
UNIT 1 : SAMUEL JOHNSON, HIS LIFE AND EDUCATION (1709-84)

Structure

- 1.0 Objective
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Johnson's life in a Nutshell
- 1.3 Samuel Johnson's Poetry
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- 1.6 Glossary of Difficult Terms
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1.0 OBJECTIVE

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Have a complete knowledge about Samuel Johnson, his life, education and his initial works.
- Know the kind of critic Johnson was and analyse his critical essay on Shakespeare called 'Preface to Shakespeare'.
- Analyse the bitter-sweet relationship between Samuel Johnson and William Shakespeare.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was the most famous literary figure of his period. He was a popular writer of journalism and of a widely-read work of fiction; a significant poet; an astute critic and editor; a theorist and practitioner of biography; and the author of the first useful dictionary of the English language. He also wrote a play—a verse tragedy called *Irene* (1749)—which was moderately successful on the stage but has never been much loved by readers or critics. And he wrote an account of a long trip he took to the Hebrides, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1773). He edited the works of Shakespeare and, late in life, provided critical introductions

to a multivolume collection of works by English poets. In the range of his accomplishments and the kinds of influence he exerted in many different forms there is no one else quite like Samuel Johnson in the history of English literature. Johnson became famous in his own time after the publication of the Dictionary of the English Language in 1755, hailed as “Dictionary Johnson” for accomplishing something that had seemed to many to be impossible. After his death, his personality as it was remembered by others often began to eclipse his writing, particularly after James Boswell published *The Life of Samuel Johnson* in 1791, a massive biography that was constructed in large part out of the extensive journals that Boswell kept based on the time that he spent together with Johnson starting in the 1760s. The image of “Dr. Johnson” that Boswell created, an argumentative talker and a staunch conservative, dominated the public and to a large extent the critical image of Johnson. But in the last few decades, critics and readers have returned to Johnson’s works, discovering the astonishing range of his interests and skills. And that’s appropriate: before he was an icon of a certain way of thinking about the eighteenth century, Johnson was a writer, working in almost all of the forms available to a writer in his period. This anthology is designed to help students and readers go back to his writings and understand them in the context of their moment.

(<https://virginia-anthology.org/about-samuel-johnson/?print=pdf>)

1.2 JOHNSON’S LIFE IN A NUTSHELL

Samuel Johnson, critic, poet, lexicographer, essayist, was born in 1709 at Lichfield to elderly parents, and his childhood was marred by a tubercular infection which affected his sight and hearing, and his face was scarred by scrofula, then popularly called “King’s Evil”. He was educated at Lichfield Grammar School and in 1728 he went up to Pembroke College, Oxford. His studies at the university were, however, cut short by poverty, and in 1729 he returned to Lichfield, adversely affected by melancholy and depression.

After a brief period as a schoolmaster at Market Bosworth, Johnson moved to Birmingham, where he contributed articles (now lost) to the Birmingham Journal. In 1735, he married Elizabeth Porter, a widow twenty-two years senior to him in age, and using her money attempted to start a school at Edial, near his home town. The school quickly failed, and in 1737 Johnson set off to London accompanied by one of his pupils, the actor David Garrick. Lack of a university degree hindered Johnson from pursuing a profession, and he determined to make his living by writing.

Edward Care, the founder of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, allowed him to contribute articles, and for many years, Johnson made his living by hack writing. His Parliamentary Debates were published in this magazine, and were widely accepted as authentic.

It was in 1738 that the publication of his poem *London* revealed his literary abilities. However, the project of compiling the Dictionary of the English Language, which was to occupy his next nine years, testifies to Johnson’s concern to produce saleable

material. Lacking a patron, he approached Lord Chesterfield with the plan. But the Lord gave him such a snub that brought out to light the decline of the patronage system.

In 1749, the poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes* was published and Johnson's play *Irene* was staged by David Garrick, who had much earlier accompanied him to London after the failure of his school in 1737. In 1750, Johnson began the twice weekly periodical *The Rambler* to add to his income and also as a relief from the Dictionary work.

The death of his wife in 1752 returned Johnson to the melancholy and depression he had suffered after leaving Oxford. However, he continued to contribute to periodicals, and in 1755 the *Dictionary of the English Language* was published, bringing him wide acclaim which also included, by the intervention of friends, an honorary doctoral degree from Oxford. From 1758 onwards, he wrote the *Idler* essays for the *Universal Chronicle*, and in 1759 *Rassela* was published. In 1762, a crown pension relieved some of the financial pressure, and the following year he met James Boswell, who was to become his biographer.

In 1765, Johnson's spirits were much lifted as he made the acquaintance of the Thrales, and over the next few years he spent much time at their home in Streatham. In 1765, his edition of Shakespeare, for which he wrote a special Preface appeared.

In 1777, Johnson began working on *The Lives of the Poets*, (1779-81), at the request of the booksellers. In 1784, estranged from his friend Mrs. Thrale by her remarriage, Johnson died in his home in Bolt Court.

Thus it is evident from this survey of the life and works of Samuel Johnson that genius ultimately triumphs. The child who was marred by ill health, grew up into a man of letters whom many years later Thomas Carlyle described as a new kind of hero who stood apart from the narrow confines of his time and had an essentially romantic awareness of the long sweep of cultural history. To Carlyle, Johnson was not the summer up of the virtues of his time but the heroic redeemer of its faults. The decades that immediately succeeded Johnson's death in 1784 were to witness cataclysmic political and cultural changes in Europe. The Revolution of France in 1789 was to turn the world upside down. It was to bring about not only a series of radical reassessments of the British constitutional settlement of 1688, but, perhaps more significantly, a profound re-estimate of a rational world-order and of a culture which drew its inspiration from a perception of divine symmetry.

1.3 SAMUEL JOHNSON'S POETRY

Johnson's literature, especially his *Lives of the Poets* series, is marked by various opinions on what would make a poetic work excellent. He believed that the best poetry relied on contemporary language, and he disliked the use of decorative or purposefully archaic language. In particular, he was suspicious of John Milton's language, whose blank verse would mislead later poets, and could not stand the

poetic language of Thomas Gray.^[1] On Gray, Johnson wrote, "Gray thought his language more poetical as it was more remote from common use".^[2] Johnson would sometimes write parodies of poetry that he felt was poorly done; one such example is his translation of Euripides's play, *Medea* in a parody of one poet's style alongside of his version of how the play should be translated. His greatest complaint was the overuse of obscure allusion found in works like Milton's *Lycidas*, and he preferred poetry that could be easily read.^[3] In addition to his views on language, Johnson believed that a good poem would incorporate new and unique imagery.^[4]

In his shorter works, Johnson preferred shorter lines and to fill his work with a feeling of empathy, which possibly influenced Alfred Edward Housman's poetry. In *London*, his first imitation of Juvenal, Johnson uses the form to express his political opinion. It is a poem of his youth and deals with the topic in a playful and almost joyous manner. As Donald Greene claims, "its charm comes from youthful exuberance and violence with which the witty invective comes tumbling out" in lines like:

Here malice, rapine, accident conspire,
And now a rabble rages, now a fire;
Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay,
And here the fell attorney prowls for prey;
Here falling houses thunder on your head,
And here a female atheist talks you dead.

However, his second imitation, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, is completely different; the language remains simple, but the poem is more complicated and difficult to read because Johnson is trying to describe Christian ethics. These Christian values are not unique to the poem, but are part of Johnson's works as a whole. In particular, Johnson emphasises God's infinite love and that happiness can be attained through virtuous action.

1.4 SAMUEL JOHNSON'S LEXICOGRAPHY

Johnson's thoughts on biography and on poetry found their union in his understanding of what would make a good critic. His works were dominated with his intent to use them for literary criticism, including his *Dictionary* to which he wrote: "I lately published a Dictionary like those compiled by the academies of Italy and France, *for the use of such as aspire to exactness of criticism, or elegance of style*". Although the smaller dictionary was written for the masses and become the common household dictionary, Johnson's original dictionary was an academic tool that examined how words were used, especially those uses that were found in literary works. To achieve this purpose, Johnson included quotations from Bacon, Hooker, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser, and many others from the literary fields that Johnson thought were most important: natural science, philosophy, poetry, and theology. These quotes and usages were all compared and carefully studied, so that others could understand what words meant in literature.



Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

1.5 SAMUEL JOHNSON AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1.5.1 Samuel Johnson as a critic of Shakespeare (Preface to Shakespeare)

Samuel Johnson's works on Shakespeare were not devoted just to Shakespeare, but to critical theory as a whole, and, in his *Preface* to Shakespeare, Johnson rejects the previous belief of the classical unities and establishes a more natural theory on what makes drama work: drama should be faithful to life. In particular, Johnson claimed that "Among [Shakespeare's] other excellences it ought to be remarked, because it has hitherto been unnoticed, that his *heroes are men*, that the love and hatred, the hopes and fears, of his chief personages are such as common to other human beings... Shakespeare's excellence is not the fiction of a tale, but the representation of life: and his reputation is therefore safe, till human nature shall be changed." Besides defending Shakespeare, Johnson was willing to discuss Shakespeare's faults, especially his lacking of morality, his vulgarity, and carelessness in crafting plots. (http://www.gpedia.com/en/gpedia/Samuel_Johnson%27s_literary_criticism)

Besides direct literary criticism, Johnson emphasised the need to establish a text that accurately reflects what an author wrote. In his *Preface*, Johnson analysed the various versions of Shakespeare's plays and argued how an editor should work on them. Shakespeare's plays, in particular, had multiple editions that each contained errors from the printing process. This problem was compounded by careless editors deeming difficult words as incorrect and changing them in later editions. Johnson believed that an editor should not alter the text in such a way, and, when creating his own edition of Shakespeare's plays, he relied on the thousands of quotations and

notes that he used in crafting his *Dictionary* to restore, to the best of his knowledge, the original text.^[20]

Samuel Johnson's preface to *The Plays of William Shakespeare* has been considered as a classic document of English literary criticism. In this critical essay, Johnson lays down his editorial principles and gives an account of the "excellences" and "defects" of the works of the literary immortal Elizabethan dramatist. Many of his points have laid a base being the principle philosophy for modern criticism, whereas others give greater insights into Johnson's prejudices than into Shakespeare's genius.

Perhaps, there is no other documentation in the genre of English Literary Criticism during the Elizabethan/Post-Elizabethan era, exhibits the character of eighteenth century literary criticism better than Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*. Samuel Johnson took the pain for nine full years in analysing every single and distinct plays of Shakespeare before producing an account of the Criticism of Shakespearean plays. *Preface to Shakespeare* is hence, categorised by widespread generalities about the dramatist's work and by the spectacular declarations about its advantages and verdicts that has raised Shakespeare to the topmost spot amongst other European writers of any century. At times, Johnson exhibits the tendency of his contemporaries to fault Shakespeare for his inclination towards wordplay and for ignoring the demands for poetic justice in his plays; readers of successive generations have found these criticisms to mirror the scantiness of the critic more than they do those of the dramatist. What sets Johnson's work apart from that of his equals, however, is the enormous learning that lies underneath so many of his judgments; he constantly displays his acquaintance with the texts, and his overviews are deep-seated in explicit passages from the dramas. Further, Johnson is the first amongst the great Shakespearean critics, who has stressed upon the playwright's sound understanding of human psychology. Johnson's emphasis on character investigation initiated a critical trend that would be principal in Shakespeare's criticism (in fact, all of dramatic criticism) for more than a century and would lead to the abundant work of critics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and A. C. Bradley.

The importance of the *Preface to Shakespeare*, nevertheless surpasses its contributions to Shakespeare's scholarship. Firstly, it is the most substantial concrete application of a critical principle that Johnson advocated consistently and that has become an essential practice since evaluation. Johnson's logical effort to quantify Shakespeare against others, both traditional and contemporary, became the prime model. Second, *Preface to Shakespeare* illustrates Johnson's conviction that good criticism can be shaped only after good scholarship has been accomplished. The critic who tends to judge an author's originality or an author's contributions to the tradition must first rehearse massive literary readings and researches in order to understand what has been borrowed and what has been conceived.

Johnson evidently makes his Shakespeare criticism the groundwork for general statements about people, nature, and literature. He is a true traditionalist/classist in his concern with the universal rather than with the particular; the highest admiration he can grant upon Shakespeare is to say that his plays are “just representations of general nature.” The dramatist has mostly banked upon his data of human nature, rather than on weird effects, for his success. “The pleasures of sudden wonder are soon exhausted, and the mind can only repose on the stability of truth,” Johnson concludes. It is for this reason that Shakespeare has outlasted his century and reached the point where his works can be judged exclusively on their own virtues, without the intervention of personal interests and biases that makes criticism of one’s contemporaries a rather difficult task to do.

It seems that Johnson has a strong feeling that the readers of his time can often understand the universality of Shakespeare’s vision better than the spectators of Elizabethan England could, for the prevailing centuries have freed the plays of their interest. The characters in the plays are not limited by time or place or space.

As a loyal critic of Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson has left no stones unturned in putting forth the aspects of Shakespearean writings that is subjected to criticism (and the critic is Samuel Johnson himself). Samuel Johnson in his long essay “Preface to Shakespeare” somehow states that the fame and prominence Shakespeare achieved was entirely a matter of good fortune instead of hard work. Whereas on the other hand he also pays homage to Shakespeare’s way of writing and expressing the nature of humans, where other dramatists only gain attention by portraying hyperbolic and exaggerated characters, Shakespeare on the contrary focusses on characters that are natural and perceivable.

“Other dramatists can only gain attention by hyperbolic or aggravated characters, by fabulous and unexampled excellence or depravity, as the writers of barbarous romances invigorated the reader by a giant and a dwarf; and he that should form his expectations of human affairs from the play, or from the tale, would be equally deceived. Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion: Even where the agency is supernatural the dialogue is level with life.” (Preface to Shakespeare)
<https://www.sapili.org/livros/en/gu005429.pdf>

The following statement given by Samuel Johnson puts light on the fact that despite of his critical dimension, he appreciates the fact that Shakespeare is natural and unexaggerated. He further says claims that:

“Shakespeare’s plays are not in the rigorous and critical sense either tragedies or comedies, but compositions of a distinct kind; exhibiting the real state of sublunary nature, which partakes of good and evil, joy and sorrow, mingled with endless variety of proportion and innumerable modes of combination; and

expressing the course of the world, in which the loss of one is the gain of another; in which, at the same time, the reveller is hasting to his wine, and the mourner burying his friend; in which the malignity of one is sometimes defeated by the frolick of another; and many mischiefs and many benefits are done and hindered without design.” (Preface to Shakespeare)

(<https://www.sapili.org/livros/en/gu005429.pdf>)

1.5.2 Delusion and Illusion: Elizabeth Montagu’s Critique of Samuel Johnson

Samuel Johnson disappointed Elizabeth Montagu. In her view, the preface for his 1765 edition of Shakespeare’s plays failed to “address the particular excellencies of Shakespeare as a Dramatick poet.” It is the contention of this paper that when Montagu came to write her own *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare [...] with some Remarks Upon the Misrepresentations of Monsieur de Voltaire (1769)*, she intended not only to answer the French critic’s aspersions but also to improve on Johnson.

Fiona Ritchie and Elizabeth Eger have already noted that beneath Montagu’s critique of Voltaire there lies a covert dialogue with Johnson. Yet the importance of this connection for the study of Shakespeare and of drama in general merits further investigation.

The matter in question turns principally on the topic of dramatic illusion. Johnson’s spectators are “always in their senses”, but Montagu’s are transported “to the very capitol of Rome” by Shakespeare. Such transport is necessary for the moral education of the audience, a process essential to Montagu’s understanding of Shakespeare’s craft but questioned by Johnson. For Montagu, the “Dramatick poet” must write to create illusion in performance, forming sympathetic bonds with his audience that serve as conduits for moral education. For Johnson, “a play read affects the mind like a play acted” and axioms drop “casually” from the playwright’s pen.

