

An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum Study Guide

**An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum by
Stephen Spender**

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Introduction

□An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum□ was first published in 1964 in Stephen Spender's *Selected Poems*. The poem has since appeared in several collections, including *Collected Poems 1928-1985*, published in 1985. □An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum□ is perhaps the best example of Spender's political voice resonating throughout a poem. In this poem, Spender expresses his ideological positions on government, economics, and education. The students in this classroom are underprivileged and malnourished. The capitalistic government is supposed to supply equal opportunity for education, but the classroom in the slum offers little hope for change or progress for its lower-class students. This poem, written during the time of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, is fitting both in its commentary about race issues in American education and as a Socialist proclamation against capitalism and social injustice in general. Although Spender was British, his extreme left-leaning political ideologies were in response to the global question concerning social injustice. His poem does not explicitly name any country, location, race, or citizenship. Spender's intent was to shed light on social injustices worldwide; regardless of Spender's own ethnicity, the hotbed of this global struggle was the American Civil Rights movement.



Author Biography

Nationality 1: British

Birthdate: 1909

Deathdate: 1995

Stephen Spender was born on February 28, 1909, in London. The son of a journalist, he grew up steeped in the art of writing. Spender was educated at University College, Oxford, but left the university without taking a degree. His life as a poet and writer began in the 1920s while he was at Oxford, where he surrounded himself with respected writers, such as W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNeice. Spender was also closely associated with the literary giants Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot. In fact, the two are often referred to as Spender's surrogate parents.

Spender took a particularly keen interest in politics and was a self-proclaimed socialist and pacifist. His early poetry was often inspired and fueled by social protest. In 1937, he served for a short time in the International Brigades, an international force of volunteers dedicated to protecting the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War. Spender explored the experiences of the war in *Poems for Spain* (1939), which he edited with John Lehmann, and in *Ruins and Visions* (1942), a collection of his own poems spanning the years 1934 to 1942.

Although Spender was associated with the Socialist and Communist movements, he eventually became disillusioned with their ideologies. He expressed much of his dissent and frustration with the politics of the 1930s and 1940s through his poetry and essays as well as in his autobiography, *World within World* (1951), which delves into his political beliefs, social frustrations, and much-hidden homosexuality.

In 1936, Spender married Agnes Marie Pearn, from whom he was later divorced. In 1941, he married the pianist Natasha Litvin; they had two children. He enlisted in the London Fire Service during World War II. After the war, Spender joined UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) as a cultural emissary. He coedited two magazines, *Horizon* (published from 1939 to 1941) and, later, *Encounter* (published from 1953 through 1966). He also worked for the Congress of Cultural Freedom, International PEN, and the British Council. Spender's poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" first appeared in 1964 in his *Selected Poems*.

Spender was a prolific writer, authoring and editing many books. Besides poetry, he published several plays, novels, and short stories and many nonfiction works. His books of poetry include *Poems of Dedication* (1946), *The Edge of Being* (1949), *The Generous Days* (1969), and *Dolphins* (1994). His nonfiction works include *The Creative Element* (1953), *The Struggle of the Modern* (1963), and *Love-Hate Relationships*



(1974). In 1970, Spender became a professor of English at University College in London, a post he held for seven years. He was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1973, and in 1983 he was knighted.

Although Spender is rarely heralded as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, his work is well respected. The bulk of his acclaim can be credited to his passionate, charming, and insightful work concerned with politics, education, and the rights of all human beings. From his early break into the literary scene until his death on July 16, 1995, in London, Spender pursued literary recognition amidst colleagues who far exceeded him in their own abilities; his achievements were thus dwarfed by the greatness of the company he kept.



Plot Summary

Stanza 1

The opening stanza of "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" provides a clear, dreary depiction of the students in the classroom. The first child is a "tall girl with [a] weighed-down head." This girl is physically and emotionally exhausted, as if all life has been dredged from her body and sapped from her mind. Her classmates are in no better condition. "The paper- / seeming boy, with rat's eyes" is paper-thin and weak. His eyes are defensive and scared, like a scavenger, a rat. His prospect for survival, let alone success, is bleak. Another student, "the stunted, unlucky heir / Of twisted bones," is the victim of a genetic disorder. Spender writes that the boy has inherited his "father's gnarled disease"; he has been left disfigured, trapped in a physically challenged body.

