Critical Analysis of Samuel Johnson's "London":

London, published in 1738, represents Johnson's attempt to satirize the grubby world of London and also to rise above it. The poem is an "imitation" of the third Satire of the Roman poet Juvenal, which probably dates to the first century. In this poem, Juvenal imagines a friend of the poet, named Umbricius, who is sick and tired of the city of Rome and is leaving for the countryside for good. In doing what was called an "imitation" of his classical source, Johnson is not simply translating Juvenal's poem, but updating it, finding modern correlations to the Latin original. Here, London stands in for Rome, "Thales" stands in for Juvenal's friend Umbricius, and the Tuscan countryside to which Umbricius was headed becomes Wales. Exhausted by the filth, crowds, noise of London, and the difficulty of making a living as a writer, Thales (believed by some scholars to refer to Richard Savage, another hack writer who had become a friend of Johnson's) in some ways expresses Johnson's own frustrations. But London itself, published in a handsome folio edition, written in the heroic couplet form that to readers of the 1730s identified the high style of serious poetry, using the form of the imitation to signify its neoclassical aspirations, and hyped in the pages of the Gentleman's Magazine (which published ads for the poem, and also excerpted it), is clearly an attempt to Johnson to get out of hackdom as soon as possible, to become a poet like Alexander Pope, making a good living independent of the whims and tight fists of the booksellers and magazine editors.

The poem also positioned itself as part of the growing opposition to the government of Sir Robert Walpole, who had dominated British politics since taking over as the de facto Prime Minister (there was no such official position yet) in 1721.

Walpole successfully suppressed dissent through a mixture of brutality, bribery, and control of the print media. By the late 1730s, however, attacks on his regime were becoming more open and frequent, prompting new attempts on the part of his government to suppress dissenting voices. In particular, the Stage Licensing Act of 1737 called for theater managers to submit all plays for government approval in advance of performance. Prompted in part by satires against the regime like John Gay's The Beggars Opera (1728) and the satirical afterpieces by Henry Fielding that had been very popular in the mid-1730s, the Stage Licensing Act had a chilling effect on the theater. In particular, the passage of the Act thwarted Johnson's attempt to become a playwright himself. Johnson had arrived in London just that year with a half-finished tragedy in his luggage, a play called Irene that he probably imagined as a vehicle by which he could make a lot of money and gain status as an author. But in the aftermath of the Stage Licensing Act, theater managers became extremely cautious about new plays in general, and Irene was not staged until 1749. By using Juvenal's Third Satire as a point of departure, London manages to critique the Walpole regime indirectly and through coded references, but contemporary readers, particularly those in sympathy with the opposition, were readily able to see how the poem mocked Walpole's reign as corrupt.

Probably because of its political stance, London seems to have sold reasonably well, and Alexander Pope, the most famous poet of the period (and a sympathizer with opposition politics), praised it. But as a vehicle for establishing Johnson's reputation as a significant poet who could make a living off his art it was a dead end. Johnson had to continue to grind out work for hire for another decade and a half. It was not until he achieved fame in the

1750s, first as the author of a Spectator-like series of journalistic essays called The Rambler and then as the editor of the Dictionary of the English Language, which made him a kind of national treasure, since he had single-handedly accomplished for English what it had taken large teams of scholars to do for other European languages. Here, let's read Johnson as eighteenth-century Grub Street's finest product–and its most perceptive critic.