The meeting of these two influential eighteenth-century figures entails a battle of definition, one that is still relevant today. Together, the ‘Preface’ and the *Essay* have two aims: to tell us what Shakespeare is, and, thus, what it means to be “Dramatick” too.

1.6 GLOSSARY OF DIFFICULT TERMS

1. **Lexicographer:** A person who compiles dictionaries.
2. **Patronage:** the power to control appointments to office or the right to privileges.

3. **Melancholy:** a feeling of pensive sadness, typically with no obvious cause.
4. **Hyperbolic:** deliberately exaggerated.
5. **Acquaintance:** knowledge or experience of something.
6. **Cataclysmic:** causing sudden and violent upheaval.
7. **Sublunary:** belonging to this world as contrasted with a better or more spiritual one.
8. **Explicit:** stated clearly and in detail, leaving no room for confusion or doubt.

Check Your Progress:

- 1) **Write a few lines about Samuel Johnson and his works.**

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- 2) **What is Johnson's verdict on Shakespeare and Shakespearean art?**

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- 3) **Write a few lines on Johnson's critical essay 'Preface to Shakespeare'.**

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

When the works of a great writer, who has bequeathed to posterity a lasting legacy, are presented to the world, it is naturally expected, that some account of his life should accompany the edition. The Reader wishes to know as much as possible of the Author. The circumstances that attended him, the features of his private character, his conversation, and the means by which he rose to eminence, become the favourite objects of enquiry. Curiosity is excited; and the admirer of his works is eager to know his private opinions, his course of study, the particularities of his conduct, and, above all, whether he pursued the wisdom which he recommends, and practised the virtue which his writings inspire. A principle of gratitude is awakened in every generous mind. For the entertainment and instruction which genius and diligence have provided for the world, men of refined and sensible tempers are ready to pay their tribute of praise, and even to form a posthumous friendship with the author.

In reviewing the life of such a writer, there is, besides, a rule of justice to which the public have an undoubted claim. Fond admiration and partial friendship should not be suffered to represent his virtues with exaggeration; nor should malignity be allowed, under a specious disguise, to magnify mere defects, the usual failings of human nature, into vice or gross deformity. The lights and shades of the character should be given; and, if this be done with a strict regard to truth, a just estimate of Dr. Johnson will afford a lesson perhaps, as valuable as the moral doctrine that speaks with energy in every page of his works.

UNIT 2 : JAMES BOSWELL AND SAMUEL JOHNSON

Structure

- 2.0 Objective
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Relationship between Boswell and Johnson
- 2.3 Boswell's, Life of Johnson- Text
 - 2.3.1 Birth and Early Childhood
 - 2.3.2 Lord Chesterfield's Neglect
- 2.4 Johnson and Paoli
- 2.5 Glossary
- 2.6 Let us Sum Up

2.0 OBJECTIVE

After going through this unit, you'll be able to:

- Know about James Boswell, his life and his works.
- Learn what Boswell has to say about Johnson and his life.
- Learn about Lord Chesterfield, his neglect and also the letter by Johnson to Lord Chesterfield.
- Analyse the letter that Johnson wrote to Chesterfield.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Boswell was born in Blair's Land on the east side of Parliament Close behind St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh on 29 October 1740. He was the eldest son of a judge, Alexander Boswell, Lord Auchinleck, and his wife Euphemia Erskine. As the eldest son, he was heir to his family's estate of Auchinleck in Ayrshire. Boswell's mother was a strict Calvinist, and he felt that his father was cold to him. As a child, he was delicate. Kay Jamison, Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins, in her book *Touched by Fire*, believes that Boswell may have suffered from bipolar disorder,^[3] and this condition would afflict him sporadically all through his life. At the age of five, he was sent to James Mundell's academy, an advanced institution by the standards of the time, where he was instructed in English, Latin, writing and arithmetic.

The eight-year-old Boswell was unhappy there, and suffered from nightmares and extreme shyness. Consequently, he was removed from the academy and educated by a string of private tutors. The most notable and supportive of these, John Dunn,

exposed Boswell to modern literature, such as the *Spectator* essays, and religion. Dunn was also present during Boswell's serious affliction of 1752, when he was confined to the town of Moffat in northern Dumfriesshire. This afforded Boswell his first experience of genuine society. His recovery was rapid and complete, and Boswell may have decided that travel and entertainment exerted a calming therapeutic effect on him.

At thirteen, Boswell was enrolled into the arts course at the University of Edinburgh, studying there from 1753 to 1758. Midway through his studies, he suffered an episode of serious depression but recovered fully. Boswell had swarthy skin, black hair and dark eyes; he was of average height, and he tended to plumpness. His appearance was alert and masculine, and he had an ingratiating sense of humour.

Upon turning nineteen, he was sent to continue his studies at the University of Glasgow, where he attended the lectures of Adam Smith. While at Glasgow, Boswell decided to convert to Catholicism and become a monk. Upon learning of this, his father ordered him home. Instead of obeying, though, Boswell ran away to London, where he spent three months, living the life of a libertine, before he was taken back to Scotland by his father. Upon returning, he was re-enrolled at Edinburgh University and forced by his father to sign away most of his inheritance in return for an allowance of £100 a year.

On 30 July 1762, Boswell passed his oral law exam, after which his father decided to raise his allowance to £200 a year and permitted him to return to London. In this period, Boswell wrote his *London Journal* and, on 16 May 1763, met Johnson for the first time. The pair became friends almost immediately, though Johnson became more of a parental figure in Boswell's eyes.^[4] Johnson eventually nicknamed him "Bozzy".

The first conversation between Johnson and Boswell is quoted in *Life of Samuel Johnson* as follows:

[Boswell:] "Mr Johnson, I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it."
[Johnson:] "That, Sir, I find, is what a very great many of your countrymen cannot help

2.2 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BOSWELL AND JOHNSON

Son of a Scottish Laird and Judge in Edinburgh, Boswell was trained in the family profession of law. He later became a successful advocate, especially on the criminal side. His main interest, however, was in cultivating the friendship of renowned people and becoming a great writer of English prose.

Among his friends and acquaintances were some of the most well-known people of the age—John Wilkes (1727-97) English radical M.P., journalist and agitator; David Hume (1711-76), the Scottish philosopher; Voltaire (1694- 1778), the French philosopher, historian, playwright and poet; Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), the French political philosopher and novelist; Pascal Paoli, the Corsican politician and

leader about whom you would read more, later in this Unit; and above all Samuel Johnson. While on his tour of the Continent he tried to meet, (with the help of one Earl Marischal), Frederick the Great (1721-86) of Prussia, but without success.

Many fictional characters have sidekicks, but **James Boswell** is perhaps the most famous real-life sidekick in the world of letters. He was best friends with the noted 18th Century literary figure Samuel Johnson and his book *Life of Samuel Johnson* has been called the greatest biography in the English language.

He was born on October 29, 1740 in Edinburgh, the eldest son of a prominent judge. As a young man he studied law at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow. After passing his oral exam, he spent some time living in London, where in 1763 he met and became friends with Johnson.

He travelled extensively through Europe and gained some literary recognition for his published journals. He had only moderate success as a lawyer and suffered from periodic bouts of depression accompanied by bouts of drinking, gambling and wrenching. But he was an agreeable companion and cultivated a wide circle of influential friends.

In his later years, he wrote his *Life of Johnson*, based on notes of conversations he had recorded in his journals. It was published in 1791 and finally brought him the literary respect he had long desired. The fame of his book made his name synonymous with 'biographer'.

Boswell died in London on May 19, 1795 after years of failing health due to excess drinking and vices.

After having read his Rambler essays and seen his famous dictionary (1755) Boswell was keen to meet Johnson. An opportunity presented itself to him on 16th May, 1763 in the back parlour of the actor and bookseller Thomas Davies. This is how Boswell recorded the event in his *Life of Johnson*.

