

# Samuel Johnson(1709-1784)

- Often referred to as **Dr Johnson**, was an English writer who made lasting contributions to English literature as a poet, playwright, essayist, moralist, literary critic, biographer, editor, and lexicographer. Religiously, he was a devout [Anglican](#), and politically a committed [Tory](#).
- He is the subject of James Boswell's [The Life of Samuel Johnson](#), described by Walter Jackson Bate as "the most famous single work of biographical art in the whole of literature".

## Poetry

1728-[Messiah](#), a translation into Latin of [Alexander Pope](#)'s *Messiah*

1738-[London](#)

1747-*Prologue at the Opening of the Theatre in Drury Lane*

1749 -[The Vanity of Human Wishes](#)

[Irene, a Tragedy](#) (play) (first performed on 6 Feb. 1749)

## Essays, pamphlets, periodicals, sermons

1750–52 [The Rambler](#) *The Rambler* was published on Tuesdays and Saturdays from 1750 to 1752 and totals 208 articles. Though similar in name to preceding publications such as [The Spectator](#) and [The Tatler](#), Johnson made his periodical unique by using a style of prose which differed from that of the time period. The most popular publications of the day were written in the common or colloquial language of the people whereas *The Rambler* was written in elevated

prose. As was then common for the type of publication, the subject matter was confined only to the imagination of the author (and the sale of the publication); typically, however, *The Rambler* discussed subjects such as morality, literature, society, politics, and religion. Johnson included quotes and ideas in his publication from Renaissance humanists such as Desiderius Erasmus and René Descartes. His writings in *The Rambler* are considered to be neoclassical. In tone and subject matter, *The Rambler* was both lengthier and more serious than its popular ancestor in the genre. It also had a strong element of [didacticism](#).

1758–60 [The Idler](#) (12 essays contributed by Johnson)

1775 [A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland](#) : a travel narrative about an eighty-three-day journey through Scotland, in particular the islands of the Hebrides, in the late summer and autumn of 1773. The sixty-three-year-old Johnson was accompanied by his thirty-two-year-old friend of many years [James Boswell](#), who was also keeping a record of the trip, published in 1785 as [A Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides](#).

## DICTIONARY

•Johnson's [A Dictionary of the English Language](#) (1755) {Until the completion of the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) 150 years later, Johnson's was the pre-eminent English dictionary.}

## NOVELLAS

1759- [The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia](#)

## Biographies, criticism

- 1744-*Life of Mr. Richard Savage*
- 1745-[Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth](#): A commentary on Sir Thomas Hanmer, 4th Baronet's edition of Shakespeare's plays, as *Miscellaneous Observations* or *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* on 6 April 1745

### 1765-[Preface to the Plays of William Shakespeare](#)

There are four components to Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*:

1. A discussion of Shakespeare's "greatness" especially in his "portrayal of human nature";
2. The "faults or weakness" of Shakespeare;
3. Shakespeare's plays in relationship to contemporary poetry and drama; and
4. A history of "Shakespearean criticism and editing down to the mid-1700s" and what his work intends to do.

•**FIDELITY TO FACTS OF NATURE:** Johnson praises Shakespeare for meeting this requirement fully and most satisfactorily. According to him, Shakespeare is, par excellence, the poet of nature. He holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters have a universal appeal. They act and speak like human beings. They are commonly a species.

• **SHAKESPEARE'S REALISM:** Johnson has praised Shakespeare's realism. He says that his depiction of the truth of human nature and human psychology is praiseworthy. He portrayed human characters in a realistic manner. His plays are full of practical axioms and domestic wisdom. He does not depict love as the major human motive and emotion.

**MINGLING OF TRAGIC AND COMIC ELEMENT:** ‘In Preface to Shakespeare’ Dr. Johnson defends Shakespeare for his mingling of the tragic and comic elements in his plays on the grounds of realism and historical background. According to him such mingling only serves to show us the world in which the loss of one man is the gain of another.

**THREE UNITIES:** Shakespeare’s histories are neither tragedy nor comedy and hence he is not required to follow classical rules of unities. The only unity he needs to maintain in his histories is the consistency and naturalness in his characters and this he does so faithfully. In his other works, he has well maintained the unity of action. His plots have the variety and complexity of nature, but have a beginning, middle and an end, and one event is logically connected with another, and the plot makes gradual advancement towards the denouement.

Shakespeare shows no regard for the unities of Time and place, and according to Johnson, these have troubled the poet more than it has pleased his audience. The observance of these unities is considered necessary to provide credibility to the drama. But, any fiction can never be real, and the audience knows this. If a spectator can imagine the stage to be Alexandria and the actors to be Antony and Cleopatra, he can surely imagine much more. Drama is a delusion, and delusion has no limits. Therefore, there is no absurdity in showing different actions in different places.

