London Labour and the London Poor Study Guide

London Labour and the London Poor by Henry Mayhew

Contents

Plot Summary

London Labour and the London Poor examines at length the various marginalized people one might have encountered on the streets of London during the mid- 1800s. These included street vendors of fruits, flowers, fish, sundries, meals and snacks. Another section details the lives of dustmen, crossing-sweepers, chimney sweeps and mudlarks, youngsters who pick up junk on the side of the river Thames. The book also examines street entertainers, cabdrivers and the homeless, as well as the less reputable members of society including thieves and prostitutes. Somewhat mysteriously, Mayhew also profiles bus drivers and conductors, although they are employees and not independent business people. In each case, Mayhew presents a general profile of the character and background of members of the profession.

Street buyers included those who purchase rabbit skins, umbrellas, used clothes, bottles, scrap metal, paper, rubber and grease, apparently for resale. Finders were those who gathered castoff or unattended merchandise, including animal dung and bones. They also included "hard-ups," individuals who gather cigar butts from the street to dry and resell the tobacco.

Street performers, artists and showmen were divided into groups including puppeteers, acrobats, animal trainers, clowns and other actors. This category also included artists, dancers, musicians, singers, proprietors of games and rides, and those offering entertainments featuring unusual sights like alligators, a horse with two heads or a pig-faced lady.

Street artisans either repaired items in the streets or made them at home and sold them on the street. These items included stockings, nightcaps, dresses for dolls, wooden spoons and leather suspenders. Street laborers included chimney sweeps, lamplighters, shoeshine boys and those who pasted printed advertisements on walls.

The introduction by Victor Neuburg presents a sketchy biography of Henry Mayhew. Relatively little is known of Mayhew's life. The part that is known makes Mayhew sound like a character in a novel by popular Victorian writer Charles Dickens. In fact, some of Mayhew's work may have been read by Dickens and been a source of inspiration for the novelist. Mayhew wrote for newspapers most of his life. His was plagued by financial problems, and even declared bankruptcy. He wrote the articles and pamphlets that later became London Labour and the London Poor purely for financial reasons.

Mayhew's work represents an important turning point in history. For the first time, well-to-do Londoners were interested in learning more about the poor people they saw on the streets every day. However, Mayhew was unable to be entirely objective in his research. The result was uneven, at times empathetic and charitable, at other times condescending and dehumanizing. While Mayhew was a poor sociologist, he was an excellent journalist. His research methods and conclusions leave much to be desired. His concise portrayal of individuals interviewed is clear, effective, impartial yet insightful.

Mayhew took pains to accurately report the lives of those he encountered, even when the facts were in direct contrast to his conclusions.

Volume 1: Of the London Street-folk

Volume 1: Of the London Street-folk Summary and Analysis

London Labour and the London Poor is a detailed examination of the characters who frequented the streets of that great city between 1860 and 1937. Mayhew examines street vendors of fruit, flowers, nuts, shoelaces, matches, and tea. Vivid descriptions of cabdrivers, beggars, thieves, prostitutes, pickpockets and orphans bring the street scenes of London alive. Each type of worker or criminal is examined individually. While Mayhew relied on stereotypes and generalizations in the profiles, his individual interviews are crisp, journalistic accounts of misfortune and deprivation that tug at the heartstrings.

Introduction

Throughout the text, British monetary units from the 1800s are used. The major unit of exchange was the British pound, which was equal to 20 shillings. Each shilling was made up of 12 pence, otherwise known as 12 pennies, 12 cents. Many of the items sold by street vendors had a price of one halfpence or halfpenny, a coin with a value of half a penny. A halfpence was worth 1/24 of a shilling or 1/480 of a British pound. To put this in perspective, a skilled worker earned about 30 shillings per week, an amount equal to 1.5 British pounds.

Volume I: Of the London Street-folk

Author Henry Mayhew separated London street people into six categories: sellers, buyers, finders, performers, artisans and laborers. All of these were unlicensed entrepreneurs with no fixed place of business, who conducted their trade on the sidewalks or streets of England's greatest city.

Street sellers were categorized by the type of merchandise sold, including fish, poultry & cheese; fruits & vegetables; prepared foods & drinks; stationary, literature & the fine arts; manufactured articles; second-hand goods; live animals; minerals & curiosities. Sellers or street vendors accounted for 75 percent of those earning a living on the streets of London. The remainder were finders, performers, prostitutes or criminals.

Mayhew made sweeping generalizations about the different types of street people, and often relied on stereotypes. For example, he claimed that all blind musicians were highly religious while all "mechanics" or skilled laborers were melancholy, suffering from chronic depression. This reflected the Victorian belief that machines, cities and industrialization in general were unhealthy, at least for the lower classes.

Costermongers

Costermongers or costers were the largest group of working poor people in London. These unlicensed vendors sold merchandise in the streets. Most of them lived day-to-day, buying merchandise as cheaply as possible at the open-air wholesale markets before dawn, hoping to sell enough by dark to buy food to feed themselves or their children. They walked up and down beside the street shouting "Apples, rosy red apples! Two for a penny!" or shilling whatever they had to sell that day. Street vendors earned a meager living. For most, street vending was the last alternative to the humiliation of being sent to the workhouse, a place much like an orphanage or homeless shelter.

In London of the 1800s, costermongers or street vendors filled the place of today's coffee shops, convenience stores and fast food restaurants. They sold many items, but most commonly nuts, oranges, apples, flowers, needles, matches, greens, snacks and meals, herring, violets, watercress, pins and thread. The most intelligent and well-to-do costers sold food and drink, including baked potatoes, fried fish, meat pies, eel pies, cakes and tarts, coffee, tea and ginger beer, berries, ham sandwiches, milk, elder wine and peppermint water. Sale of food and beverage required more capital and equipment, but also brought more profit, often earning up to 4.5 shillings per day.

Costermongers usually lived in a drab, dreary, dirty rented room. Often it was shared with other family members. A mother, father and four or more children might live in a single room. At other times, a coster would share a room with several unrelated people, or rent a portion of a room from a small family, to save money. Costers generally could not afford to rent a room of their own, and when sales were bad might have to sleep in the doorway of a shop or church because they could not afford the few shillings to rent a portion of a room.

Most costermongers were uneducated, and had attended the free public schools only for a few years, or not at all. Although costers were adept at adding and subtracting to figure their profits, they were ignorant of multiplication and very few could read or write. Most came from families of costermongers where the father, mother and children each sold products separately during the day, pooling their money to survive. Packmen were costermongers who carried their wares on their back, walking around the countryside. While most were male, some were female and some traveled in pairs.

Mayhew decried the fact that many couples in this group were unmarried, living in sin according to his beliefs. He reluctantly noted that despite the lack of a church ceremony, most were faithful to their mates and did their best to support their children. Many costermonger children began selling alone in the streets as young as eight years old. Some were orphans. Others were required by their parents to work, to contribute to the family income. Small children usually started by selling walnuts, oranges or apples outside the theaters late at night. Many were beaten if they did not come home with enough money. Often, after repeated beatings, the child would run away and try to support himself by selling items on the street.

Orphan or runaway coster children had especially hard lives. When they made enough money, they paid to share a bed in a low lodging house with up to five other children of both sexes. Lodging house rooms were often in terrible condition, unheated with leaky

roofs and bedbugs. In the worst lodging houses, children slept in the same room with adult strangers of both sexes. Often 12 to 30 people slept in one room.

