



To what historical event does the author refer?

A. The author refers to World War I, which ended on November 11, 1918.

Influenza 1918

Jane Brox

FOCUS: EXPOSITORY WRITING; FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In ordinary times, the bankers, lawyers, and mill owners who lived on Tower Hill opened their doors to a quiet broken only by the jostle of a laden milk wagon, the first stirrings of a wind in the elms, or the quavering notes of a sparrow. It was the height of country; the air, sweet and clear. Looking east from their porches they could survey miles of red-brick textile mills that banked the canals and the *sluggish* Merrimack,* as well as the broad central plain mazed* with tenements. To their west was a patchwork of small dairy holdings giving over to the blue distance. But for the thirty-one mornings of October 1918 those men adjusted gauze masks over their mouths and noses as they set out for work in the cold-tinged dawn, and they kept their eyes to the ground so as not to see what they couldn't help but hear: the clatter of motorcars and horse-drawn wagons over the paving stones, as day and night with-

1 out ceasing the ambulances ran up the hill bringing sufferers from the heart of the city and the *hearses* carried them away.

It had started as a seemingly common thing — what the line-storm season always brings, born on its wind and on our breath, something that would run its course in the comfort of camphor* and



A CLOSER LOOK

The common cold was treated with bed rest and external applications of **camphor**. People felt that camphor, which repels moths, would also protect them from germs.

bed rest. At first there had been no more than six or eight or ten cases a day reported in the city, and such news hardly took up a side column in the papers, which were full of soldiers' *obituaries* and reports of a weakening Germany. As September wore on, however, the death



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HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

Merrimack — a river of South Central New Hampshire.

mazed — containing a confusing network.

camphor — a substance used for medicinal purposes; also used in moth balls.

1 Point out how the behavior of the citizens of the town "in ordinary times" differs from their actions in October 1918.



What conditions might have facilitated the spread of the flu?

A. One reason why the flu spread so quickly in Lawrence, Massachusetts was that the largely poor, immigrant community breathed in cloth dust, weakening their lungs. Other reasons are that they lived in crowded, unventilated areas, so that the virus was able to pass readily from person to person; cold temperatures and germs from the rubbish further weakened the people's resistance. Poor sanitation and lack of cleanliness helped create an environment conducive to the spread of the flu.

What conditions might have facilitated the spread of the flu?

notices of victims of the flu began to outnumber the casualties of war. Finally it laid low so many the Lawrence Board of Health set aside its usual work of granting permits to keep roosters, charting the milk supply, and inspecting tenements. The flu took up all its talk — how it was to be treated, how contained, how to stay ahead of the dead. The sufferers needed fresh air and isolation, and their care had to be *consolidated* to make the most of the scarce nurses and orderlies. So the board took a page* from other stricken cities and voted to construct a makeshift* tent hospital on their highest, most open land that offered the best air, which was the leeward* side of Tower Hill where a farm still spread across the slope.

A CLOSER LOOK

Stay ahead of the dead implies the problem of burying so many corpses in a short time. The funerals had to take place hurriedly in order to keep up with the number of bodies. Brox addresses this issue later in the essay.

Lawrence, Massachusetts, in 1918 was largely a city of immigrants who had come for work in the textile mills. Most had been in the city for only a short time and still spoke Polish, Arabic, French, Italian, German — forty-five different languages and dialects within the few square miles of the central district. They made worsteds* and woolens; they were dyers, cutters, and weavers. They fixed the looms, rigged the warps, and felt along the yardage for slubs, working more than fifty hours a week, breathing in air white with cloth dust. At home they

breathed in the smells of rubbish and night soil that drifted up from the alleyways between tenements. Where they lived was low-lying, so such smells, together with smoke and ash, hung in the air. Their heat was *sparse*. They were crowded into their rooms. The flu cut right through, spreading ahead of its own rumors, passing on a handshake and on the wind and with the lightest kiss. No spitting. No sharing food. Keep your hands clean. Avoid crowds. Walk everywhere. Sleep with your windows open.

A CLOSER LOOK

The workers in the textile mills adjusted the **looms** (the framework on which the yarn is woven into cloth) to the proper size, **rigged** — attached — the **warps** — the lengthwise threads, and examined the finished fabric for **slubs** — thickened places in the fabric where the threads have clumped together.



"...had come to work in the textile mills"

HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

took a page — followed the lead of.

makeshift — temporary.

leeward — away from the direction the wind blows.

worsteds — yarns spun from long-stapled wool; fabric made from this yarn.