



## 2 An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum

*About the poet*

**Stephen Spender** (1909–1995) was an English poet and an essayist. He left University College, Oxford, without taking a degree and went to Berlin in 1930. Spender took a keen interest in politics and declared himself to be a socialist and pacifist. Books by Spender include *Poems of Dedication*, *The Edge of Being*, *The Creative Element*, *The Struggle of the Modern* and an autobiography, *World Within World*. In, *An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum*, he has concentrated on themes of social injustice and class inequalities.

*Before you read*

*Have you ever visited or seen an elementary school in a slum?  
What does it look like?*

Far far from gusty waves these children's faces.  
Like rootless weeds, the hair torn round their pallor:  
The tall girl with her weighted-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.

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.

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.

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.



- Tyrolese Valley : Pertaining to the Tyrol, an Austrian Alpine province.  
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.

### THINK it out

1. 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
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. What does the poet want for the children of the slums? How can their lives be made to change?

Notice how the poet picturises the condition of the slum children.  
Notice the contrasting images in the poem – for example,  
*A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky  
Far far from rivers, capes, and stars of words.*