Each resident of a low lodging house bought his or her own food, and cooked it in one of the fireplaces in public rooms. Salt was often provided by the management. In the worst low lodging houses, children were encouraged to steal meat, bacon or potatoes, which the host then sold to other lodgers. Lodging house hosts were often women. An eight- or ten-year-old child who did not have two cents to pay for his room that night was sent away with orders not to return until he had stolen something to pay his nightly rent. If the child stole something more valuable, the host would pay a small fraction of its worth and then pawn the item. The very worst low lodging houses were home to thieves and prostitutes. A few were nothing more than brothels, or brothels for children.

In the best of the low lodging houses, the rooms were segregated by sex, with boys in one room and girls in another. Regular customers were allowed to stay free on Sunday nights. Soap and razors were provided. In some, each of the 200 to 300 residents paid a penny into a newspaper fund on Sunday. The host bought a Sunday paper for everyone with the funds, which would be read aloud by the host or an educated resident. Excess newspaper funds were used to support regular residents who became sick and unable to work. Some young costers would commit petty crimes, particularly in the winter, so that they would have a roof over their head and three small meals per day. Still, the low lodging houses were not the worst part of a young costermonger's life. When he did not make enough to pay the rent, or lost his stock, he would have to sleep on the drizzly London streets without any dinner, or any money to buy tomorrow's stock.

Mayhew estimated that 75 percent of costermongers did not own their merchandise. Instead, they borrowed stock or the money to buy it, often at the incredibly high interest rate of 20 percent per week, or 1040 percent per year. A desperate street vendor would often pay 50 percent interest for a loan on Saturday morning, to be repaid that evening. A few merchants would loan stock at no interest to street vendors selling nearby, usually to female costers.

Costers were often cheated by their wholesale suppliers, who would sell them rotting produce or shortchange them. In return, the costers often increased their slender profit margins by shortchanging customers, or slipping a few rotted berries into the bottom of the basket.

For all its privations, being a street vendor had its charms. Costers enjoyed the freedom of being their own boss, and of tramping all over London and the surrounding countryside rather than being stuck in a stuffy office or shop. When there was money, they enjoyed watching the Penny Gaff, a bawdy cut-rate vaudeville show held in an empty storefront. Many enjoyed listening to someone read a novel or short story aloud. Many costers smoked and some drank, even those as young as seven or eight years old. Gambling was also a popular pursuit, with even young boys playing cards or pitching pennies. Male costers were fond of drinking, while children of both sexes often wasted their money on sweets.

Mayhew offered heart-wrenching life stories of a number of unnamed costermongers. For example, one lad's father died when he was three years old, and his brother was just a year old. Their mother had to go out to work from 6 am until 10 pm, but left the children alone with the key to the room and some bread-and-butter for their supper. When she could not find work, she pawned everything the family owned. When that ran out, the boys often cried themselves to sleep with hunger. When he was eight years old, the lad started selling walnuts in the streets, making four pence per day. Now 12 years old, he and his brother each sold separately, so they could cover twice as much ground. By selling greens in the morning and nuts in pubs at night, they earned up to 2.5 shillings per week. Mayhew bemoaned the fact that the two boys never attended church, but worked on Sunday instead.

Another portrait is of two orphan flower girls, 15 and 11 years old. The girls work from 6 am until dark selling primroses, stocks, roses, violets, pinks or carnations in season. Their mother died seven years ago, when the youngest girl was just four years old. The two girls have supported themselves ever since. They paid two shillings a week to a married couple with two small children, to share their room. The girls' combined earnings are about one shilling per day. They are Roman Catholic and go to mass on Sunday.

Patterers

Mayhew separated the sellers of stationary, books, magazines and fine arts into a different category than costermongers, referring to them as patterers or montebanks. Patterers delivered a long, creative sales pitch that was often untrue but always entertaining. The presentations were comparable to today's late-night TV infomercials. Some customers bought the product mostly as a way to support the entertainer, as fans today might purchase the CD of a small, unknown band. Others were convinced of the product's effectiveness by the patterer's lies. One demonstrated his skill, convincing a young servant girl that if she bought a large umbrella and offered to share it with a young man, he was likely to propose marriage.

Some patterers were fortunetellers. A huckster who sold hardware at a fair was called a Cheap Jack. Other patterers sold patent medicine, notepaper, rat poison, envelopes and pens, indecent postcards or political songs.

Some patterers were musicians or orators, dramatically delivering "death-bed speeches" or "confessions." Others were musicians, entertaining in pubs and on the street by singing songs. These entertainers supported themselves by selling sheet music or printed copies of their material. Many young costers started out as singers, but because they were unable to read, could not learn new songs.

Patterers and stationary sellers were generally better educated and more intelligent than costermongers. Many could read and write, and some had come from wealthy families. Mayhew interviewed different patterers who had been an army officer, a doctor, a minister and at least one who was the illegitimate son of a nobleman. He attributed their occupation to wanderlust, a desire to be free and roam the world. This desire to go

"vagabonding" Mayhew found extremely dishonorable, although he would likely have applauded a wealthy nobleman's son who wanted to travel in Europe.

Mayhew included an interview with one young Cheap Jack or Cheap John. His parents were both drunks and street vendors. One night when he was eight years old, he was beaten again for not selling all his matches that day. He decided to run away from home. The next day, he left with only nine pence worth of matches to sell. He stayed in low lodging houses, eating scraps of food from the trash and selling matches to pay for his room. After two years of selling matches, he began hawking sheet music in bars, entertaining sailors with songs. At times, when he ran out of stock to sell, he was desperately poor, with no money for food. Eventually as a teen, he was hired by a Cheap John to hawk goods for wages, married and started a family. Twenty-five years later, he still worked as a Cheap Jack at the fairs. He had heard that his father died many years ago, but did not know if his mother was dead or alive.

Volume 2: Of the Street-Jews

Volume 2: Of the Street-Jews Summary and Analysis

The story of London is a saga of successive waves of immigrants, each scrambling to earn a living under difficult circumstances. In many cases, recent immigrants look down on the newly arrived, especially if there is a difference in race, nationality or religion. This is illustrated in Mayhew's attitude towards the Jewish residents, and their mutual disdain for recent Irish immigrants. Few adult Jews and very few Jewish women worked as common costermongers. The very few Jewish girls who peddled fruit usually worked under the watchful eye of their brothers. Mayhew reported that the "Jew-boy" selling fruits or cakes was as non-observant and as ignorant of religious teaching as his Christian counterparts.

The Jewish inhabitants of London dominated wholesale trading, especially of watches, jewels, fruit, shells, parrots, curiosities, ostrich feathers and cigars. The Jewish quarters of the city included East End, Houndsditch, Aldgate, Cheapside, Piccadilly, Covent Garden markets and Whitechapel. The Jewish traders survived by underselling other vendors, although they were often undersold by the Irish. Mayhew portrayed the Jewish traders as seldom being drinkers or gamblers, but having an extreme love of money and an unquenchable thirst for speculation in any commodity.

Jewish traders dominated the rag and used clothing trades. Ragmen wandered the streets buying used clothing, which they then sold to second-hand clothing stalls in the markets. In some cases, servants augmented their wages by selling off their master's older or little-used clothing without permission. One Jewish trader claimed to have purchased a bishop's miter, the ceremonial hat worn during church services, from the man's servant. Despite the title of this section, other occupations covered including scavengers, dustmen, chimney sweeps and crossing sweeps were not necessarily dominated by Jewish workers.