Spender then describes the boy "at back of the dim class," stating, "His eyes live in a dream." This last student represents both a glimmer of wary hope and a shiver of mental damnation. It is unclear whether he is dreaming of a life he may achieve or has lost his mind to the "squirrel's game." This vague distinction between these two conflicting interpretations exposes all the students' futures: there is little or no expectation that they will succeed, and the best they can hope for is to keep their sanity and not fall victim to a faux reality. Beneath it all, the boy's dreaming eyes may harbor an honest desire for true success. This last boy, "unnoted, sweet and young," may understand his position in society and see the sadness of his fellow students. With this understanding, he may represent hope for social change, instead of merely being an individual who has lost his mind.

Stanza 2

In the second stanza, Spender describes the classroom and its contents. The classroom is full of "donations." The children are from the lowest class; they are the children of proletarians. The classroom is constructed through donations of others' capital. All that the students possess comes from their oppressors, the bourgeoisie. The upper class, which holds these children in their place, also offers them their only tools to escape. The maps, books, and "Shakespeare's head" that give the students hope of something outside their dreary existences are gifts from the very hands that clamp them down in their economic and social position.

Spender writes,

. . . 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.

The "donations" may give a glimpse of some world to the students, but not of their world. The students do not perceive their world as like the one depicted in the classroom's "donations." It is not the "belled, flowery, Tyrolese valley" but instead a foggy, "narrow street sealed in with a lead sky." Their future is bleak, unknown, and dreary. The children in "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" are trapped by their social and economic status as children of proletarians.

Stanza 3

In the third stanza, Spender responds cynically to the reality of the students' futures. He calls Shakespeare "wicked" and the map a "bad example." He writes that the stories from the books of "ships and sun and love" are "tempting them [the students] to steal." The world presented by the bourgeoisie to the students in "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" is intended to lure them and drag them into a life of crime. Spender's cynicism is a commentary on the upper class and their circumventing tactics in the effort to hold a firm grip on lower-class citizens. By exposing the students to the beauties of the world, the bourgeoisie appear to be assisting the proletarians' children, instilling in them hope for something better. However, Spender sees the bourgeoisie's "donations" as something far more evil. His cynical view of the "donations" is that they were given not to infuse the students with hope but rather to force them to commit crime and thus be branded as thieves. As such, the bourgeoisie are readily empowered to oppress the lower class for no other reason than to protect their own families, assets, and futures from the lawbreaking hands of the proletariat.

Although Spender voices cynicism, he does not lose sight of the true victims of the injustice of the class struggle: the children. In this stanza, he continues to describe the children "on their slag heap." He returns to their thin, malnourished bodies, stating that they "wear skins peeped through by bones." They also wear "spectacles of steel / With mended glass, like bottle bits on stones." Spender is making a resounding humanist statement about the treatment of children in this poem. It appears that he is more sickened by humanity's disregard for the children than by the social and economic framework that has doomed these children to the slums.

Stanza 4

In the final stanza, Spender comes full circle. He replaces cynicism with hope, a plea for a new manifesto for the children. He is petitioning "governor, inspector, visitor" to transform the sour temptation of the bourgeoisie's donations into a reality. He begs for a change that will "break O break open" the "windows / That shut upon their lives like catacombs" and free the children from the constraints of their position in society. Spender asks that the children be shown "directly, not through "donations"" "green fields" and "gold sands."



