

Chapter 24 Primary Source Activity

The great division between rich and poor in Britain was one cause of the reform efforts of the 1800s (textbook pages 608–609). The outstanding journalist who reported on the lives of the city’s “underclass” was Henry Mayhew, who during the 1850s published his colorful observations in four volumes as *London Labour and the London Poor*. In this excerpt Mayhew describes Saturday night in the London street markets. ♦ *As you read, notice the variety of things for sale. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

The London Street Markets

The street-sellers are to be seen in the greatest numbers at the London street markets on a Saturday night. Here, and in the shops immediately adjoining, the working-classes generally purchase their Sunday’s dinner; and after pay-time on Saturday night, or early on Sunday morning, the crowd in the New-cut. . . is almost impassable. Indeed, the scene in these parts has more of the character of a fair than a market. There are hundreds of stalls, and every stall has its one or two lights; either it is illuminated by the intense white light of the new self-generating gas-lamp, or else it is brightened up by the red smoky flame of the old-fashioned grease lamp. One man shows off his yellow haddock with a candle stuck in a bundle of firewood; his neighbour makes a candlestick of a huge turnip, and the tallow gutters over its sides; whilst the boy shouting “Eight a penny, stunning pears!” has rolled his dip in a thick coat of brown paper, that flares away with the candle. . . .

The pavement and the road are crowded with purchasers and street-sellers. The housewife in her thick shawl, with the market basket on her arm, walks slowly on, stopping now to look at the stall of caps,

and now to cheapen a bunch of greens. . . . Then the tumult of the thousand different cries of the eager dealers, all shouting at the top of their voices, at one and the same time, is almost bewildering. “So-old again,” roars one. “Chestnuts all ’ot, a penny a score,” bawls another. . . . “Buy, buy, buy, buy, buy, bu-u-uy!” cries the butcher. “Half-quire of paper for a penny,” bellows the street stationer. . . . “Twopence a pound grapes.” “Three a penny Yarmouth bloaters [herring].” “Who’ll buy a bonnet for fourpence?” . . . “Penny a lot, fine russets,” calls the apple woman; and so the Babel goes on.



ILLUSTRATION/PHOTO CREDIT: UPI/BETTMANN.

. . . Then the sights, as you elbow your way through the crowd, are equally multifarious. Here is a stall glittering with new tin saucepans; there another, bright with its blue and yellow crockery, and sparkling with white glass. Now you come to a row of old shoes arranged along the pavement; now to a stand of gaudy tea-trays; then to a shop with red handkerchiefs and blue checked shirts, fluttering backwards and forwards, and a counter built up outside on the kerb [curb].

Source: *Mayhew’s London*, ed. Peter Quennell (William Kimber, 1951).

Questions to Think About

1. Why are the street markets especially crowded on Saturday nights? Who is shopping there?
2. What are some of the goods that are sold by the street-sellers?
3. **Making Comparisons** Where do you think that middle-class and upper-class Londoners buy their food and clothing and other things that the poor buy from street stalls? Describe what you think are the differences between the two experiences.
4. **Activity** From this description, make a sketch or watercolor of the London street markets, or create a poster advertising the market. Include some of the sellers and goods that Mayhew describes.