Scavengers and Cleaners

Mudlarks collected coal, small scraps of wood, lost coins and other junk from the deep, sucking, stinking mud beside the river Thames. They often waded waist-deep into the mud to retrieve an item. Often covered with filth from head to toe, they made little attempt to wash themselves, even before eating or going to bed. Mostly children and the elderly, they attempted to earn a few pennies in this way, trying to gather rags, rope or rusty nails anywhere between Veauhall Bridge and Woolwich.

Bolder boys sometimes climbed onto empty coal barges and swept up the leavings of the cargo. This was considered theft, and they were usually chased off by the owners. Sometimes one would be arrested and sent to jail for a week. Like coster children, they regarded a week in relatively warm, safe surroundings with regular meals as a vacation.

One young mudlark Mayhew interviewed belonged to a gang of boy thieves, but insisted that he would prefer to earn an honest living, if only he could get a job. A publisher Mayhew knew helped the boy get an apprenticeship where he did well and left the life of crime behind. Still, most mudlarks were scavengers rather than thieves.

Dustmen

The city of London used 3.5 million tons of coal each year and generated millions of tons of ash and soot. Dustmen were hired to haul off the ashes and dust, as well as haul away garbage and keep the streets clean. Mayhew estimated that 80 or 90 dust contractors served the city. Each bid on dust removal in a specific area and was hired by the town council. Each contractor employed a group of men in horse-drawn wagons to collect the dust and debris, haul it away and dump it in huge piles.

Shovelers piled the ashes in heaps where it was sifted by elderly men and women or young children, working as sifters. The finer ashes were sold to make bricks, while the coarser ones were used for fertilizer. Sifters worked for very low wages in hopes of finding coins or jewelry, a prize they split with the supervisor. They often turned up bones, shells, bricks, boots, kettles, or rags, which were sold to junk dealers. Most earned 1.5 shillings per day.

Like costers, dustmen and mudlarks were uneducated and tended to go into the business because their family was in the trade. It was a hard life, although some belonged to mutual aid societies like Odd Fellowes, Foresters or Old Friends. These groups collected a small amount from each member and used the money to aid the sick, widows, orphans, the elderly or those who were disabled. They also helped those injured on the job, who were routinely fired. Mayhew seems to genuinely believe that certain occupations like mudlark or dustman are hereditary, rather than learned.

Chimney Sweepers

Chimney sweeps were filthy, stank and were looked down upon, even by costermongers. Many times, they were destitute orphans who had been apprenticed to a tyrannical sweep in childhood. Because small size was greatly prized, sweeps often starved their apprentices. Fewer than ten percent could read or write.

In times past, sweeps seldom bathed and usually owned only one set of clothes. Many days during the slow season, they went without food. In Mayhew's time, bathing was more frequent, with sweeps bathing once every six months and some taking a bath once per week. This was in part due to the public baths that had opened in the city between 1847 and 1849, resulting in 110,940 baths per year at one location. The public baths also offered facilities to wash and iron clothes. Ninety percent of the patrons were male.

Crossing Sweeps

Crossing Sweeps earned a scanty living using a broom to keep a particular intersection clean. Many became fixtures in a residential or commercial area. They would hail cabs,

and assist men and ladies in and out of carriages. They were also available to run errands, mail letters, clean boots and perform other menial tasks about the neighborhood in return for tips.

Many crossing sweeps were elderly or unable to work due to asthma, arthritis or an injury in the workplace. It was a job of last resort, and many lived on table scraps from the residents. When a crossing sweep was well established, the police would protect him from interlopers, chasing off any upstarts who tried to move in on his territory. Some crossing sweeps worked the same intersection, in all weather, every day for decades.

A few banks or commercial establishments employed a crossing sweep permanently to open doors and hail cabs, the forerunner to today's doorman. They were generally honest men unable to work at other occupations. Very rarely, a good, dependable crossing sweeper would be given a job as footman or porter in a household.

Mayhew interviewed a crossing sweep who was originally from Dublin. Orphaned as a child when both parents died of Cholera, he traveled to England for work. He had worked as a bricklayer until he was injured falling off a scaffold at the age of 36. One leg was amputated. He sold matches for five years, earning just 6 pence per day. Finally, he established himself as a crossing sweeper, working the same intersection for more than a decade.

While most crossing sweepers were older men or women unable to work, sometimes a small group of youths would cooperatively take over an intersection. Such gangs of youths, usually boys, often combined tumbling and street sweeping. They would run alongside a city bus, entertaining riders with somersaults, back-flips, handstands and cartwheels in return for tips when the passengers got off. Others also worked as musicians, porters, shoeshine boys or were paid by shop owners to tack up advertisements.

One youth in such a gang was young Mike, an orphan. When his father died, his mother was cheated out of her house and furniture. Shortly after, she died of cancer. Mike lived with his teenage sister until she married. Her husband did not want to support a 12-year-old boy, and kicked him out. The sister and her husband later emigrated to America. Mike joined a gang of crossing sweeper youths. They tumbled together and worked sweeping an intersection together. Each kept his own tips, but they prepared meals together and rented a room together in a low lodging house. When there was not enough money for a room, they slept under the arched stone doorway of a church.

Volume 3: Our Street Folk

Volume 3: Our Street Folk Summary and Analysis

Mayhew's "street folk" were mostly entertainers who worked in the streets or at fairs. They would now be called buskers. These entertainers would have been similar to the man who plays the saxophone or the boys who drum on empty five-gallon buckets for tips on the sidewalks or subway of a major city today. Street folk were separate from patterers. While patterers used an entertaining sales pitch or spiel to sell a product, street folk were pure entertainers who performed for tips or wages.

Most of the street entertainers were better educated than street vendors, and the majority could read. Many came from families that were comfortable financially, or even wealthy. Many performers started out as singers, and branched into other types of entertainment later. Most worked as an assistant or apprentice to another entertainer, to learn the trade. Unlike costermongers, crossing sweepers and mudlarks, who were almost destitute, street entertainers seemed motivated partly by ego, by the urge to perform before an audience.

Punch

Puppeteers, or "Punch" as Mayhew called them, presented the popular Punch and Judy show in parks, beside streets and for private audiences. The show was named after the main male character, Punch.

Mayhew interviewed one puppeteer, a thin, poorly dressed but well mannered man, a former gentleman's footman. As a servant, he earned 20 pounds per year, plus his room and board and two sets of clothing. He estimated that he earned one pound per day as a street entertainer, far more than as a servant. However, being a street entertainer carried less social status than being a gentleman's servant. The puppeteer had been working as Punch for 25 years, since the age of 25. He presented the sentimental, comic, tragic two-act play in the streets, at private parties, and at birthday parties for the children of noblemen. The content of the play was changed, to fit different audiences.

Street Conjurer or Wizard

The Street Conjurer or magician interviewed was the son of an affluent man who worked in the Customs office. His father died when he was ten, and his mother sold the family's immense and valuable library, as well as the furniture, to support the family. He worked as an errand boy for four years until at 14 he began to sell oranges outside a theater. From there he went to selling beer inside the theater, to being an extra on stage, to acting at the age of 15. After the show closed, he worked as the doorkeeper until the owner mentioned an opening for a magician. With no knowledge, skill or experience, he volunteered. Quickly learning the slight-of-hand, he earned two shillings

in tips plus four shillings in wages putting on 20 or 30 shows per day. After a few years he earned four pounds per week performing in bars and parlors for tips.

Fire Eater or Salamander

A tall, thin man with wild dark eyes, the fire eater was the son of a barber educated in private schools. He was expelled for cutting school and helped his father in the barber shop for three months. Struck by the desire for a more interesting life, and travel, he ran away when the Greenwich Fair came to town. He first worked the door for a show, then began performing as a singer for tips, then apprenticed to a fire eater. Now he earned four to seven shillings per night setting various foodstuffs alight and eating them. Once when he had no work he bet a man he could kill 20 rats in a cage, using only his teeth. He did so, and won five shillings.