Mr. Davies mentioned my name and respectfully introduced me to him. I was much agitated; and recollecting his prejudice against the Scott, of which I had heard much, I said to Davies, 'Don't tell where I come from'- 'From Scotland', cried Davies roguishly. 'Mr. Johnson, (said I) I do indeed come from Scotland, but I cannot help it.'

I am willing to flatter myself that I meant this as light pleasantry to sooth and conciliate him, and not as an humiliating abasement at the expense of my country. But however that might be, this speech was somewhat unlucky; for with that quickness of wit for which he was so remarkable, he seized the expression -'come from Scotland', which I used in the sense of being of that country; and, as if I had said that I had come away from it, or left it, retorted, 'That, Sir, I find, is what a of

very great many of your countrymen cannot help.' This stroke stunned me a good deal; and when we had sat down, I felt myself not a little embarrassed, and apprehensive of what might come next.

Johnson had defined oats in his Dictionary, as 'A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people', and gained a notoriety for Scot baiting. Johnson, of course, had no prejudice against the Scots. From the passage quoted above, you get a foretaste of the respect and awe with which Boswell treated Johnson. The former ruthlessly subordinated his own personality to the latter's and reported every blow that he received from his subject without reminding his readers of his own strong points-his manipulation of his subject, his powers of description, narration and analysis.

When Boswell published his first book on Johnson *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, with Samuel Johnson LL.D (1785) an account of 101 consecutive days' travel in Scotland with the great friend, it was the author's fatuity and the subject's greatness that struck the reading public. When in 1791 *The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D*, was published the impression became stronger and Boswell did not receive the acclaim that was his due. On the other hand, to Hannah More who begged him to soften his portrait, he replied 'I will not make my tiger a cat to please anybody.'

In the nineteen-twenties Boswell's private papers were discovered at Malahide Castle near Dublin, and in the thirties in Aberdeenshire in Scotland, which placed him among the greatest diarists of all time. Boswell's writings are now studied with as great an avidity as Johnson's own.

Apart from the two works mentioned above, Boswell's *An Account of Corsica*, the *Journal of a Tour to That Island*; and *Memoirs of Pascal Paoli* were published in 1768. The 70 essays entitled *The Hypochondriac* were published in the *London Magazine* between 1777 and 1783. Boswell's letters, private papers and his *London Journal* were published in the twentieth century.

2.3 BOSWELL'S: LIFE OF JOHNSON- TEXT

2.3.1 Birth and Early Childhood

Samuel Johnson was born at Lichfield, in Staffordshire, on the 18th of September, N.S. 1709; and his initiation into the Christian Church was not delayed; for his baptism is recorded, in the register of St. Mary's parish in that city to have been performed on the day of his birth. His father is there styled Gentleman, a circumstance of which an ignorant panegyrist has praised him for not being proud; when the truth is that the appellation of Gentleman, though now lost in the indiscriminate assumption of Esquire was commonly taken by those who could boast of gentility. His father was Michael Johnson, a native of Derbyshire, of obscure extraction, who settled in Lichfield as a bookseller and stationer. His mother was Sarah Ford, descended of an ancient race of substantial yeomanry in Warwickshire.

They were advanced in years when they married, and never had more than two children, both sons; Samuel, their first born, who lived to be the illustrious character whose various excellence I am to endeavour to record, and Nathaniel, who died in his twenty-fifth year.

When he was a child in petticoats and had learnt to read, Mrs Johnson one morning put the common prayer book into his hands, pointed to the collect for the day, and said, 'Sam, you must get this by heart.' She went upstairs, leaving him to study it. But by the time she had reached the second floor, she heard him following her. 'What's the matter?' said she. 'I can say it,' he replied; and repeated it distinctly, though he could not have read it more than twice.

But there has been another story of his infant precocity generally circulated, and generally believed, the truth of which I am to refute upon his own authority. It is told, that, when a child of three years old, he chanced to tread upon a duckling, the eleventh of a brood and killed it; upon which, it is said, he dictated to his mother the following epitaph:

Here lies good master duck,
Whom Samuel Johnson trod on;
If it had liv'd, it had been good luck,
For then we'd had an odd one.

There is surely internal evidence that this little composition combines in it, what no child of three years old could produce, without an extension of its faculties by immediate inspiration; yet Mrs Lucy Porter, Dr. Johnson's stepdaughter, positively maintained to me, in his presence, that there could be no doubt of the truth of this anecdote, for she had heard it from his mother. So difficult is it to obtain an authentic relation of facts, and such authority may there be for error; for he assured me, that his father made the verses, and wished to pass them for his child's. He added, 'my father was a foolish old man; that is to say, foolish in talking of his children'.

2.3.2 Lord Chesterfield's Neglect

Lord Chesterfield to whom Johnson had paid the high compliment of addressing to his Lordship the Plan of his Dictionary, had behaved to him in such a manner as to excite his contempt and indignation. The world has been for many years amused with a story confidently told and as confidently repeated with additional circumstances, that a sudden disgust was taken by Johnson upon occasion of his having been one day kept long in waiting in his Lordship's antechamber, for which the reason assigned was, that he had company with him, and that at last, when the door opened, out walked Colley Cibber; and that Johnson was so violently provoked when he found for whom he had been so long excluded, that he went away in a passion, and never would return. I remember having mentioned this story to George Lord Lyttelton, who told me, he was very intimate with Lord Chesterfield; and

holding it as a well-known truth, defended Lord Chesterfield, by saying that Cibber, who had been introduced familiarly by the back-stairs, had probably not been there above ten minutes. It may seem strange even to entertain a doubt concerning a story so long and so widely current, and thus implicitly adopted, if not sanctioned, by the authority which I have mentioned; but Johnson himself assured me, that there never was any particular incident which produced a quarrel between Lord Chesterfield and him; but that his Lordship's continued neglect was the reason why he resolved to have no connection with him. When the Dictionary was upon the eve of publication, Lord Chesterfield, who, it is said, had flattered himself with expectations that Johnson would dedicate the work to him, attempted, in a courtly manner, to sooth, and insinuate himself with the Sage, conscious, as it should seem, of the cold indifference with which he had treated its learned author; and further attempted to conciliate him, by writing two papers in *The World*, in recommendation of the work; and it must be confessed, that they contain some studied compliments, so finely turned, that if there had been no previous offence, it is probable that Johnson would have been highly delighted. Praise, in general, was pleasing to him: but by praise from a man of rank and elegant accomplishments, he was peculiar gratified.

Johnson, who thought that all was false and hollow; . . . despised the honeyed words, and was even indignant that Lord Chesterfield should, for a moment, imagine that he could be the dupe of such an artifice. His expression to me concerning Lord Chesterfield, upon this occasion, was, 'Sir, after making great professions, he had, for many years, taken no notice of me; but when my Dictionary was coming out, he fell a scribbling in *The World* about it. Upon which, I wrote him a letter expressed in civil terms, but such as might show him that I did not mind what he said or wrote, and that I had done with him.'

This is that celebrated letter of which so much has been said, and about which curiosity has been so long excited, without being gratified. I for many years solicited Johnson to favour me with a copy of it, that so excellent a composition might not be lost to posterity. He delayed from time to time to give it me; till at last in 1781, when we were on a visit at Mr Dilly's at South Hill in Bedfordshire, he was pleased to dictate it to me from memory. He afterwards found among his papers a copy of it, which he had dictated to Mr Barette, with its title and corrections, in his own handwriting. This he gave to Mr Langton; adding that if it were to come into print, he wished it to be from that copy. By Mr Lington's kindness, I am enabled to enrich my work with a perfect transcript of what the world has so eagerly desired to see.

'To the Right Honourable the Earl of Chesterfield'

February 7, 1755

'My Lord,

I have been lately informed, by the proprietor of *The World* that two papers, in which my Dictionary is recommended to the public, were written by your Lordship.

To be so distinguished, is an honour, which being very little accustomed to favours from the great, I know not well how to receive, or in what terms to acknowledge.

