

CHAPTER - 10

AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM IN A SLUM

IMPORTANT STANZAS FOR COMPREHENSION

Read the stanzas given below and answer the questions that follow each:

1. 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 paper-seeming boy, with rat's eyes.

Questions

- (a) Where, do you think, are these children sitting?
- (b) How do the faces and hair of these children look?
- (c) Why is the head of the tall girl 'weighed down'?
- (d) What do you understand by 'The paper-seeming boy, with rat eyes'?

Answers:

- (a) These children are sitting in the school classroom in a slum which is far far away from the winds or waves blowing strongly.
- (b) The faces of these children look pale. Their uncombed and unkempt hair look like rootless wild plants.
- (c) The head of the tall girl is 'weighed down' by the burdens of the world. She feels depressed, ill and exhausted.
- (d) It means that the boy is exceptionally thin, weak and hungry.

2.....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 the tree room, other than this.

Questions

- (a) Who is the 'unlucky heir' and what will he inherit?
- (b) What is the stunted boy reciting?
- (c) Who is sitting at the 'back of the dim class'?
- (d) 'His eyes live in a dream'—what dream does he have?

Answers:

- (a) The lean and thin boy having rat's eyes and a stunted growth is the 'unlucky heir'. He will inherit twisted bones from his father.
- (b) He is reciting a lesson from his desk. He is enumerating systematically how his father developed the knotty disease.
- (c) A sweet young boy sits at back of this dim class. He sits there unnoticed.
- (d) The boy seems hopeful. He dreams of a better time—outdoor games, of a squirrel's game, of a room made inside the stem of a tree. He dreams of many things other than this dim and unpleasant classroom has, such as green fields, open seas.

3. On sour cream walls, donations. Shakespeare's head,
Cloudless at dawn, civilized dome riding all cities.
Belled, flowery, Tyrolean valley. Open-handed map
Awarding the world its world.

Questions

(a) What is the colour of the classroom walls? What does this colour suggest?

(b) What do these classroom walls have?

(c) Which two worlds does the poet hint at? How is the contrast between the two worlds presented?

(d) Explain: (i) 'Open-handed map'

(ii) 'Awarding the world its world'.

Answers:

(a) The colour of the classroom walls is 'sour cream' or off white. This colour suggests the decaying aspect and pathetic condition of the lives of the children in a slum-school.

(b) The walls of the classroom have pictures of Shakespeare, buildings with domes, world maps and beautiful valleys.

(c) The poet hints at two worlds: the world of poverty, misery and malnutrition of the slums where children are underfed, weak and have stunted growth. The other world is of progress and prosperity peopled by the rich and the powerful. The pictures on the wall suggesting happiness, richness, well being and beauty are in stark contrast to the dim and dull slums.

(d) (i) 'Open handed-map' suggests the map of the world drawn at will by powerful people/dictators like Hitler.

(ii) 'Awarding the world its world' suggests how the conquerors and dictators award and divide the world according to their whims. This world is the world of the rich and important people.

4.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 up with a lead sky
Far far from rivers, capes, and stars of words.

Questions [All India 2014]

(a) What are the 'children' referred to here?

(b) Which is their world?

(c) How is their life different from that of other children? (d) What is the future of these children?

Answers:

(a) Those children are referred to here who study in an elementary school classroom.

(b) Their world is limited to the window of the classroom. They are confined only within the narrow streets of the slum, i.e., far away from the open sky and rivers. Their view is full of despair and despondency. The life of the children seem to be bleak.

(c) "The slum children spend their life only in the narrow streets of the land. They do not get the basic necessities of life. They are deprived of food, clothing and shelter. But the main thing that they differ from other children is freedom. They do not enjoy the freedom of life.

(d) The future of these children is uncertain and bleak.

5. 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?

Questions [Delhi 2014]

(a) Who are 'them' referred to in the first line?

(b) What tempts them?

(c) What does the poet say about 'their' lives?

(d) Explain: 'From fog to endless night'.

Answers:

- (a) Here 'them' refers to the children studying in a slum school.
(b) All beautiful things like ships, sun and love tempt the children of slum school.
(c) The poet says that the children spend their lives confined in their cramped holes like rodents. Their bodies look like skeletons because they are the victims of malnutrition. Their steel-frame spectacles with repaired glasses make them appear like the broken pieces of a bottle scattered on stones. Their future seems to be bleak. (d) Their future is foggy or uncertain. The only certainty in their lives is the endless night of their death. In other words, their birth, life and death are all enveloped by darkness.

6.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.

Questions

(a) What are the two images used to describe these slums? What do these images convey?

(b) What sort of life do such children lead?

(c) What blot' their maps? Whose maps?

(d) What does the poet convey through 'So blot their maps with slums as big as doom'?