Street Clown

The emaciated, depressed man with sunken eyes and wrinkles had worked as a clown for 16 years. His mother died when he was two years old, and he worked as a stable boy for his father's employer for several years. He would prefer to be a groom or a police officer, anything except a clown. However, now that he had a wife and children to support, he clowned from 8 am to dark every day for 6 shillings per week. Ashamed, he hid his occupation from the neighbors. Often when he was working, all he could think of was that he had two children at home with nothing to eat.

Photographer

Mayhew's "photographic man" was a former banjo player who had worked as a photographer for two years. He and his dancer wife saved for a year or two to buy the camera and dark room equipment. He learned his craft on the job, taking terrible portraits of customers the first month or so. Much of the photographer's business was a scam. Due to competition, he had to offer portraits for a half-penny, an impossibly low price. To bolster earnings, he either lured people into buying a more expensive photo, or sold them bogus products like a "Patent American Air Preserver" that was actually just scrap paper.

Bus Drivers and Conductors

For unknown reasons, Mayhew included the drivers and conductors of horse-drawn omnibuses in his profile of street entertainers. Unlike the street vendors or entertainers, these men were employed by the owners of the various bus companies that crisscrossed the city and surrounding countryside. They were also well paid compared to others profiled in the book.

The bus drivers earned three pounds per week driving the horses that pulled the bus. Many were former farmers, while others came from a variety of occupations from cheesemongers to servants to gentlemen. Most could read and write, were married and worked seven days per week, which prevented any attendance at church.

Conductors collected the fares from passengers on the buses. They earned four shillings per day, which they were allowed to take from the fares collected. They came from all walks of life and most could not afford to marry. There was a perennial problem with conductors stealing a portion of the fares collected. Anyone suspected of stealing was immediately fired and found it impossible to get a job with another bus company. The bus company also employed timekeepers at two pounds per week and "oddmen" or temporary fill-in drivers or conductors at two shillings per week.

Cabdrivers

About 40 percent of the cabdrivers owned the horse-drawn cabs or carriages they drove, while the remainder rented the cab on a daily basis. They worked brutally long shifts, driving constantly anywhere from 11 to 22 hours per day. Because of the length of the shifts, many employed "bucks" or unlicensed cabdrivers for a portion of the day, although the practice was not legal.

Various Classes of Vagrants

Vagrants were those who loitered in the streets with no work or occupation. Mayhew described them as, "Youths, prostitutes, Irish families and professional beggars." Many were young men between 12 and 20 years old, whom Mayhew described as budding criminals. Many did errands to earn a few dollars during the day, such as holding horses or working in the market, helping to carry produce. They were dishonest and stubborn, and sometimes formed gangs that robbed individuals. Irish families were described as filthy, diseased, lazy but grateful beggars.

Several times Mayhew referred to various groups including costermongers or temporary workers as preferring to starve rather than accept any charitable aid, which Mayhew saw as admirable. One workhouse reported three times as many Irish residents in a single year, 12,000 compared to about 4,000 English residents.

Casual Ward of the Workhouse

The casual ward of the workhouse was a kind of free dormitory for destitute travelers. It was designed to serve poor laborers traveling to London to look for work, or destitute women and children traveling to join their husbands. The casual ward provided basic food and shelter for 24 hours only. Anyone staying longer would be transferred to the workhouse.

Those checking in to the casual ward were given six ounces of bread and one ounce of cheese for supper, and the same for breakfast the next morning. The accommodations consisted of wooden platforms against the walls, strewn with clean straw, that served as beds. No lights were allowed, so residents went to sleep as soon as it became dark. Many of the female residents were prostitutes under the age of 20, who had started selling themselves around the age of ten.

Between 1837 and 1848 everyone who said they were destitute was admitted, some 16,000 persons per night in England and Wales. Beginning in 1848, a change in the law

permitted the warden to turn away anyone he felt was not sufficiently destitute and the number of residents was reduced to one-third.

One resident of the casual ward who was profiled was an 18-year-old girl of mixed race. Her mother was white and her father was half-black, from Philadelphia. Because her parents were not married, the girl had lived with her white English grandmother since she was 4 months old. Her mother later married a white man who beat her because he did not want a black daughter. At the age of ten she ran away from home and returned to live with her grandmother. Her grandmother died when the girl was 12 years old, and she was sent to work as a maid. Both the man and woman of the household beat her. Once, she was knocked down a flight of stairs when she took too long running an errand. She ran away, and tried to earn a living selling watercress in the streets. It was not enough. Refusing to become a prostitute, she pawned most of her clothing to pay the landlady at a lodging house. Eventually, when she ran out of money, she had no choice but to stay at the casual ward. Mayhew spoke with the landlady and confirmed that the girl's story was true, and that she was of good character.

Another resident was a well-educated 43-year-old man who was spoiled by his wealthy family as a child. He ran away at the age of 13, and began picking pockets as a lark. His girlfriend shoplifted. He began to pass counterfeit bills, a crime punishable by hanging. Later, he bought a rigged dice game and traveled around the countryside cheating gamblers. He and his partner would rob any lone travelers they encountered. Eventually he was arrested for passing counterfeit bills. Escaping a death sentence, he was sentenced to transportation, being sent to Australia for 14 years. There he was flogged for various offenses, 875 lashes total. He served 12 years of his sentence but ran away still owing 7 more years due to bad behavior.

Homeless Asylum

There was only one homeless asylum or shelter operating in London, with beds for 310 men and 95 women. In addition, it offered 30 stalls where a woman might sleep in bed with her children. Ironically, it was named Playhouse-yard. The maximum stay was for three days, and the shelter was only open when temperatures dropped below freezing.

Each person was given eight ounces of bread in the morning and at night. Residents slept in wood-sided sleeping berths like coffins, lined with a hay-filled mattress. Most residents were the unemployed, those too ill to work or families recently arrived from Ireland. Some of the unemployed would commit petty theft to be arrested, because the food was slightly better in jail. In response to this, the city reduced jail rations for those incarcerated for two weeks or less.

Volume 4: Those That Will Not Work

Volume 4: Those That Will Not Work Summary and Analysis

Mayhew states that the necessity of finding food separates animals from plants. Humans also must work for a living. Someone who is physically or mentally unable to work must rely on others, or on charity. However, some people who are physically and mentally able to work choose not to do so. Mayhew sees this as a moral defect present in vagrants, vagabonds and criminals.

Most portions of this section were written by other authors, not Henry Mayhew. It is difficult or impossible to catalogue all the various ways to earn a living, although many have tried different methods. About 5.25 million men were employed in Great Britian, plus about 1 million domestic servants, 200,000 professors and artists and 200,000 civil servants. In addition, there were 200,000 paupers, prisoners and lunatics. Wives accounted for 3.5 million persons, while there were 7.5 million children.

Agencies for the Suppression of Vice and Crime by the Rev. William Tuckniss, B.A.

The London City Mission was a group of missionaries of various denominations paid to go door-to-door and read scripture, try to convert residents to Christianity and to encourage residents, especially the poor, to attend church. In 1861, 381 missionaries were paid for 1.8 million home visits. This led to an astonishing total of more than 12 visits per day, 365 days per year by each missionary. During those 1.8 million home visits, 2.7 printed tracts were handed out, meaning on average each person accepted one or two. These visits resulted in 307 poor people attending church for the first time, 3,500 being baptized and 48 persons who were living in sin deciding to marry their partners.

