English 3281/3201
Prose Study
The London Poor
by John Henry Raleigh

The life of the London poor in the nineteenth century was, for the most part, miserable and no one who has read Henry Mayhew, that great sociologist, can ever forget his grim and heartbreaking peoples and scenes. If man had set out consciously to fashion a hell for his fellow men he could not have done better than 19th century English culture did with the poor who “lived” off the streets of London. Indeed Mayhew's descriptions in *London Labour and the London Poor* sometimes convey a kind of pandemonium quality and one can almost sniff the sulfur in the air. His description of a crowd entering a penny gaff - a kind of temporary theater which puts on salacious performances - suggest some of the horror.

Forward they came bringing an overpowering stench with them, laughing and yelling as they pushed their way through the waiting room. One woman carrying a sickly child with a bulging forehead was reeling drunk, the saliva running down her mouth and she stared about with a heavy fixed eye. Two boys were pushing her from side to side, while the poor infant slept, breathing heavily, as if stupefied, through the din. Lads jumping on girls, and girls laughing hysterically from being tickled by the youths behind them, every one shouting and jumping, presented a mad scene of frightful enjoyment.

But if anything, as over against this evil of stench and noise, the lonely pathos of individual tragedies is even more frightful: the blind street-seller who had once been a tailor and had worked in a room seven feet square, with six other people, from five in the morning until ten at night, the room having no chimney or window or fire, though no fire was needed, even in the winter, and in the summer it was like an oven. This is what it was like in the daytime, but “no mortal tongue” the man told Mayhew, could describe what it was like at night, when the two great gaslights went on. Many times the men had to be carried out of the room fainting for air. They told the master he was killing them, and they knew he had

other rooms, but to no avail. The gas lights burned into the man's eyes and into his brain until, “at last I was seized with rheumatics in the brain and obliged to go into St Thomas's hospital. I was there eleven months and “*came out stone blind*” ; or the crippled streetseller of nutmeg graters, who crawled, literally, out into the streets where he stayed from ten to six, eking out his pitiful existence six days a week. On wet days he would lie in bed, often without food. “Ah,” he told Mayhew, it *is* very miserable indeed lying in bed all day, and in a lonely room, without perhaps a person to come near one - helpless as I am - and hear the rain beat against your windows, all that with nothing to put your lips.” Thus, if in what follows the life of the poor is shown to have some moments of joy, these are, it is remembered, only oases in an illimitable desert of misery.

1. **What type of essay is this? Be sure to justify your answer through specific evidence from the essay and reference to a definition.**

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2. **Identify 2 ways that coherence is created. Give specific evidence as support.**

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3. **Identify the tone of the selection. Using 2 specific references, explain how the tone is revealed.**

4. **The final line includes the phrase, "...oases in an illimitable desert of misery". Explain the figurative language here and how it functions.**