Answers:

- (a) The images used to describe the slums are:
(i) slag heap
(ii) bottle bits on stones
(iii) foggy slums
(iv) slums as big as doom. (Any two acceptable)
These images convey the misery of the children and the poverty of their dirty and unhygienic surroundings.
(b) In the dirty and unhygienic surroundings the slum children lead very pathetic and miserable lives full of woes, wants, diseases, poverty and uncertainty.
(c) These living hells i.e. these dirty slums blot their maps. These are the maps of the civilized world—the world of the rich and great.
(d) The poet conveys his protest against social injustice and class inequalities. He wants the islands of prosperity to be flooded with the dirt and stink of the slums.

7. Unless, governor, inspector, visitor,
This map becomes their Window and these windows
That shut upon their lives like catacombs.

Questions

- (a) Why does the poet invoke 'governor', 'inspector', 'visitor'? What function are they expected to perform?
- (b) How can 'this map' become 'their window'?
- (c) What have 'these windows' done to their lives?
- (d) What do you understand by 'catacombs'?

Answers:

- (a) Governor, inspector and visitor are important and powerful persons in the modern times. The poet invokes them to help the miserable slum children. They are expected to perform an important role in removing social injustice and class inequalities. They can abridge the gap between the two worlds—the beautiful world of the great and rich and the ugly world of slums.
- (b) Two worlds exist. This map' refers to the beautiful world of prosperity and well being inhabited by the rich and great and shaped and owned by them. Their windows' refer to the lairs, holes or hovels of the dirty, stinking slums where the poor and unfortunate children of slums live. The slum children will be able to peep through windows only when the difference between the two worlds is abridged.
- (c) These windows' of dirty surroundings have cramped their lives, stunted their growth and blocked their physical as well as mental development. They have shut them inside their filthy, dull and drab holes like the underground graves.
- (d) 'Catacombs' means 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.

8. 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.

Questions

- (a) 'Break O break open'. What should they 'break'?
- (b) Explain: 'till they break the town'.
- (c) Where will 'their world' extend up to then?
- (d) What other freedom should they enjoy?

Answers:

- (a) They should break all the barriers and obstacles that bind these children and confine them to ugly and dirty surroundings.
- (b) Till they come out of the dirty surroundings and slums of the town and come out to the green field and breathe in the open air.
- (c) Then their world will be extended to the gold sands and azure waves as well as to the green fields.
- (d) They should enjoy freedom of acquiring knowledge as well as freedom of expression. Let the pages of wisdom (contained in the books) be open to them and let their tongues run freely without any check or fear.

QUESTIONS FROM TEXTBOOK SOLVED

Q1. Tick the item which best answers the following.

- (a) The tall girl with her head weighed down means The girl
- (i) is ill and exhausted
- (ii) has her head bent with shame
- (iii) has untidy hair.

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

(i) sly and secretive

(ii) thin, hungry and weak

(iii) unpleasant looking.

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

(i) has an inherited disability

(ii) was short and bony.

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

(i) Full of hope in the future

(ii) mentally ill

(iii) distracted from the lesson.

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

This means they

(i) are insecure

(ii) are ill-fed

(iii) are wasters

Ans: (a) (i) is ill and exhausted

(b) (ii) thin, hungry and weak

(c) (i) has an inherited disability

(d) (i) full of hope in the future

(e) (i) are insecure.

Q2. 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 has used this expression to suggest the decaying aspect. The deterioration in the colour of the classroom walls symbolises the pathetic condition of the lives of the scholars—the children of this slum school.

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?

Ans: The pictures that decorate the walls hold a stark contrast with the world of these underfed, poverty-stricken, slum children living in cramped dark holes. Obstacles hamper their physical and mental growth. The pictures on the wall suggest beauty, well-being, progress and prosperity—a world of sunshine and warmth of love. But the world of the slum children is ugly and lack prosperity.

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

Ans: The poet wants the people in authority to realise their responsibility towards the children of the slums. All sort of social injustice and class inequalities be ended by eliminating the obstacles that confine the slum children to their ugly and filthy surroundings. Let them study and learn to express themselves freely. Then they will share the fruit of progress and prosperity and their lives will change for the better.

MORE QUESTIONS SOLVED

SHORT ANSWER TYPE QUESTIONS (Word Limit: 30-40 words)

Q1. In the opening stanza the imagery is that of despair and disease. Read the poem and underline the words /phrases that bring out these images.

Ans: The following words/phrases bring out these images of despair and disease:

'Rootless weeds'; 'the air 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'.
'gnarled disease'.

Q2. Why does Stephen Spender use the images of despair and disease in the first stanza of the poem and with what effect?

Ans: He uses the images of despair and disease to describe the miserable and pathetic lives of the children living in slums. The faces of these children are pale and lifeless. They and their hair are like 'rootless weeds'. The burden of life makes them sit with their head 'weighed down'. The stunted growth is depicted by 'the paper-seeming boy' and 'the stunted unlucky heir of twisted bones'. Their weak bodies recite their fathers' 'gnarled disease'.

