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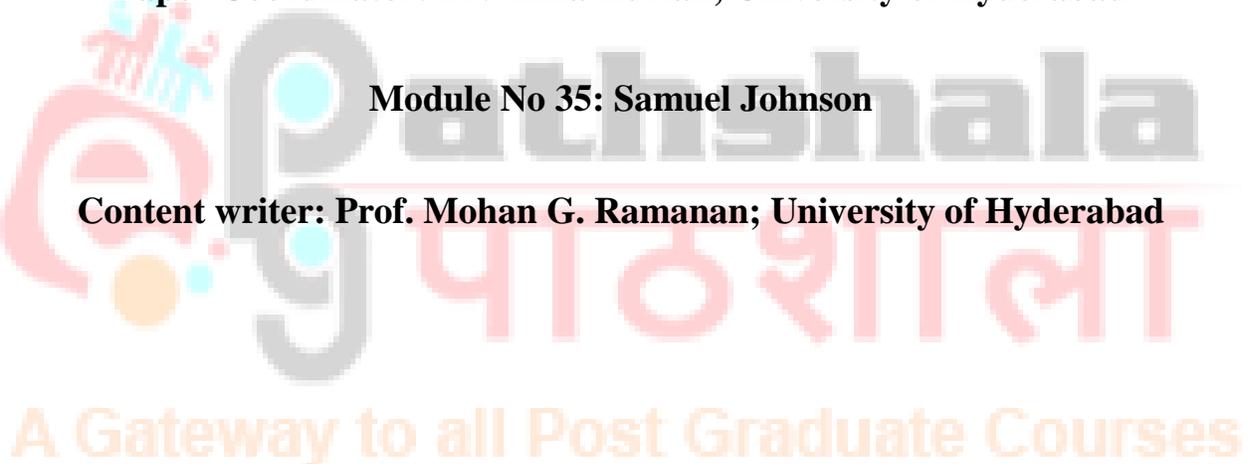
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Paper 02: English Literature 1590 – 1798

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Module No 35: Samuel Johnson

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Dr. Samuel Johnson

Lesson Plan

The lesson will have a section on the life and opinions and career of Dr. Johnson where Boswell's excellent Biography, one of three best in that genre (the other two being Lockhart's Scott and Trevelyan's Macaulay), may be consulted.

There will be a section contextualizing Johnson in relation to the intellectual background of the age wherein we will take up the enlightenment, the Augustinism of the age, and the Neo classical qualities of the literature of the period and Johnson's own adherence to these values.

This will be followed by a Section on his most important works – his play *Irene* (1749), his Satires “London” (1732) and “The Vanity of Human Wishes” (1749), his excellent novelette, *Rasselas* (1759), his *Dictionary*, his edition of Shakespeare along with its influential Preface (1765) and his last great work, *Lives of the English poets* (1781). There will be a separate section on the preface to Shakespeare because of its importance as a neo classical document.

Introduction

Samuel Johnson, in some circles, is regarded as England's greatest intellect of the Eighteenth Century. A Man of Letters, one who took all knowledge for his province and wrote and spoke the most elegant witticisms of the English language, and one who did yeoman service for the language by composing its first Dictionary. Indeed, he used to be called “Dictionary” Johnson for his work. However, in recognition of his services to English literature, the University of Dublin conferred an honorary doctorate on him and he was thereafter known as Doctor Johnson. He touched on all genres of literature — poetry, drama, the essay, criticism and the novel and — left an indelible mark on English literature.

Section 1: His Wit and Opinions and Sayings

Dr. Johnson was born in Litchfield in 1709 and passed away in London after a very eventful literary life in 1784. His biographer Boswell who met Johnson in 1763 and began keeping a journal and recording his impressions of Johnson and his views, produced one of the greatest biographies ever written. This was published in 1791. Johnson was the great Clubman, the massive intellect with a massive body who made friends as easily as he could offend them.

In his dealings with men like Edmund Burke(the Statesman), Reynolds(the Painter),Goldsmith (the writer),Sir Robert Chambers(the Judge), to name only a few, he gave out his opinions and views on men and matters with an élan and a vitality which simply overwhelmed his audience. His sayings, witticisms and throw away comments constitute a veritable treasure trove of literary material. Here are some examples. When a woman asked him the meaning of a word and he was unable to give it, the lady in question reminded him that he was England's first Lexicographer. Johnson said that it was "ignorance, dear madam, sheer ignorance". Such was his humility. However, his wit could often turn satirical as well.