As regards the unity of Time, Shakespeare says that a drama imitates successive actions, and just as they may be represented at successive places, so also they may be represented at different period, separated by several days. The only condition is that the events must be connected with each other.

Johnson further says that drama moves us not because we think it is real, but because it makes us feel that the evils represented may happen to ourselves. Imitations produce pleasure or pain,

not because they are mistaken for reality, but because they bring realities to mind. Therefore, unity of Action alone is sufficient, and the other two unities arise from false assumptions. Hence it is good that Shakespeare violates them.

**FAULTS OF SHAKESPEARE:** In his "Preface" Johnson defends Shakespeare in many matters, but he does not consider him to be a faultless dramatist. According to him, Shakespeare tries more to please his audience than to instruct them. It seems that he writes without any moral purpose. His plots are often very loosely formed and carelessly pursued. His comic scenes are seldom very successful. In such scenes the jests are generally indecent. Johnson does not take a favourable view of Shakespeare's tragic plays. He accuses him of employing a disproportionate pomp of diction. He condemns Shakespeare for inappropriate use of idle conceit and his over-fondness for quibbles.

Next, his plots are loosely formed, and only a little attention would have improved them. He neglects opportunities of instruction that his plots offer, in fact, he very often neglects the later parts of his plays and so his catastrophes often seem forced and improbable. There are many faults of chronology and many anachronisms in his play.

His jokes are often gross and licentious. In his narration, there is much pomp of diction and circumlocution. Narration in his dramas is often tedious. His set speeches are cold and weak. They are often verbose and too large for thought. Trivial ideas are clothed in sonorous epithets. He is too fond of puns and quibbles which engulf him in mire. For a pun, he sacrifices reason, propriety and truth. He often fails at moments of great excellence. Some contemptible conceit spoils the effect of his pathetic and tragic scenes.

•1779–81-*Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* alternatively known by the shorter title *Lives of the Poets*, is a work by Samuel Johnson comprising short biographies and critical appraisals of 52 poets, most of whom lived during the eighteenth century. These were arranged, approximately, by date of death.

•Johnson divided his [biographies](#) into three distinct parts: a narrative of the poet's life, a presentation of his character (summarized traits), and a critical [assessment](#) of his main poems. He adopted this method not because he failed to perceive relationships between a poet's life and his works but because he did not think that a good poet was necessarily a good man. His method allowed him to make use of his recognition that “a [manifest](#) and striking contrariety between the life of an author and his writings” can exist and to assign different purposes to his analysis of his subjects' lives and their poetry.

•Among the major lives are those of [Abraham Cowley](#), [John Milton](#), [John Dryden](#), [Joseph Addison](#), and [Alexander Pope](#); some of the minor ones, such as those of [William Collins](#) and [William Shenstone](#), are striking. Johnson personally disliked some of the poets whose lives he wrote, such as [John Milton](#) and [Thomas Gray](#).

•He was justly proud of *The Life of Cowley*, especially of its lengthy discussion of the 17th-century [Metaphysical poets](#), of whom Cowley may be considered the last representative.

•*The Life of Pope* is at once the longest and best. Yet in his masterly comparison of Pope and Dryden he acknowledges Dryden as the greater poet.

•Johnson responded most favourably to the works of poets from Dryden to Pope and was skeptical of those produced in his own generation, including the poetry of Gray, Collins, and Shenstone, though he admired Gray's [An Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard](#).

**James Boswell, 9th Laird of Auchinleck** (29 October 1740 – 19 May 1795), was a Scottish biographer, diarist, and lawyer, born in Edinburgh. He is best known for his [biography](#) of his friend and older contemporary, the English writer [Samuel Johnson](#), which is commonly said to be the greatest biography written in the English language.

When the [Life of Samuel Johnson](#) was published in 1791 it at once commanded the admiration that Boswell had sought for so long, and it has since suffered no diminution. Its style was unique in that, unlike other biographies of that era, it directly incorporated conversations that Boswell had noted down at the time for his journals. He also included far more personal and human details than those to which contemporary readers were accustomed. Instead of writing a respectful and dry record of Johnson's public life in the style of the time, he painted a vivid portrait of the complete man, brought to life through a "dramatic" style of dialogue.

**Life-writing involves, and goes beyond, biography.** It encompasses everything from the complete life to the day-in-the-life, from the fictional to the factional. It embraces the lives of objects and institutions as well as the lives of individuals, families and groups.

Life-writing includes autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries, journals (written and documentary), anthropological data, oral testimony, and eye-witness accounts. It is not only a literary or historical specialism, but is relevant across the arts and sciences, and can involve philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, ethnographers and anthropologists.

Recent areas of interest in life-writing studies include the relation of biography to scientific discovery. Life-writing is also an integral part of studies relating to the Holocaust, genocide, testimony and confession, and gender and apartheid.