Q3. In spite of despair and disease pervading the lives of the slum children, they are not devoid of hope. Give an example of their hope or dream.

Ans: The burden of poverty and disease crushes the bodies of these slum children but not their souls. They still have dreams. Even their foggy future has not crashed all their hopes. They dream of open seas, green fields and about the games that a squirrel plays in the tree room.

Q4. How does Stephen Spender picture the condition of the slum children?

Ans: Stephen Spender uses contrasting images in the poem to picture the condition of the slum children. For example:

"A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky Far far from rivers, capes and stars of words."

The first line presents the dark, narrow, cramped holes and lanes closed in by the bluish grey sky. The second line presents a world of beauty, prosperity, progress, well-being and openness.

Q5. What is the theme of the poem 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum'? How has it been presented?

Ans: In this poem Stephen Spender deals with the theme of social injustice and class inequalities. He presents the theme by talking of two different and incompatible worlds. The world of the rich and the 'civilized' has nothing to do with the world of narrow lanes and cramped holes. The gap between these two worlds highlights social disparities and class inequalities.

Q6. What message does Stephen Spender convey through the poem 'An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum'? What solution does he offer?

Ans: Stephen Spender conveys the message of social justice and class equalities by presenting two contrasting and incompatible worlds. He provides a way out. For achieving any significant progress and development the gap between the two worlds must be bridged. This can be done only by breaking the barriers that bind the slum children in dark, narrow, cramped holes and lanes. Let them be made mentally and physically free to lead happy lives. Only then art, culture and literature will have relevance for them.

Q7. Who created the ivory world and how, what does this world contain?

Ans: The conquerors and dictators change the map of the world according to their whims and will. They change the boundaries of various nations and shape the 'map'. Their fair map is of a beautiful world full of domes, bells and flowers, rivers, capes and stars.

Q8. The poet says. 'Aria yet. for these Children, these windows, not this map, their world'.

Which world do these children belong to? Which world is more accessible to them?

Ans: The world of stinking slums is the world that belongs to these poverty-stricken, ill-fed, under-nourished children. The narrow lanes and dark, cramped, holes or hovels make their world. The world of 'domes', 'bells' and 'flowers' meant for the rich is inaccessible to them. They can only dream of rivers, capes and stars.

Q9. Which images of the slums in the third stanza present the picture of social disparity, injustice and class inequalities.

Ans: The slum dwellers slowly turn in their 'cramped holes' from birth to death i.e. 'from fog to endless nights'. Their surroundings are 'slag heap'. Their children "wear skins peeped through by bones." Their spectacles are "like bottle bits on stones." The image that sums up their harsh existence reads: "All of their time and space are foggy slum."

Q10. So blot their maps with slums as big as doom," says Stephen Spender. What does the poet want to convey?

Ans: The poet notices the creation of two different worlds—the dirty slums with their narrow lanes and cramped houses which are virtual hells. Then there are islands of prosperity and beauty where the rich and powerful dwell. The poet protests against the disparity between the lives of the people in these two worlds. He wants that the poor should enjoy social equality and justice. The fair 'map' of the world should have blots of slums as big as doom. The gap must be reduced between the two worlds.

Q11. Stephen Spender while writing about an elementary classroom in a slum, questions the value of education in such a milieu, suggesting that maps of the world and good literature may raise hopes and aspirations, which will never be fulfilled. Yet the school offers a solution/hope. What is it?

Ans: The slum children are being imparted education in a room whose walls are off-white in colour but are decorated with the pictures of 'Shakespeare', 'buildings with domes', "world maps" and 'beautiful valleys'. The maps of the world and good literature may raise hopes and aspirations. They may try to steal slowly from their milieu but it is quite unlikely that their hopes and aspirations may be fulfilled. The only solution/hope for them is to break the artificial barriers that bind and cramp them. Once free from their milieu, they can enjoy beauty.

Q12. How can powerful persons viz. governor, inspector, visitor may contribute to improve the lot of slum children?

Ans: Powerful persons like governors, inspectors and visitors may take an initiative and start abridging the gap between the worlds of the rich and poor. They can play an important and effective role in removing social injustice and class inequalities. They should break and dismantle all the barriers that bind these children and confine them to the ugly surroundings. They will have their physical and mental development only when they leave the filthy and ugly slums. All good things of life should be within their reach. They must enjoy the freedom of expression.

Q13. How far do you agree with the statement: "History is theirs whose language is the sun."

Ans: This metaphor contains a vital truth. This world does not listen to the 'dumb and driven' people. Only those who speak with confidence, power, authority and vision are heard and obeyed. Those who create history are people whose ideas and language can motivate, move, inspire and influence millions of people. In order to be effective, their language must have the warmth and power of the Sun.