Spender further hopes that the children will be able to □let their tongues / Run naked into books the white and green leaves open.□ The □white and green leaves□ could be seen to represent money, bourgeoisie donations that supply the books the children use. However, with this statement, Spender is asking for a pragmatic alteration in the practical application of □donations.□ Given the current bourgeoisie scheme to oppress the proletariat through donations, the students either are locked in their social position or are led into a world of crime through temptation. Spender is claiming that if students are truly allowed free exploration□naked tongues running freely through donated books□then their education and their □language□ will become the □sun□ burning away the □fog□ that has sealed their fates and doomed them to □An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum.□



Themes

Poverty

The theme of poverty is principal to the poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum." Spender creates a crisp image of children in poverty through his descriptions of dire situations and malnourished students, revealing a sad, hidden segment of society that was prevalent throughout the world. He is not commenting directly on any particular nation in his poem; instead, he exposes the widespread neglect of children of all nationalities, races, and ethnicities. It is poverty that has caused the students in "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" to be "weighed-down," "paper-seeming," "diseased, and "twisted." Spender believes this poverty is created through the oppressive power of capitalism.

This poem was written during the American Civil Rights movement, and although Spender was British, the injustice that occurred in the United States was a global issue that affected the entire world, especially close English-speaking allies like Britain. Spender was affected by the struggles for equality in the United States because of his staunch dedication to social and political reforms. Although this poem was written during this time of oppressive racial injustice in America, Spender does not directly focus on a select group of underprivileged children, based on race, religion, or creed. Instead, he hones the content of his poem and remarks about the social injustice imposed upon all children, making it much more difficult to ignore. When the spotlight is cast upon a select group of individuals, certain members of particular groups are able to shrug their shoulders or cast a doubtful eye at the authenticity of the group's plight. However, when the spotlight is cast upon children writ large, no one can turn a blind eye. Regardless of their upbringing, history, race, or ethnicity, children are innocent beings dependent on the helping hands of humanity. Without aid, children are effectively left to die, and adults who do not help are left with an undeniable sense of guilt and worthlessness. Spender cultivates these emotions in his poem and uses them to his advantage, delivering a powerful message about poverty, its effect on children, and the oppressive power of money.

Communism and Education

Karl Marx firmly states in *The Communist Manifesto* that education is "social, and determined by the social conditions under which you educate, by the intervention of society, direct or indirect, by means of schools." Spender thoroughly supports this statement in "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" and asks for a complete subversion of the dominant social model with regard to its direct and indirect intervention in schools. Although this poem may not be perceived wholly as a Communist poem, a keen dissection of its parts clearly reveals a Marxist solution to the educational crisis caused by poverty.



Spender does not appreciate the "donations" given to the children, because he sees them as an indirect intervention of capitalistic society in schools. These donations are not given for the good of the children's education but for the sole purpose of keeping them in position as lower-class citizens. This end is achieved in that the donations project a world outside the slum that is seemingly unattainable and thus press the children into lives of unfulfilled dreams or of crime—the delusional last resort for gaining wealth and escaping the slum. Spender asks for a pragmatic shift in the way these donations are given and used—a Communist approach—in which money empowers the children to truly explore books, maps, the world, and themselves. In other words, it would give them the chance to pursue education without the pretense of temptation or a future of unfulfilled aspirations.

This changed use of "donations" is a Communist attitude to education. "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" pictures the children as proletarians and the donors as bourgeoisie. Spender does not wish to remove education from society, but he aspires to transform it into an institution managed by a Communist, not a capitalist, society, where all children are given the opportunity to excel, with no favoritism given to their social starting point. This change demands a proletariat revolution, shifting the social tides, because Spender, like Marx, still believes that education is social and that the only society that should be intervening in education is a Communist one.

Knowledge and Revolution

Knowledge and its effect on revolution is a key theme in "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum." As shown earlier, this poem strongly embraces Communism and its ability to transform education and uproot poverty, yet Spender's undying embrace of education stands above everything else as the most empowering and most important influence on the future of humanity. For Spender, the children's minds possess the power of the sun and the ability to clear the fog from the bleak future. As he puts it, "History theirs whose language is the sun." These children, empowered by a substantial, honest education, can achieve a mental prowess that will free them from futures "painted with a fog." With knowledge, the children can change the future. They can raise their educated arms in revolt and overturn the oppression that desperately tries to keep them in place.

