education to all. For history remembers only those people who are educated and have enlightened themselves for a better world.