Prostitution in London by Bracebridge Hemyng

Pornography including obscene books and pictures had recently become illegal in London, as part of the effort to curb prostitution. Hemyng attributes an increase in prostitution in England to the spread of vice throughout Europe due to the French Revolution around 1776.

There was a lack of agreement on the number of prostitutes in the city of London, with the police estimating 7,000 to 8,000 prostitutes while Bishop Ryan estimated 80,000. This discrepancy may have been due to different definitions of prostitution.

The purpose of the mission was to reduce blasphemy including taking the Lord's name in vain, to encourage shops to close on Sunday, and to eliminate fortunetellers and brothels. The theater, fireworks, low lodging houses, drinking, smoking, the music hall

and blasphemy were also seen as signs of depravity contributing to the increase in prostitution.

Brothels were most common in Whitechapel, Shadwell, Spitalfields and other areas frequented by sailors. The author makes no distinction between a woman having sex with her boyfriend or future husband, a woman living with a man to whom she was not married, or a streetwalker having sex for money. All were prostitutes in his eyes.

The narrative includes a description of an opium den, comparable to the crack houses of today, where women engaged in sex for drugs or lay passed out on the floor. The author paints a touching story of the innocent young girl lured away from home on a pretext and kidnapped into prostitution where within weeks she died from severe venereal disease.

Another example cited was a Frenchwoman who sold her body to support herself and her husband, with her husband's knowledge.

A 19-year-old female newspaper printer or "typo" earned a comfortable wage, but liked to eat and drink extravagantly. She sneaked away from work and sold her body whenever possible to pay for luxuries.

A "Dolly-mop" was an amateur prostitute, that is, a woman who had sex with a boyfriend or lover in return for a few presents or a little money. The author seemed most shocked that such a person would have sex merely for her own pleasure. Some nursemaids and servant girls fell into this category, meeting men in parks on their days off. Others were kept by soldiers. Some young soldiers were supported financially by wealthy women, essentially making them male prostitutes. A mistress supported by her lover was also considered a prostitute. Including these individuals probably accounts for the higher estimate in the number of prostitutes.

Thieves by John Binny

Theft abounded around the river Thames, from mudlarks stealing a small piece of rope off a barge to professionals stealing silk worth thousands of dollars. Fences or receivers of stolen goods abounded, from swag shops and pawnbrokers to keepers of lodging houses. "Dolly shops" or stores that sold women's clothing, were particularly suspect. Here, the author alleges, the lowest type of wives and even prostitutes pawned the household linens to buy highly intoxicating liquor. Unintentional irony is apparent, as the reader realizes that at least some of those women may have used the money to feed their children.

A convicted thief was interviewed. Born into a gypsy camp, the author supposes him to have had "hot African blood" and to have been more passionate than other people. The gypsy women supported the clan through telling fortunes, but the men occasionally sold horses. They then clipped the mane and tale and sold the horse at a fair a few miles away.

The thief's father died when he was six years old. He lived with his mother and learned the trade of coach-making, but longed to travel. At the age of 13, he took a box of coins his mother had saved and ran away. When the money ran out, he broke a window and stole a bowl of coins from a pawnbroker's shop. He went on to become a highway robber and pickpocket. Eventually convicted for stealing 2,000 pounds in jewels, he was sentenced to be transported for life - that is, banished to a colony such as Australia. However, eventually he returned and led an honest life.

Beggars and Swindlers by Andrew Halliday

The author, in a condescending tone, states that street vendors of matches, buttons or other small items were simply trying to evade the laws against begging. They often worked together with prostitutes who urged their clients to make a donation. Halliday cites the fact that a youngster would sell matches one day and flowers the next as evidence of malicious intent.

Vendors of knives and combs were swindlers rather than beggars, who earned a living by cheating their customers. In an unintentionally ironic statement, the author asserts that some citizens pretended to be half-wit dancers because it was such a lucrative trade. He asserts that beggars often spent considerable amounts of money buying elaborate costumes to support their claims to be disadvantaged navigators, weavers or farmers.

Characters

The London Poor

This book profiles the lives of the poor workers and vagrants of London. Most of the book deals with the characteristics of groups of people by occupation, rather than in-depth profiles of any one person. This technique, of using a little evidence to arrive at sweeping generalizations and draw broad conclusions, was much more common in Mayhew's time than it is today. Where a journalist of today would present a compelling word portrait of a specific individual to illustrate the problem, Mayhew relied on generalities. For this reason, there are few specific individuals to reference. Even when a brief profile of a specific individual is given, he or she is unnamed.

As a group, the London Poor were hungry, dirty and poorly dressed. Most worked from before sunrise to long after sunset simply trying to earn enough money to buy some food, and many failed at that. Health care was almost non-existent, so many had diseases or injuries. Many were widows or orphans due to the high death rates associated with accidents and disease. Most were uneducated because their parents could not afford to send them even to the free schools. Even small children could earn a few pennies to help support the family, and often they were required to do so.

Two Young Costermonger Brothers

London Labour and the London Poor contains many brief profiles of individual workers. However, they are almost all unnamed, identified only by their occupations. Today, these individuals would probably be given fictitious names, but Mayhew handles the problem by avoiding names altogether.

The two most startling are two young brothers who worked as costermongers or unlicensed street vendors. A wealthy man took pity on the two boys, and took them into his home, providing them with a hot meal. He promised to provide the boys with food and shelter as long as they would work. The gentleman set the boys the task of moving a huge pile of straw from one storage shed to another, one straw at a time. The two brothers quickly rebelled at this mindless, repetitive, boring and pointless task. The gentleman took this as a sign that the London poor were lazy and not interested in working. He overlooked the fact that most of them worked hard every day, selling items on the street, without any improvement in their circumstances.

Costermonger Lad

The coster lad's father died when he was just three years old. His mother had to work from 6 am to 10 pm each day, and left the young boy in charge of his brother, who was just one year old. Each day she left the boys several slices of bread and butter for their main meal. When the mother lost her job, she pawned all the family's furniture and extra

clothing to feed her children. The starving children often cried themselves to sleep at night because they were so hungry. Neither boy ever attended school or church.

At eight years old, the coster lad began to sell walnuts in the streets to augment the family income. He could earn four pence per day. When he became 12 years old, he and his brother each sold independently, earning up to 2.5 shillings per week by hawking greens during the day in the streets, and nuts in bars at night.

Two Sisters Selling Violets

Girls often sold violets or other flowers, usually to men who presented the blooms to their wives or girlfriends. While this was sometimes a front for prostitution, in other cases honorable girls tried to earn a living by selling whatever flowers were in season. Mayhew interviewed two Roman Catholic sisters who sold flowers together. They were orphans, 15 and 11 years old. They worked from 6 am until dark each day, selling any blossoms they could buy cheaply at the wholesale markets like Covent Garden. The girls sold carnations, violets, primroses, roses and stocks in season. The two had supported themselves in this way since their mother died 7 years ago. They rented a part of a furnished room from a married couple at the somewhat inflated price of 2 shillings per week. The couple justified this price by pointing out that the wife washed the girl's clothes. Unlike many costermongers, the two girls were religious and went to church every Sunday.

Mudlark Boy

Like most mudlarks, this young boy waded into the river Thames up to his chest to scavenge bits of rope, bone, coal, metal or anything else that could be resold. He was usually covered from head to toe with mud, and made no attempt to clean it off before eating or sleeping. Eventually he joined a gang of youths who stole items in the markets, but insisted that he would prefer a life free of crime. Eventually, a publisher friend of Mayhew's gave the lad a job, and helped him get an apprenticeship. True to his word, the boy never stole anything again and was able to support himself.