He could give offence but also apply the salve immediately as he did to Goldsmith whose craving for attention, all his acquaintances were aware of Johnson had spoken triflingly of him among friends but realizing Goldsmith's hurt, offered an immediate apology because his friendship had to be nurtured and preserved. Another example can be quoted from Boswell. "My valued friend Dr. Barnard, now Bishop of Killaloe, having once expressed to him an apprehension, that if he should visit Ireland he might treat the people of that country more unfavourably than he had done the Scotch, he answered with strong double-edged wit, " Sir, you have no reason to be afraid of me. The Irish are not in a conspiracy to cheat the world by false representations of the merits of their countrymen. No, Sir; the Irish are a FAIR PEOPLE;--they never speak well of one another." Boswell mentions a short Life of Johnson published after his death by Kearsley where we have this account which gives us an idea of the man and his personality:

"When he walked the streets, what with the constant roll of his head, and the concomitant motion of his body, he appeared to make his way by that motion, independent of his feet." That he was often much stared at while he advanced in this manner, may easily be believed; but it was not safe to make sport of one so robust as he was.

Mr. Langton saw him one day, in a fit of absence, by a sudden start, drive the load off a porter's back, and walk forward briskly without being conscious of what he had done. The porter was very angry, but stood still, and eyed the huge figure with much earnestness, till he was satisfied that his wisest course was to be quiet, and take up his burthen again."Johnson's massive intellect was matched, it appears, by his equally massive physical proportions.(B1121)

We can now consider some of his well-known opinions about writers. Of Fielding and Richardson he said, comparing them to Fielding's disadvantage, "that there was as great a difference between them as between a man who knew how a watch was made, and a man who could tell the hour by looking on the dial-plate" (B389).

In another context he asserted that Fielding was a "blockhead" and "a barren rascal". Johnson's opinions were the result of deep thought and his observations on Fielding were based on his conviction that there was more knowledge of the human heart in one letter of Richardson than in all of Fielding's novel *Tom Jones*. He went on to tell Thomas Erskine who thought Richardson tedious: "Why, Sir, if you were to read Richardson for the story, your impatience would be much fretted that you would hang yourself. But you must read him for the sentiment, and consider the story as only giving occasion to the sentiment" (B480).

Late in his life he wrote the lives of the Poets, masterpieces of biographical criticism, beautifully structured and forcefully written. In these, among many opinions, he famously expressed his view that Religious Poetry was not possible, that Metaphysical poetry was characterized by heterogeneous images yoked together by violence, an observation which for Johnson was disparaging but which has become for all of us *the* definition of metaphysical Poetry. *His Lives* were an early English attempt to establish an English literary canon.

The principal works we will be considering in this Unit are a small part of his prodigious output. When he died in 1784, Johnson was widely mourned. Boswell's brother, Thomas David who reported Johnson's last moments said: "The Doctor, from the time he was certain his death was near, appeared to be perfectly resigned, was seldom or never fretful or out of temper, and often said to his faithful servant, (Francis Barber) who gave me this account, '*Attend, Francis, to the salvation of your soul, which is the object of greatest importance*' he also explained to him

passages in the scripture, and seemed to have pleasure in talking about religious subjects.” He died on 13 December 1784.

Section 2: The Enlightenment and the Augustan and Neo Classical context

When we speak of the Eighteenth century we speak of it in several ways—as the Age of Enlightenment, as the Augustan Age and as the Neo-classical period. One can legitimately call it the Age of Enlightenment, which it was.

After the European Renaissance of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries there was a revival of interest in the classics followed by a great rejection of the Metaphysical hair splitting arguments of the Medieval Church Fathers, a rise of Individualism and the visible manifestation of this in self-consciousness and a general acceptance of Man as the measure of all things rather than God.

