This is a journal entry by Flora Tristan, a Frenchwoman who visited London in 1839. Overseas visitors to London rarely commented favourably on the English weather. It was often claimed by visitors that in England there are “eight months of winter and four months of bad weather.” In her journal entry, the author is complaining about the smog – air pollution from houses and factories so bad it created a thick, smoky fog.

SOURCE A: A journal entry, written in 1839

Over every English town there hangs a pall compounded of the Ocean vapours that perpetually shroud the British Isles, and the heavy noxious fumes of the Cyclops’ cave. No longer does timber from the forests provide fuel for the family hearth; the fuel of Hell - coal - snatched from the very bowels of the earth, has taken its place. It burns everywhere, feeding countless furnaces, replacing horse-power on the roads and wind-power on the rivers and the seas which surround the empire.

Above the monster city a dense fog combines with the volume of smoke and soot belching from thousands of chimneys to wrap London in a black cloud which allows only the dimmest light to penetrate and shrouds everythins in a funeral veil.

In London, misery is in the very air you breathe and enters in at every pore. There is nothing more gloomy or disquieting than the aspect of the city on a day of fog or rain or black frost. Only succumb to its influence and your head becomes painfully heavy, your digestion sluggish, your breathing laboured for lack of fresh air, and your whole body is overcome by fatigue. Then you are in the grip of what the English call “spleen”: a profound despair, unaccountable anguish, cantankerous hatred for those one loves the best, disgust with everything, and an irresistible desire to end one’s life by suicide. On days like this, London has a terrifying face: you seem to be lost in the necropolis of the world, breathing its sepulchral air. The light is wan, the cold humid; the long rows of identical sombre houses, each with its black iron grilles and narrow windows, resembles nothing so much as tombs stretching to infinity, whilst between them wander corpses awaiting the hour of burial.

On such black days the Englishman is under the spell of his climate and behaves like a brute beast to anybody who crosses his path, giving and receiving knocks without a word of apology on either side. A poor old man may collapse from starvation in the street, but the Englishman will not stop to help him. He goes about his business and spares no thought for anything else; he hurries to finish his daily task, not to return home, for he has nothing to say to his wife or children, but to go to his club, where he will eat a good dinner in solitude, as conversation fatigues him. Then he will drink too much, and in his drunken slumber forget the troubles which bother him during the day. Many women resort to the same remedy; all that matters is to forget that one exists. The Englishman is no more of a drunkard by nature than the Spaniard, who drinks nothing but water, but the climate of London is enough to drive the most sober Spaniard to drink.

Summer in London is hardly any different than winter; the frequent chilling rainstorms, the heavy atmosphere charged with electricity, the constant change of temperature, cause so many colds, headaches and bouts of colic that there are at least as many sick people in summer as in winter.