'When upon some slight encouragement, I first visited your Lordship, I was overpowered, like the rest of mankind, by the enchantment of your address; and could not forbear to wish that I might boast myself *Le vainqueur du vainqueur de la terre*;--that I might obtain that regard for which I saw the world contending; but I found my attendance so little encouraged, that neither pride nor modesty would suffer me to continue it. When I had once addressed your Lordship in public, I had exhausted all the art of pleasing which a retired and uncourtly scholar can possess. I had done all that I could; and no man is well pleased to have his all neglected, be it ever so little.

'Seven years, my Lord, have now passed, since I waited in your outward rooms, or was repulsed from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties, of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a Patron before.

'The shepherd in Virgil grew at last acquainted with Love, and found him a native of the rocks.

'Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the Public should consider me as owing that to a Patron, which Providence has enabled me to do for myself.

'Having carried on my work thus far with so little obligation to any favourer of learning, I shall not be disappointed though I should conclude it, if less be possible, with less; for I have been long wakened from that dream of hope, in which I once boasted myself with so much exultation, my Lord, your Lordship's most humble, most obedient servant.

'Sam Johnson'

'While this was the talk of the town,' (says Dr. Adams, in a letter to me) 'I happened to visit Dr. Warburton, who finding that I was acquainted with Johnson, desired me earnestly to carry his compliments to him, and to tell him, that he honoured him for his manly behaviour in rejecting the treatment he had received from him, with a proper spirit. Johnson was visibly pleased with this compliment, for he had always a high opinion of Warburton. Indeed, the force of mind which appeared in this letter, was congenial with that which Warburton himself amply possessed.'

Check Your Progress

- 1) Write a few lines on James Boswell.

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- 2) Write a short note on the letter written to the Right Honourable the Earl of Chesterfield'

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- 3) What does Boswell say about the life of Johnson?

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2.4 JOHNSON AND PAOLI

On the evening of October 10, I presented Dr. Johnson to **General Paoli**. I had greatly wished that two men, for whom I had the highest esteem, should meet. They met with a manly ease, mutually conscious of their own abilities, and of the abilities of each other. The General spoke Italian, and Dr. Johnson English, and understood one another very well, with a little aid of interpretation from me, in which I

compared myself to an **isthmus** which joins two great continents. Upon Johnson's approach, the General said, 'From what I have read of your works, Sir, and from what Mr Boswell has told me of you, I have long held you in great veneration?' The General talked of languages being formed on the particular notions and manners of a people, without knowing which, we cannot know the language. We may know the direct **signification** of single words; but by these no beauty of expression, no sally of genius, now it is conveyed to the mind. All this must be by allusion to other ideas. 'Sir (said Johnson) you talk of language, as if you had never done anything else but study it, instead of governing a nation.' The General said, ' Questo e un troppo gran complimento; ' this is too great a compliment. 'I should have thought so, Sir, if I had not heard you talk.' The General asked him, what he thought of the spirit of **infidelity** which was so prevalent.

JOHNSON. 'Sir, this gloom of infidelity, I hope, is only a transient cloud passing through the hemisphere, which will soon be dissipated, and the sun break forth with his usual splendour.'

'You think then, (said the General) that they will change their principles like their clothes.'

JOHNSON. 'Why, Sir, if they bestow no more thought on principles than on dress, it must be so.' The General said, that a great part of the fashionable infidelity was owing to a desire of showing courage. Men who have no opportunities of showing it as to things in this life, take death and futurity as objects on which to display it.'

JOHNSON. 'That is mighty foolish affectation. Fear is one of the passions of human nature, of which it is impossible to divest it. You remember that the Emperor Charles V, when he read upon the tomb-stone of a Spanish nobleman. "Here lies one who never knew fear," wittily said, "Then he never snuffed a candle with his fingers."

Dr. Johnson went home with me, and drank tea till late in the night. He said, 'General Paoli had the loftiest port of any man he had ever seen.' He denied military men were always the best bred men. 'Perfect good breeding' he observed, 'consists in having no particular mark of any profession, but a general elegance of manners; whereas, in a military man, you can commonly distinguish the brand of soldiers, *I'homme d'eepee*.'

Dr. Johnson shunned to-night any discussion of the perplexed question of fate and free will, which I attempted to agitate. 'Sir (said he) we know our will is free, and there's an end on 't.'

Check Your Progress

- a) Who wrote the epitaph for the eleventh duckling of the brood? What authority was there for saying that Samuel Johnson wrote it?

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- b) Name the persons he received information/material from for the episode in the Life relating to Chesterfield's neglect of Johnson.

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- c) What did Paoli think about language and why do you think he should have begun their talk with that subject?

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2.5 GLOSSARY

- 1) **Infidelity**- the action or state of being unfaithful to a spouse or other sexual partner.
- 2) **Precocity**- The state of being precocious (Having or showing the qualities or abilities of an adult at an unusually early age).
- 3) **Isthmus**- a narrow strip of land with sea on either side, forming a link between two larger areas of land.
- 4) **Proprietor**- the owner of a business, or a holder of property.
- 5) **Appellation**- a name or title.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

After Johnson's death in 1784, Boswell moved to London to try his luck at the English Bar, which proved even less successful than his career in Scotland. In 1792 Boswell lobbied the Home Secretary to help gain royal pardons for four Botany Bay escapees, including Mary Bryant. He also offered to stand for Parliament but

failed to get the necessary support, and he spent the final years of his life writing his *Life of Samuel Johnson*. During this time his health began to fail due to venereal disease and his years of drinking. Boswell died in London in 1795. Close to the end of his life he became strongly convinced that the "Shakespeare papers", including two previously unknown plays *Vortigern and Rowena* and *Henry II*, allegedly discovered by William Henry Ireland, were genuine. After Boswell's death they proved to be forgeries created by Ireland himself.^[16] Boswell's remains were interred in the crypt of the Boswell family mausoleum in what is now the old Auchinleck Kirkyard in Ayrshire. The mausoleum is attached to the old Auchinleck Kirk.

UNIT 3 : ART IN LIFE AND WORKS OF JOHNSON

Structure

- 3.0 Objective
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Johnson and his Essays
- 3.3 The Vanity of Human Wishes (1749)
- 3.4 Narratives of Travellers Considered
- 3.5 Obstructions of Learning
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 Let us Sum Up
- 3.8 Suggested Readings/Attributions

3.0 OBJECTIVE

After going through this unit, you'll be able to:

- Know about the art of Johnson and its effect on Johnson's writings
- Learn about Johnson's essay 'The Vanity of Human Wishes'.
- Analyse the writing style of Johnson.
- Know and analyse two more very famous essays of Johnson, Narratives of Travellers Considered and Obstructions of Learning.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Johnson was an expert in that very difficult part of life, the management of one's own mind. He knew, with his constitutional melancholy, what it was to be ridden by the nightmare of mental trouble. "A man so afflicted," he said, "must *divert* distressing thoughts, and not combat with them." *Boswell*. "May he not think them down, Sir?" *Johnson*. "No, Sir. The attempt to think them down is madness." So it is that he says, in the *Rambler*: "The safe and general antidote against sorrow is employment. It is commonly observed that, among soldiers and seamen, though there is much kindness, there is little grief: they see their friend fall without any of that lamentation which is indulged in security and idleness, because they have no leisure to spare from the care of themselves." He reminds us, too, that there are some troubles on which we ought to be silent. Talking of Dryden's open resentment of hostile criticism, he remarks, "The writer who thinks his works formed for duration mistakes his interest when he mentions his enemies." And elsewhere he

comments on the unwise outcry of some writers whom Pope had pilloried in the *Dunciad*. "No man," he remarks, "sympathises with the sorrows of vanity."