The focus shifted in the 18th century to France where the Philosophes extended and deepened the ideas of the Renaissance. Amongst the Philosophes were Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu and Diderot, all of whom were against the *Ancien Regime* of France and boldly spoke out against superstitions and prejudices and asserted a humane value system. “*Man is born free*”, said Rousseau, “*but is everywhere in chains*”.

He meant that injustice and imperfection in the world was not cosmic or God given, but man made. That these ‘mind forged manacles’ (Blake’s phrase) could be shattered by the application of reason and understanding. In defense of democracy and free speech, Voltaire said that even if he disagreed with everything someone said, he would defend with his life that person’s right to say it.

This rational and man centered discourse was given a great fillip in England by John Locke, the sensationalist philosopher. He was convinced that understanding in the mind was occasioned by our sense impressions and these impressions fused together to create intellectual arguments. Hence he is a Sensationalist philosopher. He was part of a movement to focus attention on the world and to encourage people to become attuned to it.

Instead of metaphysics we needed physics so to speak, and Francis Bacon, who was a 17th century forerunner of the Enlightenment, liked to call himself a natural philosopher; one who had an

empirical attitude to everything and one who would accept things only on the basis of reason and experiment. In that spirit, Locke rejected metaphysics and concentrated on the world.

Locke said “The Works of Nature sufficiently evidence a Deity”. By this he meant God left humans with the responsibility of managing the world, after he finished creating it. Thus through tolerance, discussion, and rational behavior, Man could make the world perfect.

This comfortable ideology informed the thinking of many writers in the 18th century. That is why the period has been characterized by George Saintsbury as “the Peace of the Augustans”, a reference to England’s similarity with Imperial Rome ruled by the Emperor Augustus when the Pax Romana was established in the world. Likewise this was the period of the Pax Britannica which everyone acknowledges was a period of comparative calm after the earlier turbulence. There was now an emphasis on consolidation and conservation of what had been established.

Many thinkers, contrary to what Voltaire in *Candide* disparagingly satirized said and what Johnson instinctively knew to be false felt that, “What is, is Right”. This optimism, of course, was not shared by the Augustan satirists and the best English writing of this period is actually a questioning of the Augustan peace and optimism.

Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, through its four Books, punctures this optimism about the human race. Pope is satirical of the dunces and miscellaneous thinkers who perpetuate illusions and Johnson is, as Basil Willey has called him a, “Cosmic Tory” one who cannot accept this secular, almost unchristian, world view. Be that as it may, the Enlightenment period was a period of general satisfaction with the way one lived.

The Augustan Age is also called the Neo Classical Age. The long period after the classical thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Horace and Quintilian, until the Renaissance was characterized by the hegemony of the Catholic Church. Overwhelmed by Catholic Christendom, it was inevitable that when the classics were revived after the so called Dark Ages of the medieval period, they should be suffused with Christian feeling and piety.

We see this in Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry* where in his defense of poetry against the Puritan assault he attempts to fuse Platonism with Christianity and to give Plato a renewed life as

a proto Christian thinker. Johnson is in the same tradition – a neo-classical thinker and very representative of the Age. This is brought best in his treatment of Shakespeare.

Section 3: Early Work and *Irene*

Johnson's early work was to a large extent contributions to *The Gentleman's Magazine* in which he wrote Abridgements, Translations, Prefaces and one of the early Lives, that of Walter Savage. He also contributed to *The Idler*. *Rasselas* appeared in 1759 and perhaps there is no work of a more philosophical character in English literature than this novelette, replete with worldly wisdom and ethical values.

In 1775 the *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* and In 1781 *The Lives of the Poets* appeared. Johnson wrote innumerable letters, prayers and meditations, sermons and essays all of which have been published. *Irene*, the only play which Johnson wrote, was published in 1749 but its composition had begun as early as 1726 and a good part of it was written in 1737 when Johnson was teaching at Edial School Hall. Johnson, it must be admitted was less interested in performance than in seeing Drama as a literary artefact—a bias which affected his criticism of Shakespeare.