Cheap Jack

The Cheap Jack was a salesperson who delivered persuasive sales pitches at fairs and other public places. Often, the claims of the Cheap Jack were highly exaggerated, if not outright lies. Most customers knew this, although some very naive ones may have believed his claims. The Cheap Jack's parents were costermongers, and both alcoholics. At a very young age, he was forced to sell items in the streets, and never attended school. When he did not sell enough on any one particular day, he was brutally beaten by his father. After one such beating when he was eight years old, the Cheap Jack ran away from home. He continued to sell matches, often sleeping in the streets and eating scraps from the trash. After two years he began to sell sheet music in bars, entertaining sailors by singing the songs. Eventually as a teenager he was hired by

another Cheap Jack to shill goods at fairs. He was able to earn enough at this trade to marry and start a family. Having worked for 25 years, he heard that his father died but no longer knew if his mother was alive or not.

Mike the Crossing-Sweep

The only subject named in the book is Mike, a young orphan who worked as a crossing sweep. Mike used a broom to keep an intersection of the street clean, earning tips from people with homes or businesses nearby. His father died when Mike was just a tot. His mother was cheated out of the familiy's property. After Mike's mother died, he lived with his teen sister. However, when she married, her husband did not want the burden of supporting a 12-year-old boy and kicked Mike out. The sister and her husband moved to America.

Mike joined an all-male gang of sweeper youths. They tumbled beside buses, performing cartwheels and back flips. When the bus stopped, passengers frequently gave them tips. The rest of the time, the group swept at specific intersections, earning tips. The group pooled their money for food and a room in a lodging house. When there was not enough money for a room, they slept huddled together under the stone archway of a church door.

Punch

Punch was a puppeteer, named after the main character in the universal street puppet show, Punch and Judy. A gaunt man dressed in raggedy clothes, Punch had seen better days working as a footman for a gentleman. He was about 50 years old in the story and had been a puppeteer for half his life. He worked as an assistant to another puppeteer until he saved enough money to buy his own puppets and portable theater. Then, he presented the show on the streets, as well as for private audiences at parties including the birthday parties of the children of wealthy families.

The two-act Punch and Judy play had a standard format, although this Punch varied it to include more comedy, more sentiment or more tragedy, depending upon the audience. He could earn up to one pound per day presenting the play at various parks and streets around the city.

Street Magician

Like many street entertainers, the Street Conjurer or magician had seen better days. His father earned a comfortable living as an employee at the Customs house, but died when the magician was ten years old. The Street Conjurer or magician interviewed was the son of an affluent man who worked in the Customs office. He attended school, and like many entertainers, could read and write. His father died when he was ten, and his mother sold the family's furniture, including a valuable library, to a man who cheated her out of most of the money.

The street magician worked in some capacity since he was ten years old. At the age of 14, he began working as a coster, selling oranges outside the theater. He soon managed to get a part in a play as an extra, and from there went on to become an actor. When the play closed, he worked taking money at the door until there was an opening for a magician. Teaching himself a few tricks, he began working as a conjurer at the age of 15, putting on as many as 20 or 30 shows per day.

Clown

One of the saddest characters that Mayhew portrays is the clown. In makeup and costume very smilar to today's clowns, he put on skits and performed antics in parks, trying to earn tips. Mayhew makes it clear that this clown's jokes and tricks were not very funny. Instead, the thin, moody man spent the whole time thinking about his wife and children back at home without any food. After his mother died when he was two years old, he worked as a stable boy for the man who employed his father, for several years. Now he has worked as a clown for 16 years, although he would have preferred almost any other job. He was ashamed to be a street entertainer and hid his costume from the neighbors. He worked from 8 am to dark every day for about 6 shillings per week.

Photographer

The photographer or "photographic man" was really more of a con artist. He worked as a banjo player for several years, saving money to buy the camera and other equipment. However, with portrait photos selling for as little as a halfpence, he could not even break even on photo sales. His two main tactics were to convince the customer to buy a more expensive portrait, or to convince customers to buy various bogus add-ons or extras. At times, when he was in a hurry, he would send the customer off with any old photo he had lying around — not a portrait of the customer. Some customers caught him, and returned. He then charged them an additional fee for a new sitting. Other customers who were travelers from out of town may never have realized the mistake, and were simply cheated out of their money. He also sold a special product that was supposed to extend the life of the photograph. In fact, it was merely scrap paper.

Objects/Places

London

By far the most important place in the book is the city of London. During Mayhew's time it was a thrilling, exciting, fascinating, dirty, sooty, amoral metropolis where every kind of sin thrived. Almost any product one could name was available on the streets, often stolen and sold for a low price. Disease and accidental death abounded, leaving many orphans to shift for themselves. The wealthy had recently implemented workhouses and other programs to at least provide poor people with food and shelter, although they were not entirely successful and many died. Still, London was a beautiful city full of delightful sights and sounds.

The River Thames

The Thames ran through the heart of London. Mudlarks and other scavengers often waded up to their chest in the water, covered with filthy mud, trying to salvage anything that would bring a few pennies. They often stole a few items from passing barges.

Covent Garden

The open-air market at Covent Garden was a place teeming with life, filled with colorful fruits, vegetables and flowers. Here costermongers or street-vendors often purchased the stock they would sell that day, whether it was violets, oranges or walnuts. Here, too, stall-keepers often shortchanged the costers, who shortchanged their own customers in return.

Whitechapel

Some of the most notorious low lodging houses and brothels were in the district of Whitechapel.

Playhouse-yard

Playhouse-yard was the unlikely name of the only homeless shelter in London during Mayhew's time. There, more than 300 homeless men, women and children stayed each night. They were given a ticket for 3 nights lodging, after which they had to find other accommodations or sleep in the street. The shelter or asylum was open only when temperatures dropped below freezing. At other times, the poor were expected to sleep in the streets.

The Low Lodging House

The low lodging house was the most humble of boarding houses, a converted private home. Many were in very poor repair, with gaping holes in the roof and no heat. Here, for 2 pence, an orphan or traveler could rent a bed for the night. Beds were shared with up to 4 adults or 6 children sleeping in the same bed, and several beds to a room. A low lodging house with many rooms might accommodate up to 400 people each night. While the better houses separated adults from children and men from women, the worst were little more than brothels.

The Rented Room

Most costermongers and entertainers lived in a rented room. Often, an entire family of 10 or more would live in one rented room, cooking in the fireplace and sleeping in the bed with children on the floor. A single person, pair of orphaned siblings or couple might share a rented room with other couples or a smaller family of 3 or 4 people. In one case, two sisters 11 and 14 years old shared a small room with a married couple and the couple's 2 children.

The English Countryside

In the summer, many costermongers, entertainers and others would take to the roads. They tramped across the countryside, selling their products in every tiny village and wealthy house. At times, two teenage costers would travel together for safety's sake. This practice filled a need to travel, and allowed the young people to experience the clean air and sunshine of the English countryside.

Ireland

Many of London's poorest residents were recent immigrants from Ireland. Desperately poor, they traveled to England in hopes of finding work. Although economic conditions were bad in England, they were worse in Ireland. Coal freighters offered cheap fares to England, and many Irish immigrants arrived, hoping for a brighter future.

Penny Gaff

The Penny Gaff was a rude burlesque variety show put on in a store after hours. For one cent, costermongers and other poor residents could see singing, dancing, comedians, magicians and other performers. The show was frequently bawdy, with dancers actually showing their legs, singing dirty songs.

