

- How does the writer's use of imagery and figurative language contribute to his argument?

In the summer of 1902, the American author Jack London documented his first-hand experience of the life of the urban poor in London, England.

My first impression of East London was naturally a general one. Later the details began to appear, and here and there in the chaos of misery I found little spots where a fair measure of happiness reigned – sometimes whole rows of houses in little out-of-the-way streets, where artisans¹ dwell and where a rude sort of family life obtains. In the evenings the men can be
5 seen at the doors, pipes in their mouths and children on their knees, wives gossiping, and laughter and fun going on. The content² of these people is manifestly great, for, relative to the wretchedness that encompasses them, they are well off.

But at the best, it is a dull, animal happiness, the content of the full belly. The dominant note of their lives is materialistic. They are stupid and heavy, without imagination. The Abyss³ seems
10 to exude a stupefying atmosphere of torpor⁴, which wraps them about and deadens them. Religion passes them by. The Unseen holds for them neither terror nor delight. They are unaware of the Unseen; and the full belly and the evening pipe [...] is all they demand, or dream of demanding, from existence.

This would not be so bad if it were all; but it is not all. The satisfied torpor in which they are
15 sunk is the deadly inertia that precedes dissolution. There is no progress, and with them not to progress is to fall back and into the Abyss. In their own lives they may only start to fall, leaving the fall to be completed by their children and their children's children. Man always gets less than he demands from life; and so little do they demand, that the less than little they get cannot save them.

At the best, city life is an unnatural life for the human; but the city life of London is so utterly
20 unnatural that the average workman or workwoman cannot stand it. Mind and body are sapped⁵ by the undermining influences ceaselessly at work. Moral and physical stamina are broken, and the good workman, fresh from the soil, becomes in the first city generation a poor workman; and by the second city generation, devoid of push and go and initiative, and actually
25 unable physically to perform the labour his father did, he is well on the way to the shambles at the bottom of the Abyss.

Jack London, *The People of the Abyss* (1903)

¹ artisan: a skilled workman

² content: contentment, condition of being satisfied

³ abyss: a deep pit; figuratively speaking: the world of despair

⁴ torpor: lethargy, inaction

⁵ sapped: weakened, drained of vitality