Irene, in fact suffers from being a play which is not good for performance. Some would regard it as a failure though Walter Jackson Bate, the modern biographer of Johnson argued because we know it to be a work by Johnson, we expect more and are disappointed. That it was performed for nine nights by David Garrick in 1749 at the Drury Lane Theatre, suggests that the play has some literary value. Johnson's sources for this play were Richard Knolles' *Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603), George Sandy's relation of a *Journey ... containing a Description of the Turkish Empire* (1615), Hebelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1697) and Humphrey Predeaux's *Life of Mahomet* (1697). It shows evidence of Johnson's wide reading and his interest in the orient, a feature of *Rasselas* also.

Irene, however, is an uneven play. Johnson's friend Gilbert Walmesley thought that it made the heroine suffer too much in the first part, leaving very little possibility of suffering in the second. *Irene* falls prey to Mahomet's inducement to her to marry him and become mistress of untold wealth and a great empire, on condition that she convert to Islam.

Succumbing to temptation, she changes her religion and marries Mahomet. Irene's conversion to Islam leads to her falling out with her friend Aphasia, and her decision unleashes a complex power struggle involving Mahomet's advisors like Cali Bassa and Aga Mustapha ending in her tragic death.

The Blank verse form Johnson chose seems ineffective because Johnson, the neo-classicist cannot forget the rhythms of the heroic- couplet and its closed character. However it does have some literary value and should be read as a preparation for Johnson's later works.

Section 4: Johnson's Edition of Shakespeare

Johnson and his friend Stevens edited *The Plays of William Shakespeare* and that edition announced as early as 1745 was finally published in 1765. Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare is a great critical document which is representative of 18th century taste, but this shall be explored in a later section. Shakespeare was Johnson's favourite reading as a boy and he was profoundly affected by some of the scenes.

He was terrified by Hamlet's ghost and needed company when he was reading the play, while Cordelia's death in *King Lear* offended his sense of poetic justice. As a representative writer of the neo-classical period he was unhappy with Macbeth's dagger which reminded him of a butcher's knife and troubled him due to its impropriety.

He was dissatisfied with the lack of an authoritative text of Shakespeare and did not trust many of the prompt texts used by players to which he had access, believing that they were often modified for performance.

For him the reader of Shakespeare was the true audience, not the audience in the theatre and this textual bias affected his judgement of Shakespeare. Beginning work on *Macbeth* as early as 1746 he wrote "*Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth*" and announced his opinions and theories and the fact that he was going to edit a publication of the great dramatist. In 1756, he reprinted "*Miscellaneous Observations*", attached a proposal for printing Shakespeare's works and later signed a contract to do the edition in eight volumes.

He promised to correct earlier editions and explain obscurities, collate the old copies and by preserving what was valuable, publish an authoritative edition of the plays. Johnson, elsewhere,

admitted that it was want of money that prompted him to do the work but the passion which had gone into the work, belies this assertion. It was finally published in 1765 with Notes and a Preface, in the composition of which, Stevens collaborated. Johnson's edition is notable for this Preface, but in his edition he carefully collated older editions and arrived at, what for him, was an authentic text.

The fact that later Emendators constantly cite Johnson should be ample proof of the worth of this monumental work. Johnson had the praise of Warburton, Malone, Adam Smith, and Sir Walter Raleigh, all of whom commended him.

Section 5: The Preface to Shakespeare

The Preface begins by drawing attention to the abiding nature of Shakespeare's work. Johnson observes, literary works which have been long commended by popular taste, have a way of asserting their primacy and that Shakespeare is one such writer. What is remarkable about Shakespeare is that he imitates general or universal human nature.

His characters might be Roman or Greek, heroes or heroines, clowns or wise men but they are first and foremost human. The historical trappings are a convenience because Shakespeare is more interested in delineating human nature and its typicality. We therefore, get types, not particular instances of character.

Johnson draws attention to the language Shakespeare uses and admires it, though he criticizes him for being too fond of the pun and word play. He tends to overdo linguistic play to the extent of sacrificing plot and movement, if that will permit him to follow up a particular line of association begun by a word or phrase. Johnson says that this was Shakespeare's 'fatal Cleopatra'.

Shakespeare, Johnson observes, is not following the Aristotelean Unities strictly. We have unity of action in his plays but we do not have the unities of place and time. Is this a fault, asks Johnson, and answers by saying that Shakespeare is a realistic Dramatist and imitates life accurately and, therefore, this breaking of classical tenets is acceptable.

