

Things to think about: Engels, Condition of the Working Class

How does Engels connect the social conflict evident in London (and other great English cities) with the "marvels of civilisation" with which it is surrounded (36)? How, if at all, does Engels' characterization of large cities apply to those you are familiar with?

In Engels' view, what obligation does society have to each of its members? Why and how did English industrial society of the mid-19th century fail to fulfill that obligation?

What are the implications of Engels' repeated use of language that ordinarily refers to domesticated or wild animals to describe members of the urban working classes?

What is the effect of Engels' extremely specific and detailed descriptions? of his constant references to smell as well as sight?

Why does Engels emphasize the absence of security in the lives of industrial workers?

On the basis of Engels' account, were homeless people in the Victorian period better or worse off than they are now?

How does Engels reveal the intensity of his feelings about the conditions he describes?

What are the likely public health consequences of slum life as Engels describes it? the likely "moral" consequences?

Engels quotes many authoritative surveys of working class life in various cities. Do these authorities agree in their assessments? What might have motivated so many efforts of this kind?

What makes Manchester the "classic type of a modern manufacturing town" (54)?

What does Engels mean by a well-planned town? Why does he prefer new buildings to old ones?

Is Engels' characterization of the Manchester city plan as "hypocritical" on p. 59 justified?

How and why does Engels emphasize the contact between workers

and animals (or animal products)?

Engels is obviously sympathetic to the workers whose plight he describes. Is this consistent with his repeated suggestions that they are not quite civilized?

How would you explain Engels' distinction between English and Irish workers?

What, according to Engels, are the factors that made working class consciousness and class tensions more acute in the period when he was writing?

On what basis does Engels accuse English society of murdering its industrial workers?

Temperance activism was widespread in 19th-century Britain and America. Would activists have agreed with Engels that for slum residents "drunkenness has ceased to be a vice"? (114) How does the alcohol abuse that Engels describe compare with modern issues of substance abuse?

Are you persuaded by Engels' assertion on p. 143 that in England the "social war is already underway"?

Why was the death rate among working class children so high?

Can you detect Engels' middle-class sensibilities in his description of the sensibilities of the poor? What difference, if any, does it make that he was German?