The Elementary School Classroom in a Slum (Summary)

(By: Stephen Spender)

This poem revolves around the pathetic and miserable condition of the children who are living and reading in an elementary school located in the slum. In the first stanza, the poet talks about the children reading over there. One of them is a tall girl whose seems to be unable to raise her head due to unbearable pressure of grinding poverty which doesn’t let her feel confident. Besides, there is a boy who has been compared to paper due to his scrawniness. Apart from that, his eyes have also been compared to rat’s eyes which show greed in his eyes. A boy has been called unlucky heir as he has inherited a disease of twisted bones and knots from his father. Except these boys, there is one more boy who is sweet and unnoted but sitting at the back of the dim class having a dream of squirrel in his mind. He wants to be as free as a squirrel is its tree room. In nutshell, the poet (Stephen Spender) shares the condition of children studying over there.

In the second stanza, the poet highlights the condition of the walls of that slum which look like sour cream. Furthermore, he mentions about the donated pictures by the people such as; Shakespeare’s portrait, picture of dawn without clouds, an open-handed map & an Austria’s valley which is famous for bell shaped flowers. He also states that these windows are the real world of these children through which they can get to see the real world. He states the condition of the narrow lanes wherein they live and also adds that even the sky is not clearly visible from there. According to him, children have not seen rivers, mountains and many other basic things needed for survival.

In the third stanza, the poet calls Shakespeare a wicked whose portrait has no importance in the eyes of the students. According to him, the map is a bad example which only allures them to be thieves. In nutshell, he seems annoyed with the kind of things present on the walls of the classroom in the slum. He finds all of them useless for the children. He further adds that there is no clarity of thought and career in their mind, even mentions about the darkness which prevails in the slum of the students. He compares their lifestyles to catacombs which mean ‘underground graveyards’. Their bodies have nothing left in them except the bones. They are unaware of right and wrong which has been highlighted through the example of ‘wearing spectacles of steel with mended glasses’.

In the fourth stanza, he requests the governor, inspector and visitor to do their work sincerely and take these children out of the slums. He wants them to destroy the slums as well as everything present over there as same as the death and destruction do. He wants open and free environment for the children and asks for blue sky and gold sand which also symbolize the freedom. According to the poet, only the educated people can create the history and change the world. So he wants all these suffering children to come out of the slum and make history as well.