Johnson also points out that in Shakespeare we have comic plays where contrary to the tenets of classical criticism, tragic scenes are depicted, and conversely we have tragic plays where comedy is not absent.

In addition he also writes Tragi-comedies. Is this not a deviation from strict classical norms? It is, says Johnson, but it is not a fault, because life is essentially a mix of tragedy and comedy and Shakespeare by mixing the modes is only depicting life with great fidelity. Johnson now shows himself to be a critic of common sense and his neo-classicism is not of the dogmatic kind.

However, when he bemoans that in the tragedies of Shakespeare, vice seems to win over virtue and there is no poetic justice, he seems to be contradicting himself. His point is that a dramatist must assert the victory of virtue over vice to be a proper guide to humanity.

Shakespeare's lack of moral probity troubles him and he finds fault with the Dramatist for deviating from neo-classical values by allowing evil to triumph. One may ask, as Johnson's critics have asked, why this should not be. Is the triumph of vice not an imitation of life where there is no poetic justice? Is Shakespeare not being true to life as he is true to life when he mixes the tragic and comic? The Preface goes on to give detailed analyses of several aspects of Shakespeare's work and on balance pronounces him to be a great writer.

Johnson, thus, is able to reconcile his neo-classicism with his pragmatic understanding of Shakespeare's realism. The Preface is, therefore, both a Neo-classical document and a document which interrogates the received opinions of Neo-classical thought.

Section 6: Dictionary Johnson

Johnson's Dictionary was finally published in 1755 and is an influential document which has informed the science of lexicography since. Both Murray of the OED and Webster have acknowledged their debt to Johnson. Johnson's work appeared at a time when there was a veritable explosion of printed material and the publishing of literary works was on the rise.

Concerns arose about the need to standardize and categorize the language, amidst the inevitable chaos of print and Johnson single handedly took up the task. The Royal Society in England of an

earlier day wanting to promote plain English had attempted to lay down rules so that scientific ideas could be disseminated with greater facility.

The Dictionary was an act of great consolidation and also brought about the standardization of grammar in the English language. About twenty Dictionaries had been published before Johnson's, but they were lacking in several aspects. Many of them were poorly organized and researched and they failed as Henry Hitchings said "to give sufficient sense of the English language as it appeared in use". Johnson began work on it as early as 1746 and approached patrons for financial help to begin this monumental work.

The first edition contained a staggering 42,773 words and Johnson illustrated his work with literary quotations of which there were 114,000. He frequently cited Shakespeare, Milton, and Dryden. Johnson's added notes on a word's usage, done with humour and with his prejudices intact, adds to the brilliance of the work. Here are a few examples:

Excise: a hateful tax levied upon commodities and adjudged not by the common judges of property but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid.

Lexicographer: a writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original and detailing the signification of words.

Oats: a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.

Monsieur: a term of reproach for a Frenchman.

Writative – A word of Pope's, not to be imitated: 'increase of years makes men more talkative but less writative; to that degree I now write letters but of plain d'ey's'."

He was meticulous to a fault. "Turn" had 16 definitions with 15 illustrations, "Time" had 20 definitions and 14 illustrations, "put" ran more than 5000 words spread over 3 pages and "take" had 134 definitions, running to 8000 words and 5 pages. All this at a time when Johnson did not have the benefit of modern technology. It displayed his massive intellect to advantage in addition to his learning and prodigious memory. The Dictionary was rightly seen as the great work it undoubtedly was, but as is usual, there were detractors, though it must be noted that the praise given overwhelmed the negative opinions.

Section 7: “London”

“London”, an Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal was published in 1738. It has 263 lines and is in heroic-couplets and is in Ian Jack’s formulation a Tragical Satire. It is Tragical because of its grim picture of how Worth is not recognized by the metropolis.

It focuses on the poet, Thales, who is compelled to leave London due to lack of preferment. Thales is shown returning to Wales (Cumbria), and in this Johnson is imitating Juvenal who Umbricius leaves Rome for Cumae, unable to put up with the corruption of Rome. The poem is, as we have said, an Imitation and in the tradition of imitations done by Alexander Pope of the Latin classical poet, Horace.

