**LONDON: A Background study**

Samuel Johnson was a famous poet, playwright, and essayist during the neoclassical era of English literature, which comprised the first half of the eighteenth century under the reigns of Queen Anne, King George I, and King George II. This era is also known as the Augustan Age, which name refers to the Augustan period of the Roman Empire, when Latin literature and philosophy flourished. Johnson subtitled his poem “An Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal” in order to directly name the inspiration of the poem: the satirist Juvenal. Juvenal wrote a series of satires during the second century CE that critique the decline and degeneration of the Roman Empire, much as Johnson’s poem critiques the decline and degeneration of the city of London.

***London*** is a poem by Samuel Johnson, produced shortly after he moved to London. Written in 1738, it was his first major published work. The poem in 263 lines imitates Juvenal's Third Satire, expressed by the character of Thales as he decides to leave London for Wales. Johnson imitated Juvenal because of his fondness for the Roman poet and he was following a popular 18th-century trend of Augustan poets headed by Alexander Pope that favoured imitations of classical poets, especially for young poets in their first ventures into published verse.

London is part of the eighteenth-century genre of imitation, or [Neoclassicism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoclassicism). The work was based on [Juvenal's Third Satire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satires_of_Juvenal" \l "Satire_III:_There_is_no_Room_in_Roma_for_a_Roman" \o "Satires of Juvenal) which describes Umbricius leaving Rome to live in [Cumae](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cumae) in order to escape from the vices and dangers of the capital city.

 In Johnson's version, it is [Thales](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thales_of_Miletus) who travels to Cambria ([Wales](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wales)) to escape from the problems of London. Johnson chose Juvenal as a model based on his own appreciation for Juvenal's works. The epigraph from Juvenal, “Quis ineptae [iniquae] / Tam patiens urbis, tam ferreus ut teneat se?” (Juv. 1.30-1) can be translated as “Who is so patient of the foolish [wicked] city, so iron-willed, as to contain himself?”.

The poem describes the various problems of London, including an emphasis on crime, corruption, and the squalor of the poor. To emphasise his message, these various abstract problems are personified as beings that seek to destroy London. Thus, the characters of Malice, Rapine, and Accident "conspire" (line 13) to attack those who live in London.

Who Thales represents is unknown, but it is possible that he represents [Richard Savage](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Savage_(poet)), Johnson's friend who left London to travel to Wales.

**Summary:**

"London" is a poem of 263 lines by Samuel Johnson, and addresses the corruption and vices prevailing in London. The opening lines of the poem are controversial, with the poet bidding farewell to his friend who is leaving England. However, the poet has this consolation, that his friend’s retreat to St. David in Wales will keep his friend away from the vices and corruption of the city of London.

The speaker waits with his friend Thales by the River Thames. He feels sorrowful, because his friend has decided to leave London for the country, but he respects and supports Thales’s decision. The two men look over London, and for a moment, things seem calm. Then Thales frowns and begins to explain why he has chosen to leave the city.

Thales feels that London—and all of England, for that matter—has declined under the current government and its policies. The nation used to be nobler and more just. There were courageous kings such as Edward and Henry, who both won great military victories against England’s enemies. There were also kings such as Alfred the Great, who was righteous and inspiring. Such monarchs created a climate that curtailed criminality. Thales believes that during Alfred the Great’s reign, a single jail could have held half of England’s criminals. He invokes these old rulers to illustrate the heights of greatness from which London and England have fallen.

London is now full of criminals; those who aren’t breaking the law fall prey to those who are. People everywhere are going hungry. They are taken advantage of by the government, which supports “pirates” who prey on Englishmen. Meanwhile, the nation’s leaders are allowed to grow rich by running lotteries and collecting taxes from the poor. These leaders are now driven by the love of money rather than the pursuit of noble aims, leaving Londoners at the mercy of such plutocrats. The working classes are subject to the whims of those with less character but more money. Thales feels that the entire city is falling into ruin as “falling houses thunder on your head.” He attributes these maladies to the misguided culture but lays most of the blame on the greedy and indifferent government, lamenting how each official constantly tries to “raise his treasures higher than before.”

Thales asks to be given a place where honor, kindness, and wisdom aren’t looked down upon. He wants a better life than the one he has in London. At the end of the poem, he tells the speaker that he still has much to add—but they’ve run out of time, since his boat has arrived. He foresees a time when his friend will also flee London—when his “youth, and health, and fortune” are gone—and then feel enraged enough to pen a satire against the city, presumably in the form of the poem “London” itself.