

## **POEM 2 An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum.**

### **GIST OF THE POEM**

- In this poem the poet focuses on the theme of social injustice and inequalities.
- He presents the pathetic and miserable picture of the elementary classroom in a slum.
- These children have pale and lifeless faces.
- They are like rootless weeds which are uncared and unwanted with their disorderly hair torn around their faces.
- They are depressed and oppressed with the burdens of life and keep their heads down. They have stunted growth.
- They inherit the diseases of their father.
- Some of them do have dreams. A sweet young boy is sitting at the back of the dim classroom. He is dreaming of a squirrel's game in the trees and probably other interesting things.
- The walls are dirty and creamy and on them are hung the donations given by the rich and also Shakespeare's portrait.
- A civilized dome found in the cities and Tyrolese valleys with beautiful flowers are also put up.
- The map on the wall shows the children, the beautiful world outside; but for these children of the slum it is meaningless.
- The children studying in these schools do not have the means to go and explore the world. For them what they see through their classroom windows, the narrow street and the lead sky is the world.
- Shakespeare is wicked for them as he has written only about the rich, beautiful world tempting them to steal.

- The map is of no interest to them because it does not reflect the world they live in—cramped and dark lanes.
- Their lives start in darkness and end in utter darkness.
- They are undernourished and their poverty has distorted their vision as they spend their whole time in foggy slums.
- The poet feels that the map which shows beautiful and exotic places should be replaced with slums as it is not the world they live in.
- Unless the governor, inspector, and visitor play a vital role in bringing about a change, their lives will remain in dark.
- The slum children will be able to peep through the window only when the gap between the two worlds is bridged.
- They should break the barriers till they come out of the dirty surroundings and their world should be extended into the green fields, golden sands, and bright world.
- They should have the freedom of expression and their outlook be broadened.
- For, only the educated and learned people can create history whose language has strength and power.

**Understand the poem in terms of Poetic devices: Imagery:**

**Similes:**

**Like rootless weeds:** the coarse, untidy and unkempt hair of the slum children is similarised to rootless weeds to bring forth the idea that the children were malnourished.

**Like bottle bits on stones:** the shining mended glasses of the spectacles is contrasted against the dark complexion of the malnourished slum children. The metal framed, broken glasses of the spectacles of the slum children is similarised to the shining bottle bits on stones.

The slum children settled on the waste heap is similarised to the splinters and pieces of broken bottle/glass against stones.

Like the broken glasses of the spectacles, the hopes, aspirations, ambitions lives of these slum children are completely shattered.

**Like catacombs:** The slum children are living in dark and dingy rooms which are similarised to catacombs in subterranean cemetery. The windows of these rooms look like the lids of catacombs. The future of the slum children is shut for ever like the dead bodies in the catacombs.

**Slum as bid as doom:** slum is similarised to hell of death. Living in slum is worse than death, rather it is a living hell.

### **Metaphors:**

**Rat's eyes:** suggests the boy's curious, anxious and insecure nature. Like a rat always insecure, on the move, searching for food and safety, this small boy too shares the same condition.

**Father's gnarled disease:** the boy's father is handicapped with a crooked body. The boy has inherited his father's disease and the malnourished body of the paper seeming boy is no better than the crooked, disease-stricken body of his father.

**Squirrel's game:** Like the squirrel enjoys his freedom playing feely everywhere in nature, the boy also wants to play and enjoy his life with his endless curiosity. But he is forced to be in the dark, dull and dreary classroom of the slum school.

**Tree room:** The hiding place of squirrel with great, comfort, security, curiosity and fun is contrasted with the gloomy and dull class room of the little boy.

**Future painted with fog:** Just as fog blocks, blurs or ruins vision, the slum children's future is vague and blurred with hopelessness, frustrations and lack of empathy and upliftment.

**Lead sky:** The normal bright and blue sky is described as lead sky, suggesting the dark and dull sky just as the base metal lead is. There is no blue and bright sky of life and future for the slum children.

**Spectacles of steel:** The poverty-stricken, skinny and skeletal bodies of the slum children look like wiry framework of steel just like that of a pair of spectacles. The expression also suggest the view of mass of students, visually impaired wearing low-cost and unhealthy spectacles with metal frames. These poor children are deprived of everything due to the callous attitude of the government officials.

### **Answer the following briefly**

1. Why do you think the poet has used the expression 'sour cream'?

The expression 'sour cream' was used to describe the dull and pale walls of the classrooms. It expresses the sickening and repulsive atmosphere of the classroom as well as the hopelessness that engulfs the student's lives.

2. How does the wall decorations of the classroom contrast with the reality of the slum children?

The classroom walls are decorated with picture of Shakespeare's , buildings with domes, world maps and beautiful valleys symbolizing study of classical literature(education), power , wealth & progress, the great world of opportunities and the beautiful nature respectively. In sharp contrast, these slum children are living in the slum with dull, dreary atmosphere of bleak future.

3.How can the life of the slum children be changed?

The life of the slum children can be changed by providing them healthy environment to live, open up opportunities to experience and enjoy the beauty of the world outside and help them accumulate the wealth of knowledge and wisdom through right education.

4. What spectacles of the slum and slum children does the poet bring out through the poem?

The slum children are living in extreme poverty, ill-health and pathetic living atmosphere. They inherit their parents' diseases, and are deprived of all basic necessities of life.. Though they are studying in a school in a slum, it is in a pathetic plight and nobody bothers about the children and they have a bleak future.

