

Discuss the theme of the country and the city in Johnson's London.

Samuel Johnson's *London* (1748) presents eighteenth century English anxieties about discord and decay through the antithesis of the city and the country. Johnson critiques the pitiful state of the country's capital by commenting on the degeneration that has plagued the society. The poet's despair on his friend's departure from England is emblematic of the loss of all the virtues of a "true Briton" that once characterised the people of the country. The construction of binaries in the poem needs to be critically evaluated to reveal a truer picture of the society that the poet wishes to reform.

Thales' reasons for leaving London and "exploring" foreign lands signifies that the corruption of the city stands for corruption of the country as a whole. Thales is not only leaving London, but seeking refuge in Wales, which discards the earlier image of England as the epitome of civilisation. The complete breakdown of morality is indicated by the phrase, "from Vice and London far". The vices of the city are elaborated throughout the poem, which are then contrasted with the countryside. The "vice" of the city is mainly depicted through the ambition of those in power. This ambition, leading to bribes and unchecked crimes has resulted in the terribly unsafe atmosphere of the city. The countryside, in contrast, is a place where such ambitious men are absent and Thales can find "repose" by living in "poverty" as "once the harassed Briton" did. The phrase "safe in poverty" is interesting, as it condemns the unsafe and chaotic state of the city. The lines providing reasons for preferring the country over the city are immediately followed by the political decisions that the poet condemns. Johnson vents his frustration with Robert Walpole's administration as he mentions the "pensions" which buy the people's "vote" and a true Briton, who is a "patriot", is punished while the corrupt "courtier" is made richer.

Besides the city-country theme, the corrupt political scene is a theme that Johnson uses to critique the condition of the city. Johnson grieves over the loss of "one *True Briton*" to Wales. This entails dwelling on the perversion of

truth in fields of literature, drama, politics, and relationship between the ruler and the ruled. The corrupt politicians influence the sort of literature that is written by English writers. Since such “Lords” do not possess true virtue, their patronage results in “cheap” panegyrics. The perversion of order and harmony is a major theme in English satires and Johnson uses it to show the disruption of class relations. He is critical of the way the “Lord” has to “win” the “groom” by “bribes [and] flattery”. This reversal of relations between the ruler and the ruled is a sharp attack on Robert Walpole’s practice of giving favours to men and securing political support. Johnson observes with satirical revulsion at how money changes hands between corrupt men and makes the nation a “beggar’d land”. In contrast, the countryside is constructed as a “smiling land” which still possesses uncorrupted idyllic beauty. It is also a place where class relations are undisturbed as so Thales can freely “despise the dainties” of the “Lord” whom he serves. The countryside is, therefore, a place where relations between people and their nature remain frozen, while the people in the city have changed for the worse.

In the extended image of *Origilio*¹, Johnson imitates Juvenal’s style of commenting on the plundering of the country’s wealth by the politicians’ greed for “gold”. Contrary to this, Johnson likens Thales’ person to the country Briton whose “rustic tongue” is not skilled in sophistry that the ambitious men of the city use to feed their ambition. This theme of the city and the country is, however, a poetic construction and does not wholly correspond to the realities of the time. The countryside is not presented as a thriving place where people labour hard to meet out a barely sufficient living. The population of the city of London grew over twenty times with the advancements brought with the Industrial Revolution. These advancements also affected the countryside, and had an adverse impact unlike the city which benefitted greatly. The replacement of manual labour by machinery caused widespread unemployment for the people of the countryside. The people were forced to resort to violence and the countryside was in a state of chaos, which finds no place in Johnson’s depiction. In critiquing the city, the poet uses the countryside as a blank slate, as an imagined space which can be construed as a foil to the problems of the city.

¹ Hardy, JP.

Walpole's corrupt ruling tactics are set against the honourable rulers of the past, being Elizabeth I and the "illustrious" Edward III. The corruption of those in power is extended to the deplorable diplomatic relations that England has made in their rule. The anti-war standpoint taken by the Walpole administration is criticised as it has corrupted English culture and society. As the poet remarks with contempt, the "warrior" has "dwindled into a beau". Johnson is extremely critical of England's political as well as cultural ties with France. The metropolis stands for civility and decorum, which is in conflict with the French who treat England's banks as "shores" or dumping grounds. As the poet apologises for such disturbing details of England's filthy banks, he is engaging with the eighteenth century idea of purging the city of contamination. The idea of the city as a sanitised place which is free from corruption, both in physical and moral terms informs Johnson's critique. The French people who have settled in London are, to the poet, those criminals of France who have fled harsher punishment of their country. The city has become a place that is plagued by robbers and "Lords of the Street" who harass the common man. The city, therefore, is far from being the ideal image of civilisation. This grim image of the city is set against the countryside where Thales can "prune" his walks in a place that has the Edenic semblance of Milton's paradise. Such picturesque "prospects" that Thales expects from the countryside sideline the turmoil that the place was experiencing.

The countryside is an imagined space that could give Thales hope of dwelling in "A happier place". Another such space is that of the past which Johnson uses to contrast with the present state of the city. In the standard Neo-classicist strain, Johnson imitates Juvenalian satire that compares the degraded present to a rich past that is now lost. The past as a foil to the present is combined with the antithesis of the city and the country, as the countryside becomes an idealised repository for virtues that the past stands for. The poet separates the past from the present through the nostalgic recollection of England's glorious past. The past, even though far removed from the present, exists in the natural surroundings of the London that Thales cannot bear to live in. The rivers in poem become the elements that still belong to the past as the Thames evokes "pleasing dreams" of a time when "Britannia's glories" were plentiful. Besides serving the antithesis of the past and the present, the river motif also connects the city and the

country. The “fair banks of Severn or Trent” to which Thales wishes to retire stand for the “surly virtue” that he can only hope to find in these luminal spaces between North and South England.²

Thales’s departure excites mixed reactions in the poet, as in the very first line he says that he is struggling with the conflicting emotions of “grief and fondness”. This reflects the problem the poet faces in living in a city that he has come to despise. He admires the decision of his friend, but at the same time he knows he is unable to take the same step. As J.P. Hardy observes, Rome cast a “spell” on Juvenal as he could not leave it despite having condemned the city in his satires. In this imitation of Juvenal’s satire, Johnson expresses similar discontent with the state of the city, but cannot find an escape which his friend has supposedly found. The fact that the city and the countryside cannot be water-tight binaries is evident from the oxymoron phrases in the poem. These phrases occur while describing both, the country virtue and city vice. The “rustic grandeur” that the poet mourns as lost in England’s past is a problematic expression of the virtuous country Englishman whose simplicity accounts for a sort of “grandeur”. Contrary to this is the city coxcomb. The feminine vanity of the “fop” is satirised as it is used with “fiery” to note his vain pretensions to manly valour. Another oxymoron that qualifies Johnson’s stance against the city is “gaudy vassals” as the “Lords” buy fealty to rule a nation they are “plundering”. While such phrases support the indictment of the city, the ones concerning the countryside show an unresolved contradiction. The “surly virtue” which Johnson lauds is not a true representation of a country dweller and the “safe poverty” in which he lives is most atrocious to him.

Johnson’s London is a poem of its time as it combines the energies of satire with Neo-classical stress on order, harmony, and the need to preserve England’s integrity. In condemning the city of London however, Johnson fails to give a true picture of the English countryside and makes it almost a metaphor for the virtue he cannot find in the city.

² Annotation: 211. Raghunathan, Harriet. Johnson, Gray, Goldsmith: Poets of the mid-eighteenth century. Worldview Critical Editions.