

## **Samuel Johnson Criticism: A Study**

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### **Abstract**

This comprehensive study endeavors to scrutinize the multifaceted realm of criticism surrounding Samuel Johnson, a towering literary figure of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Imbued with intellectual prowess and literary acumen, Johnson's influence extends across various genres and facets of literature. Through an exhaustive review of existing literature, this research seeks to unravel the diverse perspectives that have shaped the critical discourse surrounding Johnson's works, life, and lasting impact. Methodologically, the study adopts a systematic approach, meticulously analyzing the evolution of Johnsonian criticism over time. Drawing upon a wealth of primary sources, scholarly articles, and contemporary critiques, the research aims to offer a nuanced understanding of the major themes, controversies, and scholarly debates that have characterized the evaluation of Johnson's literary contributions.

This exploration extends beyond the confines of Johnson's immediate era, engaging with the continuous reinterpretation of his works by subsequent generations of scholars. By examining the ebbs and flows in critical reception, the study aims to shed light on how Johnson's legacy has been shaped and reshaped by evolving literary and cultural contexts.

Through this undertaking, the research not only seeks to contribute to the existing body of Johnsonian criticism but also endeavors to prompt reflections on the enduring relevance and significance of Johnson's works in the broader landscape of literary discourse. As we traverse the annals of Johnsonian criticism, this study invites readers to ponder the complexities inherent in assessing the contributions of a literary luminary whose impact transcends the boundaries of his time.

### **Introduction:**

In the annals of English literature, the name Samuel Johnson resonates as a formidable intellectual force and a towering figure of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Revered for his prodigious contributions spanning essays, poetry, drama, and perhaps most notably, the creation of the first comprehensive English dictionary, Johnson's literary legacy remains both expansive and enduring. However, the assessment of his works has not been a static endeavor; rather, it has evolved dynamically through the varied lenses of critical discourse.

This study embarks on a nuanced exploration of Samuel Johnson criticism, seeking to unravel the intricate layers of interpretation, analysis, and controversy that have enshrouded his literary oeuvre over the centuries. Beyond a mere survey of extant criticism, the research endeavors to engage deeply with the intellectual currents that have shaped the narrative surrounding Johnson's literary contributions. The endeavor is not only to comprehend the critical reception but also to discern the pulse of literary and cultural zeitgeists that have influenced the interpretation of Johnson's works.

Johnson's literary corpus, which spans the ponderous and the poignant, has been both a source of admiration and contention. From his moral essays in "The Rambler" to the satirical prowess displayed in "The Vanity of Human Wishes," Johnson's versatility has invited a spectrum of critical responses.

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This study, therefore, seeks to explore not only the various lenses through which critics have viewed Johnson's works but also the thematic threads that have woven a complex tapestry of interpretation.

Methodologically, our journey through the landscape of Johnsonian criticism involves a meticulous examination of primary sources, scholarly treatises, and contemporary critiques. By tracing the evolution of critical thought on Johnson, from the immediate aftermath of his literary output to the present day, this study aims to illuminate the dynamic interplay between changing literary paradigms and the enduring resonance of Johnson's contributions.

As we embark on this intellectual odyssey, the study not only endeavors to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Samuel Johnson but also invites contemplation on the broader implications of literary criticism in shaping our understanding of literary luminaries. How the reception of Johnson's works has reflected and refracted the cultural, political, and intellectual currents of different eras forms a central inquiry. In probing these questions, this research seeks not only to shed light on Johnson's legacy but also to offer insights into the intricate relationship between critical discourse and the endurance of literary giants in the canon of English literature.

### **Survey of Literature:**

The scholarly landscape surrounding Samuel Johnson and his diverse literary contributions encompasses a rich and multifaceted discourse. This survey delves into key works that have shaped the field of Johnsonian criticism, offering a comprehensive overview of the diverse lenses through which scholars have engaged with his writings.

"Samuel Johnson: The Life of an Author" by W. Jackson Bate (1975):

Bate's comprehensive biographical exploration delves into Johnson's life with a keen focus on the interplay between his personal experiences and literary creations. This foundational work has been pivotal in shaping subsequent biographical perspectives on Johnson.

"Samuel Johnson: A Critical Study" by John Wain (1974):

Wain's critical study scrutinizes Johnson's literary corpus, particularly his moral essays in "The Rambler." Wain offers nuanced insights into the didactic nature of Johnson's moralizing, sparking debates on the philosophical underpinnings of his writings.

"Samuel Johnson: Literature, Religion, and English Cultural Politics from the Restoration to Romanticism" by J.C.D. Clark (1994):

Clark's work situates Johnson within the broader cultural and political context of 18th-century England. By exploring the intersections of literature, religion, and politics, this book contributes to a holistic understanding of Johnson's role in shaping the cultural landscape.

"Johnson's Dictionary and the Language of Learning" by Robert DeMaria (1986):

DeMaria's examination of Johnson's monumental dictionary delves beyond its linguistic significance, exploring its cultural and intellectual implications. This work has been instrumental in expanding discussions on Johnson's impact beyond the literary realm.

"Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England" by Nicholas Hudson (2003):

Hudson's study navigates the complexities of Johnson's relationship with the concept of modernity. By situating Johnson within the broader socio-cultural changes of his time, this work contributes to discussions on Johnson's role as a cultural arbiter

### **Discussion:**

Samuel Johnson's life was marked by significant events that profoundly influenced his literary career. Born in 1709 in Lichfield, England, Johnson faced financial struggles and health issues throughout his life. His early education, marked by scholarship and a voracious appetite for learning, laid the foundation for his later literary endeavors. His journey through various literary circles and his friendship with notable figures such as Joshua Reynolds and Oliver Goldsmith played pivotal roles in shaping his literary perspectives.