The *Rambler*, a series of more than two hundred essays, belongs to the years 1750–2. But after the appearance of the *Dictionary*, he wrote little. He had no longer the stimulus of necessity. In 1760, on George the Third's accession, Johnson was offered, and accepted, a pension of £300 a year. When Johnson called on Lord Bute to express his acknowledgments for this mark of royal favour, the Minister said, "It is not given to you for what you are to do, but for what you have done";—a sly glance, possibly, at Johnson's own definition of a pension in his *Dictionary* as "generally understood to mean pay given to a State hireling for treason to his country." The pension placed Johnson in easy circumstances. Then he was constitutionally indolent. It was only because he happened to need a small sum for an urgent purpose, that he wrote, in 1759, the most successful of his minor works, the story of *Rasselas*, that young prince who, with his sister, and the sage Imlac, sets forth from the happy valley in Abyssinia to survey the world, and returns to his valley, convinced that, outside of it, all is vanity. The evenings of a single week sufficed for the composition of *Rasselas*, which has been translated, as Mr Birkbeck Hill tells us, into ten languages. After *Rasselas*, his chief productions were the edition of Shakespeare in 1765 (which does not seem to have cost severe labour); the *Tour in the Hebrides*, published ten years later; and the *Lives of the Poets*, in 1779–81. The last-named work is far the most considerable achieved by him after 1755.

3.2 JOHNSON AND HIS ESSAYS

Biography is often defined as an account of a person's life, and a branch of history. In the previous section, we examined the ways in which Boswell collected and sifted his material on Johnson's life. In Boswell's own time there were at least four others who wrote Johnson's life—Mrs. Piozzi, John Hawkins, William Shaw and Arthur Murphy. Many others have written since then and Johnson is still popular as a subject of biography. C.L. Reade, Joseph Wood Krutch, James L. Clifford and John Wain have written Johnson's life in this century and the need for another life of Johnson is still felt and Donald Greene is writing another one. Notwithstanding this, Boswell's *Life* is still read and edited, despite its voluminous size. Is it only because of its authentic material? No.

Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is a piece of art. In spite of the fact that the arrangement of the material is chronological rather than topic-wise, there is a unity of design. This unity is given to the work by Boswell's respect for the penetrating wisdom of the man that Johnson was, his piety, his courage, his wit, his learning, his sympathy for the oppressed, the weak and the poor.

It is often said that Boswell kept notes on Johnson's conversations. This is true but the way he recorded just the essence of a talk and not the chaff of the trivialities that often go on in company makes Boswell's biography so effective. Notice the brevity of Boswell's report of the meeting of Paoli and Johnson. Boswell was there on that occasion. Did he not say anything? He did. But what exactly did he say? That we do not know. Why did Boswell not tell us anything about it? Possibly because he said nothing of value. Possibly because what he said would have told us more about Boswell than about Johnson. Possibly because he wanted to maintain an artistic distance. Hence it is in his selection of material that Boswell employed his artistic talent.

Related to this is the issue of authenticity. If Boswell was trying to make his history interesting did the historical Johnson actually say what Boswell's Johnson says in the *Life*? Modern scholarship, through its comparison of the accounts of incidents related in the biography with those in the notes or the journals of Boswell and reports of others present on the occasions shows that Johnson was absolutely faithful in reporting the words of different persons. It is in condensation that Boswell exercised his artistic manipulation.

Sir Harold Nicolson has pointed out that Boswell's artistic talent lay in 'projecting his detached photograph with such continuity and speed that the effect produced is that of motion and of life.' There is both narrative speed and descriptive force in Johnson's biography. You do not only follow the narrative or a philosophical discussion you also see Lucy Porter talking to Johnson and Boswell in a homely setting and Johnson and Paoli in a very formal one. You feel the hurt pride of Samuel Johnson as he hits back Chesterfield in his reply to him. You live the tension of October 10, 1769 in Boswell's mind when Paoli paid Johnson a visit. These are made possible by Boswell's peculiar abilities of description and narration, analysis, exposition and intuitive understanding of his subject's mind.

James L. Clifford suggested that Boswell constantly tried to make his expression precise and suggestive of colour and charm. For instance, 'loved and caressed by everybody' of the notes become, 'caressed and loved by all about him', 'remarkably lively and gay and very happy' became 'a gay and frolicsome fellow'. Thus we find that the power of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* is a result of a variety of talents Boswell possessed-painstaking research, accurate description, honest narration, an imaginative understanding of the subject, and a command over the English language.

3.3 THE VANITY OF HUMAN WISHES (1749)

Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749) has been written in imitation of the tenth satire of Juvenal. But in Johnson's poem Juvenal's acerbic laughter is tempered by a Christian stoicism, seeking to deflate human pride and bring out the folly of human aspiration. Johnson's interest in the moral art of biography is evident in his exploration of the examples of blind confidence challenged by time or destiny. Cardinal Wolsey falls from his "full blown dignity"; imagined aspirants to

knowledge, longevity and beauty find themselves caught out by the inevitability of change and decay, and the once victorious Charles XII of Sweden meets defeat, exile, ignominy and an obscure death.

The poem's unrelenting exposition of the precariousness of secular hope as compared to a patient submission to the will of God is conveyed through an adjectival precision and a steadily reverberant rhythm.

The *Vanity of Human Wishes* begins with:

“Let Observation, with extensive view,
Survey mankind from China to Peru;
Remark each anxious toil, each eager strife,
And watch the busy scenes of crowded life;
Then say how hope and fear, desire and hate,
O’erspread with snares the clouded maze of fate,
Where wavering man, betray’d by venturous pride,
To tread the dreary paths without a guide”.

So the poem begins with a serious reflection in which Observation is asked to survey man from China to Peru, giving the poem a wide comprehensive sweep right from the start. The poem then focusses its attention on the “anxious toil”, “eager strife” and the “busy scenes of life”, and then highlights the abstract attributes of “hope”, “fear”, “desire” and “hate” and the clouded “maze of fate” afflicting the “wavering man”. But this perplexed man is himself betrayed by Pride and therefore tries to make his progress on the paths of life without a “guide”. This lack of a proper guide takes the reader to the very heart of the matter, for this “guide” has to be discovered as the poem unfolds itself.

The poem then goes on to expose other problems that Man creates for himself:

“How rarely Reason guides the stubborn choice
Rules the bold hand, or prompts the suppliant voice.....
But scarce observed, the knowing and the bold
Fall in the general massacre of gold....”

So in these lines, the poem reinforces the vanity of human wishes by stating very clearly that Man is stubborn with Reason guiding him only rarely. Man's “bold hand” and “suppliant voice” scarcely ever listen to Reason. The “general massacre of gold” tempts even the knowing and the bold people.

The poem next goes on to further highlight the fundamental human weaknesses by observing:

“Unnumber’d suppliants crowd Preferment’s gate,
A thirst for wealth, and burning to be great;
Delusive Fortune hears the incessant call;

They mount, they shine, evaporate, and fall,
On every stage the foes of peace attend,
Hate dogs their flight, and insult mocks their end”

The poem has now come out with a full exposure of the “anxious toil” and “eager strife” of Man mentioned in the opening lines. Numberless suppliants crowding for preferment and wealth, “burning to be great” with Fortune delusively only listening to the unending calls bring out the “anxious toil” of Man in great detail. Human beings are now described as mounting, shining and then evaporating and falling, crushed with defeat. The human aspirations are always facing the enemies of peace, with hatred and insult always creating problems. Human wishes indeed are vain.

But the poem ends not on a note of despair, but with a promise of hope after raising certain overwhelming questions:

“Where, then, shall Hope and Fear their objects find?
Must dull suspense corrupt the stagnant mind?
Must helpless man, in ignorance sedate,
Roll darkling down the torrent of his fate?”

Johnson has here raised his queries about the “human wishes”. He questions regarding the place where Hope and Fear will find their objects. He worries whether “dull suspense” will continue to contaminate the “stagnant mind”. He is genuinely concerned about the helpless Man, and he questions whether Man will just keep on rolling down the twists and turns of Fate.