Spender has placed himself in a bind with these proclamations. Although it may be true that knowledge is empowerment, empowerment is the only hope for change, and change is predicated on revolution, it still appears that education cannot change without a new society. A vicious circle presents itself. Education is social, and the capitalist society intervening in education does not benefit proletarians. Thus, education benefits only the bourgeoisie. In order to change this dominant paradigm, proletarians must become educated, but with the bourgeoisie controlling society, the ability to become educated is difficult, if not impossible, for them. This, of course, leads into a much larger discussion of a worker revolution and the institution of Marxism in society, to overturn the dominant, capitalistic paradigm. Spender does not provide an answer to the struggle between proletarians and bourgeoisie, Communist and capitalist, in his poem. His

theme of knowledge and revolution in "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" is intended to shed light on the power of education and the necessity to reform the way society delivers knowledge to all people, regardless of social or economic position.

Style

Allegory

Allegory is a literary technique that employs characters as representations of ideas that are used to convey a message or to teach a lesson. Spender uses the classroom and the children in his poem as an allegory about the struggle between proletarians and bourgeoisie. The children in "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" are clearly underprivileged, lower-class proletarians. The classroom donors are wealthy, upper-class bourgeoisie. Without directly using either term—proletarian or bourgeoisie—Spender weaves a descriptive, allegoric vignette about capitalism and its dependence on an oppressed working class. He vividly depicts the hardships and struggles of proletarians through his descriptions of the tired girl with her "weighed-down" head, the paper-thin boy, and the "unlucky heir" of "gnarled disease." The exhausted students are equivalent to the oppressed working class. The children of this class are doomed to inherit their parents' diseased position in society.

Although the future holds little promise of fortune for the children or the proletariat they represent, Spender sees a glimmer of hope in education. The students represent the working class, but they also hold the answer to a changed society. If the students can achieve an education, then they may be empowered to topple the bourgeoisie hold over society. Spender writes, "Break O break open till they break the town," offering hope that education will break open the minds of the children. Once their minds are free, empowered with learning, Spender believes that they will have the power to change the social hierarchy. He effectively uses such imagery to explore poverty, education, and the Communist-capitalist struggle.

The Unidentified Narrator

When reading "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," it is difficult to pinpoint the identity of the narrator. It may be deduced that there is no narrator and that the entire construct is built wholly around Spender and his desire to examine and pontificate on politics and its effect on education. Other readings of the poem have led educators to believe that the narrator is a teacher. Spender delivers the crux of his message on poverty and education through the use of this unidentified narrator, a narrator who, in the vagueness of his identity, appeals to a wide variety of people in society. He focuses on imagery that describes the children and the classroom, that is upsetting to the reader, and that fuels a desire for change.



Historical Context

When Spender wrote "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," the world was in the midst of major cultural and political change. In 1954, in the landmark case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in the schools was unconstitutional. In 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat at the front of a bus to a white passenger, inciting a bus boycott by the African American community that ultimately led to desegregation on buses in 1956. Beginning in 1960, student sit-ins and other nonviolent protests became a popular and effective way of desegregating lunch counters, parks, swimming pools, libraries, and the like. In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, and President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. The year Spender's poem was published, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibited discrimination of all kinds based on race, color, religion, or national origin. This legislation was unprecedented.

Behind these major historical events, countless lives were changed or ended during this tumultuous time. The late 1950s and early 1960s unearthed an America that had been kept hidden for centuries. Although slavery had been abolished, African Americans were dying every year at the hands of racists. Equality was a seemingly futile hope not only in America but also across the globe. Poverty was rampant among African Americans, especially in the South. They were often undereducated and perpetually oppressed by white southerners bent on thwarting and hampering African American progress.