5. What is the theme of the poem?

This poem deals with the theme of social injustice and class inequalities. The poet presents it by talking of the two different and incompatible worlds- the world of the rich and the civilized and the world of the poor and the deprived. This gap can be bridged by the administrative authorities and through education.

6. 'So blot their maps with slums as big as doom'. What does the poet want to convey?

The poet is angry at the social inequalities in the world. There are two worlds – the dirty slums and the prosperous and the beautiful world of the rich. The poet wants the map of the world should also have blots of slums as big as the 'doom'. In reality he wants the gap to be reduced.

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

This statement means that those who have the courage and conviction to break free from the constraints of life are the ones who 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.

7. What does the poet mean by "let their tongues run naked into books"?

The poet sees hope for the children in education. He strongly thinks that the lives of these children will remain dark, narrow and unfulfilled unless they are educated. These children can make themselves free from the shackles of slums only when we give opportunities to them for education and employment.

8. How are the slum children victims of social injustice?

The children are victims of social injustice as they are deprived of the bounties of the world. They are impoverished, undernourished and deprived of the basic necessities of life. Their right to education, safe healthy and secure living are denied to him mocking the system of social justice in the country.

**Answer these questions**

1. *“Unless, governor, inspector, visitor,  
This map becomes their window and these windows  
That shut upon their lives like catacombs.”*

(a) Why does the poet invoke ‘governor, ‘inspector’ and ‘visitor’?

The poet invokes the ‘governor, ‘inspector’ and ‘visitor’ because they are the powerful people who can bring about a drastic change in the miserable lives of the slum children. They can remove the social injustice and class inequalities.

(b) What does ‘this map’ refer to? How can it become ‘their window’?

This map refers to the beautiful world of the rich. Their window refers to holes and the stinking slums of the unfortunate children of the slum. This can become their window only when the difference between the two worlds is abridged.

(c) What have ‘these windows’ done to their lives?

These windows have cramped their lives, stunted their physical and mental growth shutting them inside filthy and dingy holes, keeping them away from the vast world of development and opportunities.

(d) What do you understand by catacombs?

Catacombs are long underground graves. Here they stand for the dirty slums which block in which the slum children are confined.

(e) Which literary device has been used here? Explain.

Simile has been used here to describe the oppressive effect of the surroundings on their pathetic lives. The slum walled in against the world of opportunities and development is similarised to catacombs.

2. *“Break O break open till they break the town  
And show the children 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). What is the hope of the poet in these lines?

The poet hopes that one day these children would break free from the chains of the slums. They will rise above all atrocities and economic injustice and will create a beautiful world for themselves.

b). What kind of world does the poet visualize for the children?

The poet visualizes a world of freedom to enjoy the nature's bounty in a carefree manner. They would be enjoying all the opportunities in life and will enjoy the fruit of social justice and empathy and develop themselves into successful ones.

c). What does the 'green fields' and 'gold sands' symbolize?

The expressions are symbolic of a carefree and happy life.. It refers to a world where social and economic injustice does not prevail and everyone enjoys the right to live happily.

d). Explain 'let their tongue run naked into books.'

The poet strongly feels that the lives of these children will be very miserable and unfulfilled unless they are educated. Thus, he wishes that these children be exposed to the world of books.

e). What does 'Sun' in the last line suggest?

Sun is the symbol of grace, light, energy and a life-giving force. Here it refers to the light of education. The poet strongly believes that it is education alone that can transform the world and to transform the slum children, they should be given the power of education.

f). 'History is theirs whose language is the sun'—Explain

To create history, one has to toil and shine like a sun, a source of energy and inspiration. People who have the courage and conviction to break free from the constraints of life are the ones who create history.

### **QUESTIONS FOR PRACTICE**

1. Read the stanza and answer the questions that follows:

*"Surely, Shakespeare is wicked, the map a bad example,  
With ships and sun and love tempting them to steal-  
For lives that turn in their cramped holes  
From fog to endless nights."*

i) Name the poem and the poet

ii) Why has Shakespeare been described as wicked?

iii) Why is the map a bad example?

iv) What tempts them to steal?

v) How do the children continue to live?

vi) Explain: 'From fog to endless night.'

2. Read the stanza and answer the questions that follows:

*"The stunted, unlucky heir  
Of twisted bones, reciting a father gnarled disease  
His lesson from his desk. At the back of the dim class  
One unnoted, sweet and young. His eyes live in a dream  
Of squirrels game, in tree room, other than this."*

- a) Who is being referred to in the first two lines?
- b) Explain 'father's gnarled disease'.
- c) Who sit at the back of the class? How is he different from others?
- d) Explain his eyes live in a dream?
- e) What is the comparison drawn with squirrels game?

3. "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."

- a). What does 'slag heap' refer to?
- b). Explain 'skin peeped through by bones'.
- c). What is the comparison drawn with 'bottle bits on stones'?
- d). Why does the poet see the slums 'as big as doom'?

### **SHORT ANSWER QUESTIONS**

1. What is that these children inherit from their parents? What does it signify?
2. How has the poet described the colour of the wall and why?
3. The poet presents two different worlds. What are they?
4. What picture of the slum children does the poet draw?
5. Where does the poet see hope and relief?
- 6.. How does the poet bring to light the brutalities of slum life?
8. Explain 'Open handed map, awarding the world its world'.
9. In what way are the slum children 'unsung fighters'?