Chapter 22  English Literature

Samuel Johnson

I Choose the Dictionary—
And That’s My Final Answer!

PA'TRON. n.s. [patron, Fr. Patronus, Latin.] 1. One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with indolence, and is paid with flattery. Dr. Johnson

Imagine a world without dictionaries - no etymologies, or word histories, no Latin or Greek references--no embarrassment for not knowing half of what is in there! And yet, without the original efforts of people like Samuel Johnson, society itself might have turned another way at that critical moment in time-- toward ignorance rather than toward knowledge. In practical terms, a turn away from knowledge would have meant no space exploration, medical advances, or high-tech theme parks. No knowledge means no fun. We would have a very short life expectancy, and if we had a cavity in a tooth, it would have to be pulled, not repaired. Or how about living in a society endlessly wrestling with the bubonic plague with no hope for a cure? Knowledge is our champion--if it were a boxer, it might say “I am the greatest!”

If a man does not make new acquaintance as he advances through life,
He will soon find himself left alone.
A man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair.

Dr. Johnson

Knowledge, like friendships, should constantly grow. The Medieval Emperor Sigismund, forty-seventh successor to Charlemagne, rudely replied to a cardinal who corrected his Latin: “Ego sum rex Romanus et super grammaticus.” Or “I am the Roman King and above grammar.” This depressing response unveiled the pride of leadership in the Middle Ages, an attitude that kept many people in poverty and
ignorance for centuries. Samuel Johnson emerges like Superman from a phone booth to codify, energize, and grow the English language!

What’s in a Word?

Like capturing a glimpse of distant galaxies, the light twinkling from a new idea focuses your thoughts and adds confidence to listening and reading pleasures. Once inside your mind, a new word can paint pictures that you would otherwise never see—revealing hidden passageways to the unknown.

The size of a person’s vocabulary is directly related to his or her IQ – the more words you know, the smarter you are.* His dictionary was truly a book of empowerment—for in many instances, conversation is the warfare of life, and words are its weapons.

Yo ho, Yo ho,

The Lexicographer’s Life for Me

As a cornerstone for a history of the mind, Samuel Johnson created the well-known A Dictionary of the English Language, devoted to the honor of England. Johnson definitely added color and character to his dictionary (check out his definition of patron above) but he was superstitious, a believer in God, a lover of praise but not a seeker of it, and susceptible to flattery. Johnson places writers of dictionaries among the class of those “who toil at the lower employments of life.” The lexicographer’s (author of a dictionary) “negative recompense” is “to escape reproach.” The tone of “the Preface to A Dictionary of the English Language” is weary and resigned, with a theme in the Preface suggesting that if he hasn’t succeeded, neither has anyone else. In this excerpt, Johnson indirectly compares the English language to a growing tree. According to the Preface, “no dictionary of a living tongue (can) ever be perfect” is because any living tongue is constantly changing—adding words, dropping words, changing meanings, and the like.
*“Your boss has a bigger vocabulary than you do.” In your experience, is this statement true?

**Depend on it, sir,**

**When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight,**

**It concentrates his mind wonderfully.**

Dr. Johnson

Like the old saying goes, nothing would happen unless it was for the last minute. Deadlines are great taskmasters. Likewise, without a dictionary or structure, any language would be challenged to stay alive. His reason for having undertaken the task of writing a dictionary of English is to help codify it; put some order into the language. He obviously was dissatisfied with the quality of dictionary making up to that point in time. When Johnson “took the first survey,” he found English speech to be lacking in order and rules. The only thing that gave him assistance was general grammar. To collect words for his dictionary, he read the principal writers of his and earlier times. Johnson’s high level of concentration is evident in this work.

**Human life is everywhere**

**A state in which much is to be endured,**

**And little is to be enjoyed.**

Dr. Johnson from *Rasselas*

We have seen that a person’s appearance has very little to do with his or her productivity. In fact, the more challenging the personal circumstances, the greater the chance for character growth if the person keeps working toward the goal and does not give up. Alexander Pope was deformed from spinal leukemia and never grew taller than 4 and ½ feet tall. Poverty dictated his lifestyle as a child – he described himself as a “poor diseased infant.” It is yet another example of success because of failure, not in spite of it. Though unattractive on the outside, Samuel Johnson--the real person inside--was very beautiful indeed.
If you would like to know more about this amazing man—how he overcame adversity to achieve great fame and why he is one of the most quoted men in history, click here.

**Boswell’s Life of Johnson**

There is a circumstance in his life somewhat romantick, but so well authenticated, that I shall not omit it. A young woman of Leek, in Staffordshire, while he served his apprenticeship there, conceived a violent passion for him; and though it met with no favourable return, followed him to Lichfield, where she took lodgings opposite to the house in which he lived, and indulged her hopeless flame. When he was informed that it so preyed upon her mind that her life was in danger, he with a generous humanity went to her and offered to marry her, but it was then too late: Her vital power was exhausted; and she actually exhibited one of the very rare instances of dying for love. She was buried in the cathedral of Lichfield; and he, with a tender regard, placed a stone over her grave with this inscription:

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Here lies the body of
Mrs. ELIZABETH BLANEY, a stranger:
She departed this life
20 of September, 1694.
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*From the Life of Johnson*

Describing an incident in the life of Samuel Johnson’s father, Michael James Boswell, a good friend of Johnson, wrote his biography, *the Life of Johnson*. This work is considered important in literature because it was a milestone in the art of writing biographies. He gave particular details about Johnson’s life rather than vague generalizations, and he was careful to present the whole picture—Johnson’s faults as well as triumphs. In many ways, Boswell is considered to be the father of the modern biography. In the biography, Boswell describes Johnson as “strange and somewhat uncouth.” because his body cramped convulsively; he was scarred; his clothes were slovenly; one eye was useless; and he walked with a struggling gait. How do you think Dr. Johnson might be received on a blind date today?
Let’s face it--our self-concepts are often in need of a little first aid. A kind word, a win on the athletic field, an ‘A’ on the final exam, or even a distant association with a successful person or team often does the trick and heals invisible wounds. James Boswell was no different than you or me in this regard--he wanted to be loved and respected. Boswell’s father, however, rejected his thoughts and ambitions as superficial. Perhaps reacting to this slight, he sought the company of the celebrities in his day. Some might regard this activity as **courageous**, while others might see it as being **vain**, using his new friends to prop up a flagging, or drooping, self-concept. One celebrity happened to be Samuel Johnson and the rest is literary history.

As with many men of genius, Boswell was **exceedingly detailed**, and **presented the good, the bad, and the ugly** of Johnson and in the process, and cemented his and Dr. Johnson’s claim to fame. Additionally, he was **disciplined and persistent**, and took about thirty years to complete this pristine work. Like the rush you feel as your roller coaster car starts to crest over the first hill, reading great authors like James Boswell and Samuel Johnson will send your thoughts up and down hills, around curves–and unlike many TV shows, give you an experience worth remembering.

[Click here](#) for a glimpse of Boswell’s most excellent biography.