When the injustice of society's oppression is revealed, it is usually forced to end. Sometimes, however, such injustice takes new forms. For example, after Abraham Lincoln abolished slavery, the oppressive conditions of slavery were converted into racial segregation and the denial of civil rights to African Americans. American society in the South had exploited African Americans as slaves and reaped economic benefits; after Reconstruction, society subjugated them once more, this time as an underprivileged working class without civil or human rights. During the 1960s, the Civil Rights movement—led by Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy—struggled to free African Americans from segregation and discrimination. With civil rights, though, came another type of oppression: widespread poverty that affected African Americans in particular. The new social imbalance was touted as a struggle between rich and poor rather than as a racial issue. The U.S. economy still had its underprivileged working class, and the oppressors were off the hook because the so-called oppressed now had civil and human rights. The oppressed people's low place in society was said to stem from their own lack of ambition or intelligence. Poverty as a tool for social subjugation became extremely powerful, far more so than blatant racism.

Spender recognized this power. As a professed Socialist during the 1920s and 1930s, he was well aware of the oppressive power of capital. Much of his work conveyed the heavy politically charged ideologies of Communist and Marxist thought. The shifting perception of oppression from the 1950s into the 1960s fueled Spender's political



commentary. In "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," he focuses on the power that capitalism holds over the children in the slums, rather than on race. Although some readers may assume that the students in the poem are African American, Spender was far more concerned with the economic and social implications of the new face of oppression than he was with its possible racial implications. Spender was first and foremost a leftist and a Socialist. His writing was influenced by global injustice and during the years before he wrote "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," there was no greater social injustice than lack of civil rights in the United States. His exploration of the social change occurring in the 1950s and 1960s reflects the turbulence not only of this era in American history but also of this era in global history.

Critical Overview

There is not much written about Spender's work as a poet and even less about his individual poems. In fact, much of the critical response to Spender's poetry is negative or tepid at best in its praise. David R. Slavitt writes in *Boulevard* of attending a lecture given by Spender at Yale in 1955, stating, "He was also, I thought then and still think, a dismally bad poet." This is the familiar and resounding opinion of but one of Spender's critics. His greatest literary achievement is his autobiography, *World within World*. No matter how poorly received his poetry may have been by his contemporaries and critics, the bulk of what is written about Spender's life and, in particular, about his autobiography, is heavy with critical praise.

Written in 1951, *World within World* explores Spender's bisexual lifestyle. It is unusual in its frankness. Spender, who always went to bat for the oppressed and underprivileged, puts his own life and sexuality on the table, examining the civil and human hardships of a nonheterosexual person in the sexually repressed 1950s. Richard Freadman writes in *The Ethics in Literature*, "World within World is a powerful and nuanced call for renewal, a call which imagines some of the processes of renewal that ethical beings now need to undergo." Spender's autobiography as well as his poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" show his dedication to equality and understanding among humans. Although Spender may not be seen as one of the greatest English poets of the twentieth century, he is recognized as a humanist and a political activist with a keen eye for social commentary.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1



Critical Essay #1

Martinelli is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Martinelli examines how Spender's poem delivers a Marxist message about Communism, education, and the need for social revolution.

Spender's poem "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" is an excellent example of his lifelong dedication to the pursuit of social change and human equality. During the earliest stages of his writing career in the 1920s and 1930s, Spender was a pacifist and Socialist. He was so stirred to action by the proletarian struggle that he joined the International Brigades—an international force of volunteer soldiers organized by the French Communist Party leader Maurice Thorez and the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Clearly, Spender was an advocate for the working class and an avid supporter of sociopolitical reform. His poetry was a reflection of his support of social reform. Even as he aged, Spender continued to fight for social change and equality for all of humankind. Although he became less of a vocal supporter of Communism, these ideals were still at the foundation of his writing and his political ideology. In the turbulent decade of the 1960s, Spender wrote "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," a vivid, didactic poem calling for a Communist social reform that mirrors the writings of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in their penultimate work *The Communist Manifesto*.