Biographical elements have been integral to critical analyses of Johnson's works. Scholars often draw connections between Johnson's personal experiences, relationships, and the themes present in his writings. For instance, his struggles with poverty and physical ailments find echoes in the moral and philosophical themes explored in his essays and poetry.

Samuel Johnson's dictionary, published in 1755, was a groundbreaking lexicographical achievement that had a profound impact on the English language. Critical reception ranged from admiration for its comprehensive nature to debates on Johnson's definitions and choices. Scholars such as Robert DeMaria and Allen Reddick have explored the cultural and intellectual implications of the dictionary. Johnson's dictionary influenced language by standardizing definitions and offering a cohesive understanding of the English language. Culturally, it contributed to a sense of linguistic unity and identity. The dictionary also played a significant role in scholarship, providing a reference point for writers and thinkers of the time.

"The Rambler," a series of moral essays published between 1750 and 1752, showcases Johnson's moral philosophy. Critical perspectives on these essays vary, with some praising the depth of Johnson's moral insights and others critiquing the didactic nature of his writings. Scholars like John Wain have engaged deeply with the philosophical underpinnings of Johnson's moralizing.

Debates surrounding the didactic nature of Johnson's moralizing often revolve around the tension between instruction and entertainment in literature. Philosophical inquiries into morality, virtue, and human nature embedded in "The Rambler" have sparked discussions on Johnson's ethical stance and its relevance. Johnson's satirical writings, particularly "London" (1738) and "The Vanity of Human Wishes" (1749), offer incisive critiques of society and human ambitions. Scholars have delved into the stylistic features of his satire, examining its wit, irony, and rhetorical techniques. Bertrand H. Bronson and W.K. Wimsatt are among those who have analyzed the effectiveness of Johnson's satire.

Johnson's satire is effective in its ability to illuminate societal flaws and human folly. The stylistic features, including his use of classical models and linguistic dexterity, contribute to the enduring impact of his satirical works. Biographical perspectives play a crucial role in shaping Johnsonian criticism. Scholars have investigated how Johnson's life experiences, relationships, and personal struggles influenced the themes, characters, and narrative choices in his works. The publication of James Boswell's "Life of Samuel Johnson" (1791) added a biographical layer to the critical reception of Johnson.

Constructing a comprehensive biographical narrative poses challenges, as Johnson's life was multifaceted and marked by complexities. The implications of biographical criticism extend beyond understanding the author; they influence interpretations of his works and contribute to a holistic view of his literary legacy. The 18th-century England in which Samuel Johnson lived was characterized by significant cultural and political shifts. The Enlightenment era influenced Johnson's intellectual outlook, emphasizing reason, skepticism, and a focus on individual rights. The political landscape, marked by debates on monarchy, parliamentary power, and colonial affairs, shaped the socio-cultural context in which Johnson operated.

Johnson played a pivotal role as a cultural arbiter, contributing to discussions on literature, religion, and politics. His works reflected and engaged with the societal changes of his time, offering insights into the cultural and political dynamics of 18th-century England.

Postcolonial and feminist lenses have been applied to analyze Johnson's writings, revealing layers of meaning and socio-cultural insights. Scholars have explored how Johnson's works engage with colonial narratives and gender dynamics. Helen Deutsch and Laura Mandell, among others, have contributed to this critical discourse. Postcolonial perspectives highlight Johnson's engagement with colonial issues, challenging traditional readings of his works. Feminist analyses unveil the nuanced portrayal of women in Johnson's writings, inviting a reevaluation of his attitudes toward gender roles. The field of Johnsonian criticism has evolved over time, reflecting changing literary paradigms and scholarly approaches. Early analyses tended to focus on biographical elements and moral philosophy, while contemporary scholarship embraces diverse perspectives, including postcolonial, feminist, and cultural studies.

Changing literary paradigms have influenced interpretations of Johnson's works, expanding the scope of critical inquiry. Scholars continue to engage with and reassess Johnson's contributions in light of evolving theoretical frameworks and cultural contexts.

Johnson predates the postcolonial era as it emerged in the mid-20th century. Therefore, he didn't engage directly in postcolonial criticism as we understand it today. However, contemporary scholars have applied postcolonial perspectives retrospectively to analyze Johnson's works. One notable area of exploration is Johnson's reflections on colonialism, particularly in his writings that touch upon Britain's imperial ventures.

One work that has received postcolonial scrutiny is Johnson's "Taxation No Tyranny" (1775), where he discusses the American colonies and their resistance to British taxation. Scholars have examined this text through postcolonial lenses, exploring the power dynamics, rhetoric, and attitudes toward colonial subjects.

It's essential to note that the application of postcolonial criticism to historical figures like Johnson involves a retrospective analysis, as the theoretical framework itself emerged long after their time. The insights gained from postcolonial readings provide a contemporary lens for reevaluating the complex interplay of colonial issues within Johnson's works.

### **Conclusion:**

In concluding this study on Samuel Johnson criticism, we've explored the intricacies of his life, literary contributions, and critical reception. Biographical elements, Johnson's dictionary, moral philosophy, satire, and diverse critical lenses have enriched our understanding. The evolving landscape of Johnsonian criticism, embracing changing paradigms, emphasizes its enduring relevance. This study beckons future explorations into the dynamic world of Samuel Johnson, ensuring his legacy remains a vibrant subject of scholarly inquiry.

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