

Chapter 22 Viewpoint Activity

As great cities mushroomed in the Industrial Revolution (textbook pages 564–565), city life changed. Some people found great cities exciting; others found them appalling, even frightening. In these two letters to their families, the composer Felix Mendelssohn and the historian Thomas Carlyle give their views of London in the 1820s. ♦ *As you read, think about each writer’s reaction. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Looking at London in the 1820s**Thomas Carlyle** (December 14, 1824)

Of this enormous Babel of a place I can give you no account in writing: it is like the heart of all the universe; and the flood of human effort rolls out of it and into it with a violence that almost appalls one’s very sense. Paris scarcely occupies a quarter of the ground, and does not seem to have the twentieth part of the business. O that our father [saw] Holborn in a fog! with the black vapour brooding over it, absolutely like fluid ink; and coaches and wains [wagons] and sheep and oxen and wild people rushing on with bellowings and shrieks and thundering din, as if the earth in general were gone distracted. . . .

There is an excitement in all this, which is pleasant as a transitory feeling, but much against my taste as a permanent one. I had much rather visit London from time to time, than live in it. There is in fact no right life in it that I can find: the people are situated here like plants in a hot-house, to which the quiet influences of sky and earth are never in their unadulterated¹ state admitted.

¹ pure**Felix Mendelssohn** (May 1, 1829)

I am in very good health: London life suits me excellently. I think the town and the streets are beautiful. Again I was struck with awe when I drove in an open cabriolet [carriage] yesterday to the City, along a different road, and everywhere found the same flow of life, everywhere green, yellow, red bills [posters] stuck on the houses from top to bottom, or gigantic letters painted on them, everywhere noise and smoke, everywhere the ends of the streets lost in fog. Every few moments I passed a church, or a market-place, or a green square, or a theatre, or caught a glimpse of the Thames [river], on which the steamers can now go right through the town under all the bridges, because a mechanism has been invented for lowering the large funnels like masts. To see, besides, the masts from the West India Docks looking across, and to see a harbour as large as Hamburg’s treated like a pond, with sluices, and the ships arranged not singly but in rows, like regiments—all that makes one’s heart rejoice over the great world.

“ . . . *the people are situated here like plants in a hot-house, to which the quiet influences of sky and earth are never in their unadulterated state admitted.* ”

Source: Both from *Pandaemonium, 1660–1886*, by Humphrey Jennings, ed. Mary-Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (Free Press/Macmillan, 1985).

Questions to Discuss

1. What aspects of the city of London make a strong impression on both writers?
2. What signs of business and commerce does Mendelssohn notice on the houses?
3. **Making Comparisons** In what ways do the two writers agree in their reactions to the city of London? How do their reactions differ?