In 1848, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels wrote *The Communist Manifesto* as the platform of the Communist League, a workingmen's association. It was unavoidably formed as a secret society, because any organized uprising of the working class in Europe would result in a dramatic change both politically and socially for the ruling class. However secret the Communist League may have hoped to remain, by 1850 *The Communist Manifesto* was quickly translated into most European languages and the work became the doctrine of the proletarians, the exploited, working class, as they struggled for emancipation from the bourgeoisie, the exploiting, ruling class. Escape from this social hierarchy proved very difficult. In fact, neither Marx nor Engels saw the realization of the goals of their manifesto, yet it continues to fuel social revolutionaries across the globe.

The fundamental proposition that forms the nucleus of *The Communist Manifesto* states that every historical generation, since the dissolution of primitive society in exchange for political society and individual ownership of property, is built upon a socioeconomic structure that necessitates a struggle between two classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In order to emancipate the proletariat, Marx and Engels contend that society at large must be freed from exploitation, oppression, class distinctions, and class struggles. Looking back to the shift from primitive to political society, the ownership of property is the fuel that powers the machine that oppresses and exploits proletarians. Marx writes, "Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things. In all these movements they bring to the front, as the leading question in each case, the property question." This is the base struggle for which the proletariat must fight: the dissolution of private ownership.



If dissolution of private property is key to the emancipation of the proletariat, then there is no peaceful resolution to the class struggle. The bourgeoisie will certainly not relinquish ownership of their capital and private land, and thus the proletariat must subvert and overturn the dominant social paradigm with a forcible revolution. Marx writes

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at the Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.

Workingmen of all countries, unite!

This is, effectively, the proletariat's war cry. *The Communist Manifesto* was much more than a political theorist document; it truly incited action among the working class, igniting and fueling revolution, uprising, and social reform. Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His life mission was to overthrow capitalistic society and emancipate humanity from the constraints of a social construct founded upon the perpetual struggle between exploited and exploiting classes. This was the goal of *The Communist Manifesto* and the purpose of Marx's life.

Marx's message in *The Communist Manifesto* continued to resonate throughout Europe and Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, and it had a great impact on the foundation of Spender's writing, activism, and political ideology. Although Spender agreed with Marx's message and with the proletarian struggle, the way in which he explored Marxism and Communism changed as he aged. By 1964, when Spender wrote "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," his political ideology had altered focus. Although he was still opposed to capitalist society, Spender seemed more concerned about human equality than about the forcible emancipation and social revolution for which he had fought in the 1930s. The poem reveals this altered perception.

"An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" is written in four stanzas. The first stanza looks at the students in the classroom. The first student, a "tall girl with [a] weighed-down head," is both mentally and physically exhausted. The next, a "paper- / seeming boy, with rat's eyes" is malnourished and terrified of the world. The third student is an "unlucky heir / Of twisted bones," carrying a genetic disorder, his "father's gnarled disease." The last is an "unnoted, sweet and young" boy with "eyes [that] live in a dream." Spender's description of each student is a comment on the exploitation of the proletariat.

Like the tall girl, the working class is overworked, exhausted, and sapped of any energy that may be used to turn against the ruling class. The bourgeoisie struggle to keep proletarians weak, malnourished, and frightened, again to keep their energy level too low to revolt. The third boy speaks to the lack of adequate health care for proletarians, another means of oppressing uprising. The last boy, however, seems to represent a sign of hope. Spender writes that the boy dreams of a place "other than this," showing that the proletarian class has not lost sight of an end to oppression. If there were no hope for



equality, then the last boy would have nothing to fuel his dreams of a place outside the classroom in the slum. Spender uses the first stanza to paint a picture of the proletarians' plight and their hope for social equality.

In the second stanza, Spender brings in the distant, yet invasive role of the bourgeoisie in the proletariat's classroom. He writes of books, maps, a bust of Shakespeare, and other classroom items that are all "donations." These items show the students a world outside the slum, an existence that is "belled, flowery," and beautiful like the "Tyrolese valley." However, this world is as fantastic as an imaginary, alien world. The world the children see is "painted with a fog. / A narrow street sealed in with a lead sky"; this is their existence. Anything beyond this world is pure fantasy.