Pubs

The public houses or pubs were bars where working men and even the wealthy gathered to have a pint of beer in the evening. They were fertile places for entertainers, street vendors and beggars of all types, partly because a drunk customer had fewer inhibitions to buying or giving. Many small children started their careers as street vendors by selling sheet music or nuts in the pubs at night.

Theaters

Another popular location for small children to sell products was outside the theaters in the wee hours of the morning. Walnuts, oranges, apples and ham sandwiches sold especially well to wealthy patrons leaving the show.

Themes

Religion

Religion is a major theme in Mayhew's work. He queries every person interviewed about his or her religious education and beliefs. Mayhew clearly considers a familiarity with the Christian Bible as important, or more important, than the ability to read and write. Mayhew seems to imply that the individuals interviewed are poor because they are not religious. This reflectsa common belief in Victorian times, that poverty and often disease were God's punishment for sinful behavior or a lack of belief. When Mayhew does encounter a religious pauper, he is more likely to assume that the person has good motives and is simply unfortunate. Still, Mayhew assumes that most wealthy people are religious and highly moral, while most poor people are non-religious and immoral.

For Mayhew, of course, religion means Christian and Protestant, perhaps even Church of England. He is as apt to denigrate the Irish for being Catholic as the English for being agnostics. His worst condemnation is reserved for the Jewish poor.

The fact that Mayhew devotes an entire section to the Jewish poor in his book illustrates racism and prejudice. The tone clearly indicates that Mayhew regarded the Jews as a lower order of human being, and he makes frequent reference to their love of money, and their fondness for trading in any commodity, no matter how risky. He also displays contempt for the Irish, contending that they have less motivation to work than the English do. It is also possible that Mayhew uses the term "Jew" in a generic sense, to mean those who dealt in used clothing, rags and garbage, rather than purely as a religious or ethnic group.

Stereotypes and Classism

The book relies heavily on stereotypes rather than empirical evidence and data. According to Mayhew, certain nationalities and sexes have an affinity for specific occupations, such as Irish fruit vendors, French female singers, Italian organ players, Jewish clothing salesmen, and Dutch girls who sell brooms. It does not occur to Mayhew that these occupations may be the result of limited opportunities. Instead, he sees them as a natural outgrowth of innate characteristics, much as an insect with wings has a predisposition to fly.

One of the flaws in Mayhew's logic is the assumption that a thief or street vendor is essentially a different species from a law clerk, shopkeeper, manservant or even a king. A Victorian biologist might identify a red ant and a butterfly as different but related species. However, he would recognize two red ants as the same species, even if one were running in circles while another was marching in a straight line. This is because from a biological point of view, major physical characteristics and structural differences distinguish different species.

Mayhew overextends Darwin's theories to subdivide humans into species by occupation. Mayhew seems to assume that behavior establishes a permanent biological barrier between types of humans. He assumes that a street vendor is as different from a doctor, as a red ant is from a butterfly. In reality, the two are comparable to two red ants who are acting differently.

This assumption is partly rooted in classism, the assumption that the "lower classes" of working people, servants and the poor were in fact inferior humans who lacked the capacity to learn or to better themselves. This social system assumed that the wealthy and especially those with royal blood were innately, inherently superior to other humans in every way. While some characteristics including intelligence were assumed to be inherited, the British class system overlooked the impact of the disparity in nutrition, health care and education upon children of similar potential.

This blind spot in viewing human behavior was not unique to Mayhew. Victorians often assumed, for example, that the French, English and Italian peoples belonged to three separate species, rather than all belonging to the human race. This myopia concerning Homo Sapiens leads Mayhew to assert that street vendors and street performers are as different from each other as the English and the Italians.

Poverty

The overarching theme and topic of the book is poverty. London street-people were of interest perhaps primarily because they were extremely poor. The poverty of those interviewed for the book is astounding to a modern reader. Many had no shoes, or were dressed only in rags. Even those who had clothing were wearing torn or shapeless items thrown away by the more wealthy. Many workers reported literally going for days without food. Workhouses that supplied 6 ounces of bread and an ounce of cheese for dinner were considered generous. Residents actually committed crimes to get regular meals and a bed, in jail.

Very few of the poor residents in 1800s London had health care. One of the luxuries of staying in the homeless asylum was being checked by a doctor. Many were orphans whose parents died when they were just small children. Often, these deaths would have been preventable with modern health care. Several of those interviewed had lost children to disease or simple starvation.

Mayhew's early attitude towards the poor is best exemplified by a story he recounts, of a wealthy man who encountered two young brothers working as costermongers. The gentleman gave the two a good meal, and offered them a job. He showed the boys a huge shed full of straw, and instructed them to transfer the entire heap to another shed, one straw at a time. They were not allowed to transport more than one straw per trip. The gentleman would provide food and housing for the two boys, for as long as the task took, if they worked every day. Faced with a horrendously boring and pointless task, the two brothers stopped working after a short time. Then, they left. Mayhew seems to recount this story early in the book as evidence that the poor really had no desire to

work, and were poor because they were lazy and shiftless. However, few people would relish such an enormous, boring, pointless job. Many people would quit before the job was done, in spite of the wages offered.

Mayhew's later comments show much more empathy for the poor. When he recounts the story of the mixed-race teen girl in the casual ward, he sounds shocked that her landlady would turn this honest young girl of good morals out into the street, simply because she could not afford to pay two pennies per night in rent.

Style

Perspective

Mayhew's attempts at categorization reflect the Victorian mania for classification, which is evident in a rush to list and name every type of flower, insect, animal and mineral on earth. London Labour and the London Poor attempts to continue this spirit of scientific inquiry with regard to the impoverished residents of London. This can be viewed as one of the first attempts at Sociology, a scientific study of a human society. It can also be viewed as dehumanizing the individuals studied, reducing them to the status of beetles or rocks.

Mayhew's attempts to elevate his findings to scientific research by quantifying them are commendable. However, his methods are far from scientific. Instead of conducting statistically valid surveys or comprehensive research, he relies on a casual guess, often supplied by interviewing a single member of the trade being studied. This is partly because statistically valid methods of surveying a population had not yet been invented. For these reasons, Mayhew's statements involving numbers do not have any real scientific validity, and must be regarded as a broad estimate, or a statement of one man's opinion, rather than a fact backed up with statistical evidence. For example, Mayhew contends that vendors account for 75 percent of those earning a living on the streets of London. Yet, this was not based on any objective data gathered from the street population, just an estimate by one of the sellers. Mayhew can have no real idea how many prostitutes or thieves are plying their trades in the city compared to the number of street vendors. Therefore, his "statistics" are really no more than guesswork. Later in the book, in the same section, the number of prostitutes in London is estimated at 7,000 and then at 80,000.

Tone

The tone of the book is uneven, varying from condescending to empathetic, from perpetuating stereotypes to compassion for the individuals interviewed. When discussing the poor in the abstract, Mayhew is condescending and judgmental, concluding that they are often ignorant, lazy, worthless, non-religious, immoral and sinful. However, the accounts of them as individuals, as revealed in the interviews of nameless subjects, are evocative and heart wrenching. Mayhew recounts in detail the facts of case after harrowing case, of fatherless three-year-old children being left on their own while their mother works, of eight-year-old girls being beaten for not selling enough flowers during the day, of ten-year-old boys running away from home due to abuse. This contrast in tone may be due to the very human tendency to have prejudices against groups of people unlike ourselves, while having empathy for the individuals we encounter.