Johnson had been exposed to the Imitations of Horace done by Pope, poems like “Windsor Forest”, and saw how the classical model was deftly used by the senior poet to attack contemporary political corruption. “London” is Johnson’s longest non dramatic publication, and second only to “The Vanity of Human Wishes”, an Imitation of Juvenal’s tenth satire.

The poem describes the various problems London confronts; including crime, corruption, and squalor, and how some of these conspire to destroy London. Johnson personifies Malice, Rapine, and Accident and shows in concrete instances how they attacked those who lived in London and impinged on their lives. Johnson, it is said, had Richard Savage in mind when he created the fictional Thales.

Savage, on whom Johnson wrote one of his earliest *Lives* was his friend and companion. They would visit pubs and coffee houses together late into the night. When Savage, mauled by London’s rapacity was thrown into prison and died there, Johnson was impelled by his sense of the injustice done to Savage to write this satire.

The main theme is the manner in which Worth is not allowed to rise and is put down by Poverty. “Slow rises Worth, by Poverty depressed,” writes Johnson, taking a dig at the Whig Government of Robert Walpole. Much of Johnson’s political criticism stems from his Tory principles. He is, as Basil Willey has characterized him, a High or Cosmic Tory.

Johnson's Tory principles also impel him to reject the rule of King George II and in this he is almost a Jacobite; a faction in English politics somewhat sympathetic to Catholicism. Of course Johnson was a committed Protestant and his stature was so high that the government did not arrest him, and instead did the next best thing – denied him preferment on account of his politics and did not recognize his works. The Ways and Means Committee of Parliament was often exploited by the King to tax the people and this finds echo in the following lines of "London":

"Propose your schemes, ye Senatorian band,

Whose Ways and means support the sinking land;

Lest ropes be wanting in the tempting spring,

To rig another convoy for the King."

George II and his Prime Minister, Robert Walpole, are compared to the dissolute Roman Emperors so eloquently described by Gibbon in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. "London" also glorifies an English past in pastoral terms, and Queen Elizabeth I and her victory over the Spaniards is contrasted with the present regime's disastrous expeditions, which according to Johnson and other Tories was thought to be tantamount to selling out England to Spain's trading interests.

Though Johnson describes an ideal pastoral past, he was himself a city-fied gentleman who did not particularly care for the country and was uncomfortable with the pastoralism of "London". Pope praised Johnson's poem, and its admirers include Sir Walter Scott, T.S. Eliot and Walter Jackson Bate, though a critic like Brian Hammond feels that the poem is "no better than a somewhat mechanical updating of Juvenal's third satire". Anyone reading the poem today will be struck by its power, eloquence, wisdom and its sense of values.

Section 8: "The Vanity of Human Wishes"

“The Vanity of Human Wishes: The Tenth Satire of Juvenal imitated” is a poem of 368 lines, first published in 1749. It is, as its title tells us, an imitation of Juvenal and is a philosophical satire, different from “London”, which was overtly political.

In his poem, Johnson is more sympathetic with his subjects in contrast to Juvenal. His Christian charity allows him to contemplate life in general as one of futility in the face of the quest for greatness, fame and power. His chief example is Sweden’s King Charles XII, whom he portrays with sympathy. Charles, for the sake of personal power and aggrandizement, slaughtered thousands of impoverished people:

“Think Nothing gain’ed he cries, till nought remains,

On Moscow’s wall still Gothic Standards fly,

And all be mine beneath the Polar sky.”(L1202-204)

Johnson composed the entire poem in his head before he put anything down on paper, relying on oral form of composition and his extraordinary memory. He then sat and wrote the first seventy lines of the poem in the course of a morning and was paid 15 guineas for his poem. It is written in closed heroic - couplets and there is a sonority about the language and what Johnson himself called ‘Strong Sense’ in the poem. Strong Sense is the ability to put in much meaning in a short space, with an economy of expression. Charles finally goes to his doom and Johnson, with compassion writes about this career as follows:

“His fall was destin’ed to a barren Strand,

A petty Fortress, and a dubious hand;

He left the name, at which the world grew pale,

To point a moral, or adorn a Tale.”