In the next stanza, Spender writes that the donations are "wicked" and "a bad example" that tempts the students "to steal." Spender suggests that the bourgeois donors of these classroom gifts intend to use the donations to hold the proletarians in place. The donations do not help advance the children's education; they simply show the students in "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" a glimpse of a beautiful world outside of what they have come to accept as reality. However, this beautiful outside world is wholly unattainable because of their position as the exploited working class.

Spender seems to be pounding his fist, proclaiming that the donations leave only two options for the students in the classroom: resist the donors' temptation and live moral lives with unfulfilled dreams or give in to temptation and resort to a life of crime with the hope of gaining enough capital to break the chains of exploitation and escape the working class. Neither option is adequate, as one forces the students to remain in the "fog" as proletarians and the other compels them to exchange their proletarian life in the "fog" for one of an "endless night" as bourgeois thieves.

In the final stanza, Spender makes a plea for change. He begs the "governor, inspector, visitor" to help the students. Spender is calling for a change in the way in which donations are given and used and, thus, in the way in which society intervenes in education. He writes, "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." Spender is asking society to change for the benefit of the children. He is not directly calling for a working-class revolution as Marx did; instead, he is asking that the donations, that is, the money, be used to empower the students to freely explore the books they have been given. His message is that all students, regardless of social class, should be given the opportunity to "Run naked into books" without suffering fear, malnourishment, exhaustion, or disease. Spender is asking for a change to benefit all students; although this change might mandate a change in society, his concern is education and children, not necessarily the proletariat revolution.

Marx states in *The Communist Manifesto* that education is "social, and determined by the social conditions under which you educate, by the intervention of society, direct or indirect, by means of schools." Therefore, neither Marx nor Spender hopes to remove society from education—as both see education as inherently social—but both hope to



change the way society intervenes in education. Without a new approach to education, Spender would say not only that there is no hope for proletarian children but also that there is no hope for children in general. Here, too, we see Spender's new emphasis on a fresh vision for bringing about human equality.

Spender does not simply posit a different way of looking at the same struggle. In this poem, he takes us away from the struggle of the proletarians against the bourgeoisie and reminds us that behind this adult struggle are the children of all classes. Suddenly, the political revolution for equality takes a backseat to the general oppression of children. Regardless of social class, adults undeniably have a responsibility for the care of children. Spender uses this position to forward the Communist agenda and, at the same time, to shed light on the inequalities affecting poverty-stricken, underprivileged children. "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum" seems to demand a social change for the benefit of all children—not only proletarians—and delivers a strong, Marxist message about Communism, education, and the need for social change.

Source: Anthony Martinelli, Critical Essay on "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Two audiocassettes of Stephen Spender's poetry are available: *Poetry of Stephen Spender* (1964), published by Audio-Forum, and *Stephen Spender Selected Poems* (1994), published by Spoken Arts.



Topics for Further Study

Stephen Spender used his poetry to express his political ideology and to voice his support of Marxist ideals. Write a poem expressing your personal political ideology, or, if you prefer, write a poem from the standpoint of a political theorist, such as John Locke, Alexis de Tocqueville, or Niccolò Machiavelli.

Spender uses an allegory to present the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Other writers and thinkers have used allegories to convey complex social struggles and concepts. Compare and contrast Spender's allegory to another. You might choose, for example, Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" in the *The Republic* or George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Research Karl Marx and write a short paper on his role as an educated proletarian. Was Marx a wealthy man? How did he support himself? What was his relationship to the capitalist society he so wished to overturn? Make sure that your paper addresses Marx's forced position within a capitalist society and that you examine how he interacted with a social structure he despised.

"An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," though it is heavy with Communist allusions, still focuses primarily on education. Examine the modern education system and try to pinpoint similarities and differences between it and the system about which Spender wrote. Do you think there is still a difference in the quality of education offered at wealthy schools as opposed to that offered at poor schools? Has the current government reformed the education system to change society's intervention in the classroom, or has everything remained the same? Support your answers with research. Identify changes that you can recognize and explore ways to improve the modern education system.



Compare and Contrast

1960s: Communist countries are considered the greatest threat to the United States and the free world, with Vietnam, Cuba, and the USSR at the helm.