There is also a discrepancy in tone between the different sections of the book, perhaps reflecting the changes in Mayhew's own life and financial circumstances. In the first section, he routinely dismisses costermongers as a class as lazy, unintelligent, immoral people. In the third section, he shows much more compassion for mudlarks, dustmen and crossing-sweepers. Even though these people have repulsive personal habits, he shows more compassion for them. Even when a mudlark boy steals a few scraps of rope or coal, Mayhew is more likely to regard it as an act of desperation driven by starvation, rather than stubbornness or evil.

There are two major shifts of tone in the book. In the first section, the tone is rather condescending and judgmental, blaming the poor for their financial problems. In the two middle sections, the tone is much more sympathetic, with understanding that many of the poor are orphans forced to work from a very early age, deprived of any education and completely unskilled, often without any hope of a better life. This shift in tone may correspond to author Henry Mayhew's financial problems. As he went deeper into debt without any hope of paying off his creditors, he may have begun to understand that not all the poor were lazy, stubborn or immoral. Another shift in tone occurs in the final section, Those That Will Not Work. Most of this section is written by other people, and the tone again is very blaming and shaming towards London's poor.

Structure

The book is divided into four distinct sections, called volumes, plus an introduction. Only three of the sections are penned by author Henry Mayhew. The introduction, by Victor Neuburg, contains a short biography that includes what little is known of Mayhew's life, as well as a chronology. The central fact is that Mayhew declared bankruptcy in 1846, just two years after marrying. This section also includes a chronology of Mayhew's life, so far as it is known. Reliable information on the writer is scarce. London Labour and the London Poor is actually a series of selections from several much longer works. The material to be included in this book was also selected by Neuburg.

Each separate section deals with a different segment of London's impoverished residents. The first, entitled Volume 1: Of the London Street-folk, provides information on costermongers and patterers, two varieties of street vendors. At 188 pages, this section is by far the longest, taking up almost half the book. The second section, Volume 2: Of The Street Jews, contains profiles of Jewish second-hand clothes dealers and ragmen, as well as dustmen, chimney sweeps and crossing-sweepers. AT 102 pages, it is the shortest of the three sections written by Mayhew. The third section, Volume 3: Our Street Folk, profiles street entertainers, photographers, cabdrivers, bus drivers and conductors. It also includes information on "vagrants", those who are temporarily traveling and without a home or job. This section is 152 pages long. Each of these sections contains a brief summary of the common traits of persons in the occupation, often including generalizations about their religion, sex, education and morality. Mayhew then presents extremely touching, effective character sketches based on interviews with a worker. Often, the details revealed in these sketches are in contrast to Mayhew's conclusions.

The final section is an anomaly. Entitled Volume 4: Those That Will Not Work, this section consists primarily of material by other writers. The tone of this section is different, with an emphasis on blaming or shaming the poor as stubborn, willful, ignorant and immoral. This section seems almost to have been included to promote a political agenda that is not Mayhew's own. During the intervening years since Mayhew conducted most of his interviews, the focus seems to have shifted from compassion to finding a way to blame the poor for being unemployed and lacking an education.

Quotes

"The system of paying the mechanic late on the Saturday night — and more particularly of paying a man his wages in a public-house — when he is tired with his day's work lures him to the tavern, and there the hours fly quickly enough beside the warm tap-room fire, so that by the time the wife comes for her husband's wages, she finds a large portion of them gone in drink, and the streets half cleared, so that the Sunday market is the only chance of getting the Sunday's dinner." pg. 15

"Excitement or amusement are indispensible to uneducated men. Of beer-shops resorted to by costermongers, and principally supported by them, it is computed that there are 400 in London." pg. 17

"The men smoked, with their hands in their pockets, listening to the old crones talking, and only now and then grunting out a reply when a question was directly put to them. And yet it is curious that these people, who here seemed as inactive as negroes, will perform the severest bodily labour, undertaking tasks that the English are almost unfitted for. " pg. 60

"As yet we have been dealing principally with the uneducated portion of the street-people — men whom, for the most part, are allowed to remain in nearly the same primitive and brutish state as the savage — creatures with nothing but their appetites, instincts and passions to move them, and made up of the same crude combination of virtue and vice — the same generosity combined with the same predatory tendencies as the Bedouins of the desert — the same love of revenge and disregard of pain, and often the same gratitude and susceptibility to kindness as the Red Indian — and, furthermore, the same insensitivity to female honour and abuse of female weakness, and the same utter ignorance of the Divine nature of the Godhead as marks either Bosjesman, Carib or Thug." pg. 100

"In the course of my present inquiry I have, in only very rare instances, met with a poor Irishman, who has not a reason always at his tongue's end to justify anything he was doing. Ask a bricklayer's labourer why, in his youth and his strength, he is selling nuts, and he will at once reply: 'Sure thin, your honnur, isn't it better than doin' nothing? I must try and make a pinny til I'm in worruk again, and glory be to God, I hope that'll be soon.'" pg. 140

"She may hear, too, expressions of an opinion that 'going to church to be wed' is only to put money into the clergyman's, or as these people say the 'parson's', pocket. Without the watchful care of the other, the poor girl may form an illicit connection, with little or no knowledge that she is doing wrong: and perhaps a kind and indulgent other may be herself but a concubine, feeling little respect for a ceremony she did not scruple to dispense with." pg. 177

"Whatever their faults may be, they are good fathers, husbands, and sons Their principal characteristic is their extreme love of money; and, though the strict Jew does

not trade himself on the Sabbath, he may not object to employ either one of his tribe, or a Gentile, to do so for him." pg. 201

"The collectors are in the habit of getting beer or money in lieu thereof, at nearly all the houses from which they remove the dust, the public being thus in a manner compelled to make up the rate of wages, which should be paid by the employer, so that what is given to benefit the men really goes to the master, who invariably reduces the wages to the precise amount of the perquisites obtained." pg. 234

"The greatest mass of the agricultural labourers are known to be almost as ignorant as the beasts they drive; but the sweepers, from whatever cause it may arise, are known, in many instances, to be shrewd, intelligent and active." pg. 250

"I now come to the characteristics of vagrant life, as seen in the casual wards of the metropolitan unions. The subject is one of the most important with which I have yet had to deal, and the facts I have collected are sufficiently startling to give the public an idea of the great social bearings of the question: for the young vagrant is the budding criminal." pg. 368

"The female vagrants generally consist of prostitutes of the lowest and most miserable kind. They are mostly young girls, who have sunk into a state of dirt, disease, and almost nudity. There are few of them above twenty years of age, and they appear to have commenced their career of vice frequently as early as ten or twelve years old." pg. 412

"Prostitutes are afraid to remain long under the influence of good thoughts. They recall their days of innocence, and overpower them with an intolerable sadness — a sadness which springs of remorse. The gay women assume airs of patronage towards the beggars, and as such are looked up to; but a beggar-woman, however poor, and however miserable, if she is conscious of being virtuous is always sensible of her superiority in that respect." pg. 501

Topics for Discussion

Many of the London Poor were orphans who were forced to work from the age of 8 or 9 years old. Are children that young allowed to hold jobs in the U.S.?

What are some of the items sold by costermongers or street vendors in London?

What were some of the street entertainers mentioned in the book?

Several of the children as young as 3 years old were left home alone all day while their mother worked. Why do we consider this unsafe today?

If you had to pick one of the occupations mentioned in the book, which one would you pick and why?

Very few of the poor in London could read or write. Is education as important now as it was then? Why or why not?

Which profile of a poor person in London touched you the most, and why?