But the answers to all such questions are given in the concluding lines of the poem:

“But leave to Heaven the measure and the choice.
Safe in His power, whose eyes discern afar
The secret ambush of a specious prayer,
Implore His aid, in His decisions rest,
Secure whate’er He gives, He gives the best....
Obedient passions, and a will resign’d,
For love, which scarce collective man can fill,
For patience, sovereign o’er transmuted ill;
For faith, that, panting for a happier seat,
Counts death kind Nature’s signal of retreat
These goods for man the laws of Heaven ordain,
These goods He grants, who grants the power to gain;
With these celestial wisdom calms the mind,
And makes the happiness she does not find.”

So the poem ends with Johnson imploring Man to leave the measure and the choice to Heaven itself. Man should feel safe by submitting himself to Divine power. The vanity of human wishes becomes clear in yet another way in which the poet advises the human beings to submit their wishes to the wishes of God. Man should only implore the help of God, rest content with “His decisions” and feel secure that whatever “He gives, He gives the best”. The human passions should be obedient and the human will should be resigned. Love should fill all humanity and patience should be held supreme, faith should pant for happiness, and Death should be accepted only as kind Nature’s signal of retreat. And all these positive virtues have actually been ordained by the laws of Heaven. God grants these positive virtues, and gives Man the power to achieve them. And together with these positive goods the Wisdom of Heaven calms the human mind and gives the happiness which Man has not yet been able to find anywhere else in the world.

Thus The Vanity of Human Wishes can be considered as a poem which begins with an exposure of how vain human wishes actually are. But the poem ends on a note of optimism and final submission to the Heaven. This patient submission to the will of God gives the final answers to all the overwhelming questions raised earlier in the poem. Hope and Fear ultimately find their objects. And dull suspense does not have any chance any more to corrupt the stagnant mind. Helpless Man in sedate ignorance does not have to roll darkling down the torrent of fate any more. He has only to submit to the Divine will with the positive goods like “love”, “patience” and “faith”: Calmness of mind will be given by “celestial wisdom”, and the human being will be blessed with a happiness, yet unknown.

Check Your progress

a) Explain briefly the following lines:

**“Where wavering man, betray’d by venturous pride
To tread the weary paths without a guide”**

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b) Comment critically on the main idea of the following:

**“How rarely Reason guides the stubborn choice
Rules the bold head, or prompts the suppliant voice”**

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c) **Discuss briefly the significance of the following lines:**

**“Unnumber’d suppliant, crowd Preferment’s gate A thirst for wealth,
and burning to be great.**

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d) **Explain briefly what the poet suggests here:**

**“Where then, shall Hope and Fear their objects find? Must dull suspense
corrupt the stagnant mind?”**

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e) **Explain the message which comes in these lines:**

**“But leave to Heaven the measure and the choice Safe in His power,
whose eyes discern afar.”**

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3.4 NARRATIVES OF TRAVELLERS CONSIDERED

It might, I ponder, be justly perceived, that few books dissatisfy their readers more than the histories of travellers. One slice of mankind is indeed interested to absorb the sentimentalities, demeanours, and condition of the rest; and every mind that has freedom or authority to outspread its views, must be keen of knowing in what fraction Providence has disseminated the blessings of nature, or the benefits of art, among the several nations of the earth.

This universal longing simply obtains readers to every book from which it can expect gratification. The explorer upon unknown shores, and the describer of aloof areas, is always welcomed as a man who has worked hard for the preference of others, and who is able to enlarge our knowledge and repair our sentiments; but when the volume is unlocked, nothing is found but such common accounts as leave no distinct idea behind them, or such minute inventories as few can read with either profit or delight.

Every writer of travels should study, that, like all other authors, he undertakes either to train or please, or to mingle choice with tutoring. He that teaches must offer to the mind something to be copied, or something to be dodged; he that pleases must offer new images to his reader, and empower him to form a implicit comparison of his own state with that of others.

The greater part of travellers tell nothing, because their method of travelling supplies them with nothing to be told. He that enters a town at night, and analyses it in the morning, and then rushes away to another place, and guesses at the manners of the occupants by the entertainment which his inn paid for him, may please himself for a time with a rapid change of scenes, and a confused commemoration of palaces and churches; he may oblige his eye with a variety of landscapes, and regale his appetite with a succession of years; but let him be satisfied to please himself without labouring to disturb others.

Why should he record expeditions by which nothing could be learned, or wish to make a show of knowledge, which, without some power of insight unknown to other humans, he never could attain?

Of those who crowd the world with their schedules, some have no other purpose than to describe the face of the country; those who sit idle at home, and are inquisitive to

know what is done or ached in distant countries, may be educated by one of these wanderers, that on a certain day he set out early with the convoy, and in the first hour's march saw, towards the south, a hill covered with trees, then passed over a stream, which ran northward with a hasty course, but which is perhaps dry in the summer months; that an hour after he saw something to the right which looked at a distance like a castle with towers, but which he revealed afterwards to be a rugged rock; that he then entered a valley, in which he saw several trees tall and blossoming, watered by a rivulet not marked in the maps, of which he was not able to learn the name; that the road afterward grew stony, and the country uneven, where he observed among the hills many caverns worn by streams, and was told that the road was crossable only part of the year; that going on they found the remains of a building, once, perhaps, a castle to secure the pass, or to confine the robbers, of which the present inhabitants can give no other account than that it is haunted by fairies; that they went to feast at the foot of a rock, and travelled the rest of the day along the banks of a river, from which the road turned aside towards evening, and brought them within sight of a village, which was once a substantial town, but which afforded them neither good supplies nor spacious lodging.

Thus he conducts his reader through wet and dry, over rough and smooth, without incidents, without reflection; and, if he gains his company for another day, will dismiss him again at night, equally drained with a like sequence of rocks and streams, mountains and relics.

This is the common style of those sons of initiative, who visit vicious countries, and range through loneliness and anguish; who pass a desert, and tell that it is grimy; who cross a valley, and find that it is green. There are others of more gentle susceptibility, that visit only the lands of sophistication and smoothness; that stroll through Italian palaces, and please the gentle reader with strings of pictures; that hear masses in splendid churches, and recount the number of the pillars or variegations of the roadway. And there are yet others, who, in contempt of trifles, copy engravings graceful and rude, antique and current; and transliterate into their book the walls of every association, revered or domestic. He that reads these books must consider his labour as its own incentive; for he will find nothing on which attention can fix, or which memory can preserve.

He that would travel for the entertainment of others, should remember that the great object of remark is human life. Every nation has something unusual in its productions, its works of genius, its medicines, its agriculture, its customs and its policy. He only is a useful traveller, who brings home something by which his country may be promoted; who acquires some supply of want, or some justification of evil, which may enable his readers to compare their condition with that of others, to improve it whenever it is worse, and whenever it is better to enjoy it.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 1) Summarize the essay in your own words (within 200-250 word).

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- 2) On which aspect(s) of a traveller does Johnson talk?

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3.5 OBSTRUCTIONS OF LEARNING

It is mutual to find young men zealous and meticulous in the hunt of knowledge; but the progress of life very often produces carelessness and triviality; and not only those who are at freedom to choose their business and enjoyments, but those likewise whose occupations engross them in literary studies, pass the later part of their time without improvement, and spend the day rather in any other entertainment than that which they might find among their books.

This dwindling of the strength of interest is sometimes ascribed to the inadequacy of learning. Men are invented to despatch their labours, because they find their labours to have been vain; and to search no longer after truth and wisdom, because they at last anguish of discovering them.

But this reason is, for the most part, very misleadingly dispensed. Of learning, as of an asset, it may be declared, that it is at once privileged and abandoned. Whoever disowns it will for ever look after it with yearning, dirge the loss which he does not attempt to mend, and desire the good which he wants resolution to seize and keep. The Idler never applauds his own idleness, nor does any man repent of the diligence of his youth.

So many interruptions may hinder the procurement of knowledge, that there is little reason for wondering that it is in a few hands. To the greater part of mankind the duties of life are uneven with much study; and the hours which they would spend upon letters must be stolen from their professions and their kinfolks. Many suffer themselves to be ensnared by more active and lavish pleasures from the shades of inspection, where they find occasionally more than a calm delight, such as, though greater than all others, its certainty and its duration being estimated with its power of indulgence, is yet effortlessly resigned for some extemporal joy, which the present moment offers, and another, perhaps, will put out of reach.

