**SAMUEL JOHNSON**

Samuel Johnson is the towering figure of 18th Century English letters. He was a famous poet, playwright, and essayist during the neoclassical era of English literature, which comprised the first half of the eighteenth century under the reigns of Queen Anne, King George I, and King George II. This era is also known as the Augustan Age, which name refers to the Augustan period of the Roman Empire, when Latin literature and philosophy flourished. His influence in his own time was so profound that the latter half of the century is often simply called the Age of Johnson.  Although Johnson wrote a small number of outstanding poems, he is perhaps best remembered for his other literary achievements and as the subject of the first great English Biography: James Boswell's The Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D. (1791). He was born the son of bookseller Michael Johnson near Birmingham, England in the town of Lichfield in 1709. Despite his life long connection to the city (indeed Johnson is often considered one of the great Urban Poets.

From 1750 to 1752 Johnson published essays in a periodical called the Rambler.  The essays were concerned with matters of morality, but not from an explicitly Christian point of view.  In 1756, he undertook the monumental task of compiling a new edition of Shakespeare’s plays.  The book took him nine years to complete, and contains many unfortunate edits that have made Johnson to appear both a prude and, to many, a butcher of the original Shakespeare canon.  Despite some of his liberties with the texts of the plays, the preface and notes remain valuable tools to students of Shakespeare and literature.

With a rough exterior, overbearing manners, and many odd peculiarities and habits, Johnson possessed almost all the virtues which grace and dignify human nature. He was humane, charitable, affectionate, and generous; and ever his sallies of temper were the effect of a morbid irritability of system.

**Plot Summary**

The speaker waits with his friend Thales by the River Thames. He feels sorrowful, because his friend has decided to leave London for the country, but he respects and supports Thales’s decision. The two men look over London, and for a moment, things seem calm. Then Thales frowns and begins to explain why he has chosen to leave the city.

Thales feels that London—and all of England, for that matter—has declined under the current government and its policies. The nation used to be nobler and more just. There were courageous kings such as Edward and Henry, who both won great military victories against England’s enemies. There were also kings such as Alfred the Great, who was righteous and inspiring. Such monarchs created a climate that curtailed criminality. Thales believes that during Alfred the Great’s reign, a single jail could have held half of England’s criminals. He invokes these old rulers to illustrate the heights of greatness from which London and England have fallen.

London is now full of criminals; those who aren’t breaking the law fall prey to those who are. People everywhere are going hungry. They are taken advantage of by the government, which supports “pirates” who prey on Englishmen. Meanwhile, the nation’s leaders are allowed to grow rich by running lotteries and collecting taxes from the poor. These leaders are now driven by the love of money rather than the pursuit of noble aims, leaving Londoners at the mercy of such plutocrats. The working classes are subject to the whims of those with less character but more money. Thales feels that the entire city is falling into ruin as “falling houses thunder on your head.” He attributes these maladies to the misguided culture but lays most of the blame on the greedy and indifferent government, lamenting how each official constantly tries to “raise his treasures higher than before.”

Thales asks to be given a place where honor, kindness, and wisdom aren’t looked down upon. He wants a better life than the one he has in London. At the end of the poem, he tells the speaker that he still has much to add—but they’ve run out of time, since his boat has arrived. He foresees a time when his friend will also flee London—when his “youth, and health, and fortune” are gone—and then feel enraged enough to pen a satire against the city, presumably in the form of the poem “London” itself.

**Themes**

1. **Poverty and Violence:**

In Samuel Johnson’s poem “London,” the speaker claims that London is a dangerous place for the average citizen. His friend Thales agrees, believing that London has become so full of crime and violence that he no longer feels safe walking through its streets:

*Prepare for Death, if here at Night you roam,*

*And sign your Will before you sup from Home.*

As a result of economic inequality and a crumbling public infrastructure, crime rates have risen, including violent crimes such as rape and murder. Even most of the buildings are unsafe, for “falling houses thunder on your head”; it wasn’t uncommon during Johnson’s day for entire buildings to collapse due to poor construction.Both Thales and the poem’s speaker agree that the violence plaguing the city of London is not limited to the denizens of the streets. Much of it comes from the city’s wealthy elite, such as “the fell attorney [who] prowls for prey” or politicians who “devote [themselves] to Vice and Gain.” By hoarding and lavishly spending so much wealth that could be used to help the poor, the elite classes create an atmosphere of desperation in which the poor must resort to lives of crime in order to survive.

1. **The Corruption of Education**

Thales argues that the status of education in London is deplorable. He claims that “unrewarded Science toils in vain,” indicating that the city no longer prioritizes education and higher learning. The intelligentsia (of which Johnson was a member) is unrecognized and undervalued. Moreover, the scholarly class are either unable or unwilling to use their knowledge to help the city’s poor or reform its broken social systems, rendering their work useless and unhelpful. In another instance, the speaker complains about how often in the city “a female atheist talks you dead,” as if philosophers have become as predatory and harmful as the “ruffians” or “fell attorneys” who prey on the weak and unsuspecting. As both Thales and the speaker see it, the corruption of the city has infected every level of society, including the well-educated.

1. **The Lure of Pastoral Life**

While giving his diatribe against London, Thales stands ready to disembark for Wales, which was then known as Cambria. He encourages his audience to do likewise:

*Quick let us rise, the happy Seats explore,*

*And bear Oppression’s Insolence no more…*

For Thales, London’s problems are unsolvable, meaning that the only real solution is to move away. Even though the speaker regrets his friend’s decision to leave, he can understand it as well. They share the romanticized vision of the countryside that characterizes pastoral literature, which looks to the country as a place “Where honesty and sense are no disgrace.” Thales imagines escaping to “some pleasing Bank where verdant Osiers play” or a “peaceful Vale with Nature’s Paintings gay.” He longs for a natural setting full of life and color as opposed to the decay and filth of the streets of London near the Thames.