In this poem Johnson cannot resist the temptation to give expression to personal feeling. His definition of the scholar as one whose life is full of ills – “Toil, Envy, Want, the Patron, and the Jail” is revealing because the poem was being composed around the same time the Dictionary was in the making and Johnson resented Lord Chesterfield for not showing adequate support to

the work. In the Dictionary “Patron” is defined as follows: “*Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery*”. It is assumed he had Chesterfield in mind when he wrote this.

Johnson’s imitation of a poet who was not Christian like him, excelled himself by producing a version which matched the original faithfully. He had defined an imitation as a species of composition which is a cross between translation and original composition. He had to accommodate Juvenal’s pagan approach of seeing religion negatively and ignoring the positive path of Christianity and yet manage to sound Christian in keeping with his neo- classicism.

Section 9: *The Lives of the English Poets*

In *Lives of the English Poets* (1779-81) done in his last years, he included 52 biographies and critical appraisals and one might say, this was an early attempt in the English tradition to establish a canon for poetry.

Actually he had begun this activity in 1740 when he wrote lives of Jean-Philippe Baratier, Robert Bake and Francis Drake. As we have seen his first serious life was that of Richard Savage, the subject of “London”. Johnson’s tribute to his friend is moving, and as Bate puts it, innovative. In 1773 the Scottish publishers at Edinburgh were producing the Collected Works of English Poets, and Johnson at the instance of Tom Davies, William Strahan and Thomas Cadell, put together this final work of his as a competition.

The Lives are actually Prefaces to selections of each poet’s work and are considerably more than mere dates and advertisements. The most important literary and critical issues of the day find expression in these *Lives* and are made memorable by Johnson’s definitions, distinctions and assertions. For Matthew Arnold they constitute the elements of a liberal education. Among *The Lives* are those of Cowley, Milton, Pope, Dryden, Waller, Addison, Swift, Shenstone, Gray and Akenside, to mention only a few.

Section 10: Conclusion

In conclusion we may say that Johnson is a Representative man of his Age. In his career we see expression of all the important themes of the Age of Reason. Johnson defines the Age, albeit

from a Conservative perspective, but then he was part of the great conservative tradition popularized by Edmund Burke, Johnson's friend.

There is a healthy respect for Tradition, for precedence and for one's natural place in an organically organized hierarchical and class ridden society. However, Johnson is not a mindless observer of custom and his sturdy commonsense punctured, what he famously dismissed as, cant. He was forthright and positive but at the same time sensitive to human frailty and feelings.

Johnson's various works have a consistent moral purpose and human appeal and in reading them we are provided with an insight into the best of English culture and criticism.

Story Board

Introduction: a statement of aims and objectives of the lesson

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The Augustan Age

Section 3

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Section 4

The Shakespeare Edition

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Its organization and its main features

Section 5

The Preface to Shakespeare as representative of neo classical thinking

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Section 6

The Dictionary

Distinctive skills as a Lexicographer

Section 7

“London”, an Imitation of Juvenal and the satirical thrust of Johnson

Section 8

“The Vanity of Human Wishes” and yet another tragical satire

Section 9

The Lives of the English Poets

Section 10

Conclusion

Do You Know?

*Johnson set great store by friendships and he used to say that “if a man does not make new acquaintances as he advances through life, he will soon find himself left alone. A Man, Sir, should keep his friendships in constant repair.”

*Boswell kept asking Johnson about his opinion of Bishop Berkeley the idealist philosopher. To repeated queries Johnson walked up to a rock and kicked it hard and then looking at Boswell told him “Thus do I refute Berkeley”, implying that the Idealist denial of the reality of objects is incorrect.

*Johnson was always witty and quickin repartee. On his death bed he was as alert as ever. To Dr. Warren’s hope that he was feeling better, Johnson said “No, Sir; You cannot conceive with what acceleration I advance towards death.”

Points to Ponder

- Johnson was a fascinating mix of what would today be considered liberal and conservative views: if you were to read his work you would find that he espoused the rights of women and blacks, opposed slavery and thought of nationalism as limited in its worth. At the same time he was an anti-feminist, a staunch Anglican and believed in an ordered society.
- While today Dr. Johnson is known for his witty repartee and sharply directed humor his work reveals the depth of his intellect and the serious consideration he gave to practically every question that concerns individuals.