Today: Although Communist countries like Vietnam and China still exist, most are looked upon favorably as allies and trading partners. Now so-called rogue states, or regimes that sponsor terror or are thought to be developing nuclear weapons—such as Iran, North Korea, and Syria—are viewed as threats to the Western world.

1960s: Socialism is frowned upon as a vile offspring of Communist ideologies. Capitalism is the driving force behind which democracy accelerates throughout the world.

Today: Although capitalism is still a driving force, socialism is far more widely accepted, with many developed countries in the Western world offering socialized medicine and adequate welfare for the needy.

1960s: The American Civil Rights movement to end segregation and discrimination in public accommodations, employment, and education is in full swing, focusing on equal rights and protections for blacks. Three Civil Rights Acts are enacted during this decade.

Today: Related civil liberties movements have spurred change for women and the disabled and have begun to make inroads in rights for gays. Massachusetts has become the first state to allow gays to marry, with Vermont and Connecticut legalizing civil unions between gays. Some believe, however, that the USA Patriot Act, enacted to combat terrorism, threatens civil liberties in the name of national security.

1960s: The annual salary of a minimum-wage worker is equal to the U.S. federal poverty line for a family of three.

Today: The annual salary of a minimum-wage worker is 30 percent below the U.S. federal poverty line for a family of three.

What Do I Read Next?

Letters to Christopher: Stephen Spender's Letters to Christopher Isherwood, 1929-1939 (1980), edited by Lee Bartlett, is a collection of letters Spender sent to his great friend the poet Christopher Isherwood during their early years as writers and political activists.

World within World (1951; reissued in 2001) is Spender's autobiography. The book explores his life, his friendships, and his unspoken bisexuality.

W. H. Auden's *Selected Poems* (1989), edited by Edward Mendelson, provides the original versions of many of Auden's poems, which he revised later in his career as his ideologies matured. Auden and Spender met in their twenties and maintained their friendship throughout their lives.

The Berlin Stories (1946) combines Christopher Isherwood's two finest novels, *The Last of Mr. Norris* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, in one volume. These stories of exile, which meld Isherwood's real life with an imaginary life, formed the basis for the Broadway musical *Cabaret*.



Further Study

Huntington, Samuel P., *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon and Schuster, 1998.

Huntington analyzes world politics after the fall of Communism. Much of what was at the heart of Marxist revolutionary theory still remains, with an increasing threat of violence arising from renewed conflicts between countries and cultures that base their traditions on religious faith and dogma.

Marx, Karl, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1, Penguin Classics, 1992.

Capital, an influential book considered by many to be Marx's greatest work, details the faults of the capitalist system and is based on Marx's thirty-year study of capitalism in England, the most advanced industrial society of Marx's day.

Richardson, R. Dan, *Comintern Army: The International Brigades and the Spanish Civil War*, University Press of Kentucky, 1982.

Richardson explores the history of the International Brigades, the volunteer army that fought on the side of the Spanish Republic during the Spanish Civil War. He contends that the brigade was an instrument of the Soviet Communists. Spender served for a short time in 1937 as a member of this brigade.

Sutherland, John, *Stephen Spender: A Literary Life*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Sutherland uses information gleaned from Spender's private papers to create this insightful biography of Spender's life and the literary society in which he was immersed.

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Freadman, Richard, "Ethics, Autobiography and the Will: Stephen Spender's *World within World*," in *The Ethics in Literature*, edited by Andrew Hadfield, Dominic Rainsford, and Tim Woods, Macmillan Press, 1999, p. 35.

Marx, Karl, and Engels, Frederick, *The Communist Manifesto*, International Publishers, 1948, pp. 27, 44.

Slavitt, David R., "Poetic Justice," in *Boulevard*, Vol. 18, No. 2 and 3, Spring 2003, p. 94.

Spender, Stephen, "An Elementary School Classroom in a Slum," in *Collected Poems 1928-1985*, Faber and Faber, 1985, pp. 46-47.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently



studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals—helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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