Number #6 Victorian Cleanliness and Health

Do Not Write On This Paper

(It will be used in other class periods)

Source 1: <http://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/articles/1615>

**Health and Hygiene in the 19th Century**

Offensive odours were part of everyday urban living and these smells acted as indicators to health and social order. Environmental pollution was the by-product of industrialisation. Coal production created waste products such as soot, ash and various gases; chimneys deposited sulphur compounds; steam engines produced smoke; the 'dirty trades' including slaughterhouses washed their debris (animal blood and guts) onto the street; overcrowded urban graveyards emanated with the smell of rotting corpses dug up to make way for new ones; and in the early nineteenth century bucket privies, dung carts and cesspits were common methods for disposing of human waste. Environmental pollution found within the atmosphere and water supplies, combined with poor living conditions, ensured that life-threatening diseases such as small-pox, measles, cholera (at epidemic proportions in 1832 and 1848) remained a vigilant part of everyday concerns for all classes - in particular the working class.

For in a time when the middle ranks used soap for laundry, many labourers' families still used urine to disinfect their clothes. One could use their nose to determine their immediate environmental hazards. 'Cleanliness, like good manners became an indicator of respectability while dirt and squalor were seen as threats to moral as well as physical health.'

Source 2: http://www.npr.org/2015/03/12/392332431/dirty-old-london-a-history-of-the-victorians-infamous-filth

**'Dirty Old London'**

Horses drive traffic on London's Oxford Street in 1890. According to author Lee Jackson, by the 1890s, the city's horses produced approximately 1,000 tons of dung a day. In the 19th century, London was the capital of the largest empire the world had ever known — and it was infamously filthy. It had choking, sooty fogs; the Thames River was thick with human sewage; and the streets were covered with mud.

But according to Lee Jackson, author of Dirty Old London: The Victorian Fight Against Filth, mud was actually a euphemism. "It was essentially composed of horse dung," he tells Fresh Air's Sam Briger. "There were tens of thousands of working horses in London [with] inevitable consequences for the streets. And the Victorians never really found an effective way of removing that, unfortunately." In fact, by the 1890s, there were approximately 300,000 horses and 1,000 tons of dung a day in London. What the Victorians did, Lee says, was employ boys ages 12 to 14 to dodge between the traffic and try to scoop up the excrement as soon as it hit the streets. The first thing you'd notice if you stepped out onto the streets would be the mud that lined the carriageways, but of course it wasn't really mud.

The air itself was generally filled with soot and smoke. It was famously said of the sheep in Regent's Park — there were still grazing sheep in Regent's Park in the mid-Victorian period — that you could tell how long they'd been in the capital by how dirty their coats were. They [went] increasingly from white to black over a period of days.

If you were a respectable person, you had to wash your face and hands several times during the day to make sure that you looked half decent. ... You had the stench from blocked drains and cesspools below houses. It wasn't really a pleasant experience.

**The Streets**

Urine, of course ... soaked the streets. There was an experiment in Piccadilly with wood paving in the midcentury and it was abandoned after a few weeks because the sheer smell of ammonia that was coming from the pavement was just impossible. Also the shopkeepers nearby said that this ammonia was actually discoloring their shop fronts as well.

This is the thing that's often forgotten: that London at the start of the 19th century, it was basically filled with these cesspools. There'd be brick chambers ... they'd be maybe 6 feet deep, about 4 [feet] wide and every house would have them. They'd be ideally in the back garden away from the house, but equally in central London and more crowded areas it was more common to have a cesspool in the basement. ... And above the cesspool would be where your household privy would be. And that was basically your sanitary facilities, for want of a better term.

That actually worked quite well for a little while, but then people got very interested in this new invention — the water closet. And it's often ignored that the water closets were initially connected to these cesspools, not the sewer system that existed in the start of the century — that was just for rainwater. So you get water closets coming in and they're connected to cesspools and they don't really fit because of the extra large volume of flushing water. You get these surges of waste and dump and smell, and people start getting very concerned about what's in their cesspools because of the stink that's rising from them. …

The idea that this sort of stench is coming into the house, seeping through the house and possibly bringing in diseases like cholera or typhoid ... is actually one of the great driving forces of sanitary reform in the 19th century.

**On the first public toilets**

It's often said that the first public toilets were at the Great Exhibition, which was the first world expo held in Hyde Park [in 1851]. It had 6 million visitors in a matter of months and there were indeed public toilets set up in the exhibition. But there was a great debate after that closed as to whether London needed such facilities actually on the street. It was tied up with notions of shame and respectability and it was particularly said that women would be just too embarrassed to enter a public toilet on the public street.

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