It is the great brilliance of learning that it borrows very little from time or place; it is not restricted to season or to climate, to cities or to the country, but may be educated and enjoyed where no other pleasure can be attained. But this quality, which establishes much of its value, is one occasion of neglect; what may be done at all times with equal respectability, is postponed from day to day, till the mind is slowly resistant to the slip, and the attention is turned to other objects. Thus customary sluggishness advances too much power to be seized, and the soul shrinks from the idea of intellectual labour and intensesness of contemplation.

That those who confess to advance learning sometimes hinder it, cannot be denied; the frequent exponentiation of books not only distracts choice, but disappoints inquiry. To him that has moderately stored his mind with images, few writers afford any novelty, or what little they have to add to the common stock of learning, is so buried in the mass of general notions, that, like silver mingled with the ore of lead, it is too little to pay for the labour of separation; and he that has often been deceived by the promise of a title, at last grows weary of examining, and is tempted to consider all as equally fallacious.

There are indeed some repetitions always lawful, because they never deceive. He that writes the history of past times, undertakes only to decorate known facts by new beauties of method or of style, or at most to illustrate them by his own reflections. The

author of a system, whether moral or physical, is obliged to nothing beyond care of selection and regularity of disposition. But there are others who claim the name of authors merely to disgrace it, and fill the world with volumes only to bury letters in their own rubbish. The traveller, who tells, in a pompous folio, that he saw the Pantheon at Rome, and the Medicean Venus at Florence; the natural historian, who, describing the productions of a narrow island, recounts all that it has in common with every other part of the world; the collector of antiquities, that accounts everything a curiosity which the ruins of Herculaneum happen to emit, though an instrument already shown in a thousand repositories, or a cup common to the ancients, the moderns and all mankind; may be justly censured as the persecutors of students, and the thieves of that time which never can be restored.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- 3) What are the prime hindrances or obstructions in learning that Johnson talks about? (write in your own words).

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- 4) What are the interruptions that may hinder the procurement of knowledge?

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3.6 GLOSSARY

- **Perceive:** Become aware or conscious of (something); come to realize or understand.
- **Sentimentalities:** exaggerated and self-indulgent tenderness, sadness, or nostalgia.
- **Demeanours:** outward behaviour or bearing.
- **Disseminated:** having spread throughout an organ or the body.
- **Keen:** having or showing eagerness or enthusiasm.
- **Fraction:** a small or tiny part, amount, or proportion of something.
- **Commemoration:** the action or fact of commemorating a dead Person or past event.
- **Susceptibility:** the state or fact of being likely or liable to be influenced or harmed by a particular thing.
- **Lord Chesterfield:** Philip Dormer Stanhope, fourth earl of Chesterfield (1694-1773), a statesman and diplomat, English ambassador at the Hague 1728-32. He is best known for his letters to his son, Philip Stanhope (1732-1768), published by the son's widow in 1774. These letters consisting of instructions in etiquette were considered a handbook of good manners.
- **Colley Cibber (1617-1757):**a minor comic playwright and critic.
- **George Lord Lyttelton:** a prominent politician, and an opponent of Robert Walpole and a liberal patron of Literature.
- **Backstairs:** private stairs at the back or side of a house, generally used by servants.
- **Insinuate:** To suggest (Something unpleasant) by one's behaviour, or questions or comments.
- **The World:** The title of a periodical (January 1755-December 1756) edited by Edward Moore.
- **Gratified:** To give pleasure and satisfaction to (often use in the passive).
- **Dupe:** noun-a person who is tricked or deceived (by someone else) verb-to trick or deceive.
- **Solicited:** Asked for money, help, a favour, etc. from a person.
- **Mr Dilly:** John Dilly (1731-1806), brother of Edward and Charles Dilly, booksellers who published Boswell's *An Account of Corsica*. Johnson paid a visit to John Dilly in company with Boswell and Charles Dilly in June 1781
- **Mr Barette:** Giuseppe Barette (1719-89), an Italian teacher introduced to Johnson by one of his students called Charlotte Lennox, actress and playwright.

- **Mr Langton:** Bennet Langton (1737-1801), a valued friend of Johnson, who read the Rambler essays and on their conclusion came to see him in London. Langton came from an ancient and noble family and his pedigree had been traced to Cardinal Stephen Langton in the reign of King John (1167- 1216).
- **Transcript:** Something transcribed, a written or printed record.
- **Warburton:** Dr. William Warburton (1698-1779), rose to be bishop of Gloucester in 1759. His edition of Shakespeare in eight volumes brought out in 1747, was criticized as unscholarly. He was Pope's literary executor, and published an edition of his works in 1751. He admired Dr. Johnson, who remained grateful for his early praise of his essay on Macbeth (1747): Johnson said, "He praised me at a time when praise was of value to me."
- **Virgil:** (70-19 B.C.) the greatest Roman poet, best known for his epic the *Aeneid* (about 30 B.C., unfinished at his death). His Eclogues (pastoral poems) influenced everyone who could read Latin.
- **Baptism:** A Christian ritual in which a person is touched or covered with water to make him pure and show that he has been accepted as a member of the church; generally accompanied by name giving.
- **Panegyrist:** One who writes panegyric, i.e. a speech or piece of writing praising somebody for something.
- **Appellation:** A name or title, especially one that is formal or descriptive.
- **Stationer:** a person or shop that sells stationery, i.e. writing material paper, pencils, pens etc.
- **Yeomanry:** The body of yeomen, i.e. men holding and cultivating a small estate; minor landowners in a rural area.
- **Petticoats:** Skirts collectively; also, skirts worn by very young children; chiefly in the phrase (said of a boy): in petticoats.
- **Collect:** a short prayer, varying from day to day, read near the beginning of certain Christian religious services.

Check Your Progress

5) Summarize ‘Obstructions in Learning’ in your own words (Within 200-250 words).

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

Johnson's literary style must also be considered in its relation to the English predecessors by whom he had been influenced. In his invariable clearness, and in the strict propriety which marks his use of words, we see the influence of the literary generation which came next before his own, the writers who were the standards of style in the reigns of Anne and George I.—such as Addison and Pope. That period had been characterised by a revolt from the pedantries of scholasticism, and the revolt had run to the other extreme; common sense was the new divinity; and everything that common sense could not explain, everything that savoured of a mystic profundity, was suspected of imposture, or at least of mental confusion. In style the great virtue was elegant correctness—the appropriate garb for penetrating and polished common sense. If we wished to illustrate this ideal by the opposite extreme, we might turn to Carlyle, hurling his amorphous language into space, and tormenting human speech in a struggle to body forth the Immensities. Johnson's age was remote enough from Carlyle's ways of thinking, but at least it was in process of outgrowing the deification of common sense and correctness; it was beginning to feel that there were more things in heaven and earth than had been comprehended by the literary law-givers of the age before it. This perception necessarily re-acted upon style; in Johnson's own ponderous sentences we can occasionally see that, like Thucydides, he labours under the difficulty that the things which he wishes to express are rather too complex for his instrument, in the form which recent usage had given to it, and that he must strive to draw some new tones out of that instrument in his own way. Compare Johnson with Addison, for instance. Addison had lived from earliest manhood in a polite world; the tone of the drawing-room and the coffee-house came naturally to him; it suited his gifts, and they, in their turn, raised and adorned it. Everything that Addison wished to say, grave or lively, could be said in this tone. As Johnson finely says of him, Addison "taught a succession of writers to bring elegance and gaiety to the aid of goodness.

3.8 SUGGESTED READINGS/ATTRIBUTIONS

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Essays_and_Addresses/Samuel_Johnson

<https://www.sapili.org/livros/en/gu005429.pdf>

http://www.gpedia.com/en/gpedia/Samuel_Johnson%27s_literary_criticism

<https://virginia-anthology.org/about-samuel-johnson/?print=pdf>

<https://museoffire.hypotheses.org>