

London by Samuel Johnson=

Analysis=

English writer Samuel Johnson's poem "London" was published in 1738, contains 263 lines, and pays homage to Juvenal's Third Satire. The poem is considered a neoclassical work. Neoclassicism was the dominant movement of Johnson's time, and its writers—Johnson, Jonathan Swift, and Alexander Pope—tried to revive classical Greco-Roman styles of writing in the same vein as Horace, Virgil, and Ovid. The primary inspiration for Johnson's work was Juvenal, an ancient Roman satirist who bemoaned the deterioration of Roman society and critiqued the failures of its leadership.

In Juvenal's Third Satire, which Johnson's poem is modeled after, the speaker's friend Umbricius leaves Rome to distance himself from the vices and social ills of the city. He goes to live in Cumae, a Greek colony in Italy. In Johnson's poem, the speaker's friend Thales leaves London for Wales, then called Cambria. The latter is provincial compared to London, but it is where Thales believes he can ground himself and find peace. In this sense, "London" can be considered an escapist narrative, in which Thales decides to leave a large metropolis in order to escape the vices associated with modern cities. He believes that he may find relief in the countryside, near "[s]ome pleasing Bank where verdant Osiers play / Some peaceful Vale with Nature's Paintings gay." By contrasting imagery of a serene pastoral landscape with descriptions of a decaying city, the poem could also be considered a blatant social criticism of the modern urban lifestyle, particularly in British society.

Thales criticizes the social and economic ills of London, citing the rising crime rate in the city—including theft, rape, and murder—and the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor. The poem also discusses corruption and greed, particularly how people living within London's "curs'd walls, devote to vice and gain," all while "unrewarded Science toils in vain." Simply put, the avaricious upper class let the city fall apart for their own benefit, while those devoted to "Science" or academic pursuits conduct their work of advancing human knowledge or advocating for the poor in vain.

Alexander Pope, a leader among the neoclassical poets, praised Johnson's poem, particularly for its political commentary. The evils plaguing London are personified as ghastly caricatures in the poem, a technique that allowed Johnson to vividly depict the social and political ills of the city. These ills are depicted as destroying London and its social fabric, thus prompting Thales's need to escape to Wales.

The poem's formal qualities are representative of the neoclassical school. "London" consists of rhymed heroic couplets, which give the poem a stately, didactic tone that fits Thales's critical attitude towards his subject matter. Moreover, like many neoclassical works, the poem is long and unhurried, preferring verbosity to concision. At 263 lines, it amply covers its subject matter, in many cases conveying a point several times over.