Top of Form

Bottom of Form

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*London’* by Samuel Johnson Bottom of Form

*‘London’* was written by Dr. Samuel Johnson in 1738 in imitation of the Third [Satire](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/satire/) of Juvenal. In Juvenal, Umbricius leaves Rome because of corruption and hypocrisy. In this poem of Johnson, Thales is leaving London because of the vices and follies of the people who are living there. This poem consists of 263 lines. The first 34 lines of the poem are spoken by the narrator or Johnson. For the rest, Thales is the sole [speaker](https://poemanalysis.com/diction/speaker-in-poetry/).

Summary

*‘London’* by Samuel Johnson is about the hypocrisies and follies of the people living in London and is described by the narrator’s friend Thales.

In the poem *‘London,’* the narrator’s friend, Thales, describes why he does not want to live in London and wants to leave the city. He states that he is leaving this place because he can not stand to live with hypocrites.

Thales also satirizes the government in power at that time. He satirizes them by saying that they are bribing some common people to follow their rules so that others can also follow the same. He also praises King Henry V and Queen Elizabeth and describes the development they made during their reign in the city of London. There are a lot of things Thales wants to say to his friend, but, at this moment, a boat arrives. He boards on the boat wishing his friend happiness and success.

Themes

Johnson’s poem taps on the themes of corruption, hypocrisy, and rustic life. According to Thales, there is a lot of corruption in London. The ruffians are roaming on the streets and can rob anyone at any time. There are a lot of hypocrites in the city. Rustic life is much better than the urban life of London as it is much purer. Thales would rather go to the countryside rather than staying in the city.

This poem also highlights contemporary politics. Johnson describes how politicians take wrongful advantage of people’s beliefs. They cheat the public and only favor those who follow their orders. The fake rulers never did proper justice, and they bribed pensioners to follow their rules. Some leaders even applied waste tax policies only to rob people. According to the speaker, they should return all the resources they have robbed from people.

Analysis

The [Epigraph](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/epigraph/) has been taken from Juvenal’s satire. It can be translated as “Who can endure this monstrous city, who is so iron-willed can bear it.” The first two lines set the [tone](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/tone/) and [mood](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/mood/) of the work. These lines depict the city life as futile. Those who live there cannot remain content after seeing the condition all around. Somehow these lines give a hint regarding what Samuel Johnson was going to write in his poem *‘London’*. They also show what is going on in the narrator’s mind regarding Thales and his friend.

The following analysis of Johnson’s poem is based on the [revised 1748 version of the text](https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/london-poem-imitation-third-satire-juvenal) published in “A Collection of Poems by Several Hands” by R. Dodsley.
In the first four lines of Johnson’s *‘London,’*there is grief in the speaker’s heart because London has been deteriorated by the ruling government. At the same time, there is also a fondness for Thales in his heart.

In the first line of this poem, Johnson attacks the government led by Sir Robert Walpole. At the same time, he is showing his affection towards Thales. He says that when his friend is sad inside and asks him for farewell, he is in a [dilemma](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/dilemma/) concerning whether he should be happy or sad.

When he thinks about it with a calm mind, he comes to the point that he should praise his friend for his foresightedness for leaving the land of corruption behind, but at the same time, he must regret that his friend is leaving him alone.

In the second line, Thales represents the poet Robert Savage, one of Johnson’s friends. He left London due to adverse circumstances and settled in Wales. However, Johnson insists that the resemblance between Thales and Savage is coincidental. In Juvenal’s satire, Umbricius departs Rome to settle in Cumae. Besides, Johnson enhances the authority of the speaker by giving him the name of the great Greek mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher from Miletus, Thales.
His friend is leaving and going to a place which is very far from London and is free from corruption, where the air is pure, like the countryside. It seems that the speaker’s friend is going to Cambria which is the ancient name for Wales. He is leaving for Cambria, where he can pay homage to St. David, like a true English descendant of him. He can lead a peaceful life there.

This section of Johnson’s *‘London’*imitates lines 5-9 of Juvenal’s Third Satire. In the eighth line, Johnson alludes to St. David. He is the patron saint of Wales. In Juvenal, the narrator’s friend sets out for Cumae. It is situated near Naples in Southern Italy, the home of the Cumaean prophetess.
The speaker says that everyone would like to leave London unless they are bribed to stay at the place, else they would prefer to live in Scotland. Hibernia is a reference to Ireland. The “Strand” is a busy street in London, close to Johnson’s house.

Johnson’s speaker says that one will not die untimely in London until one suffers starvation. There is a strong possibility of this since there are a lot of malice, hypocrisy, and conspiracies. He says that in the city there are a lot of ruffians who can come and seize others’ property or they can lose their property to the sudden outbreak of fire.

In the city, “relentless ruffians” ambush all the time for a lonely passerby. The worst case is that the “fell attorney” (cruel lawyers) waits like a wild creature to latch onto his prey, a [metaphorical](https://poemanalysis.com/figurative-language/metaphor/) reference to his clients. Not only that the houses are so congested that it seems they can fall now or then. The people there have no faith in God and they can mislead a person at any time. Who can live in such a place? That’s the question that troubles the speaker most.
The speaker and Thales both wait at the bank of the river for the “wherry” (a rowing boat) that will take Thales to a sea-going vessel, while Thales is holding a little sum of money that will help him to make his living there.

The speaker states that by standing near the bank of the Thames river silently, they can watch a glimpse of the Greenwich state (maybe in the reflection of water), where Queen Elizabeth was born. They will seize this opportunity to kneel and pay homage to her because she was an ideal ruler. He says that it was a beautiful time when Queen Elizabeth I was reigning the country. She was glorious in her reign and thinking of it still makes them proud. The Queen’s name reminds the speaker of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588.
By “her cross”, the speaker refers to the large red cross of the White Ensign, hoisted by the Royal Navy. In the following line, he points at the rivalry between the Spanish and English navy regarding the supremacy over trade and commerce. It was believed that England was afraid of facing the Spanish force. However, in 1739, Walpole declared war against them.

The speaker says that the people in present are playing some stupid masquerades. Their thinking is degraded by such incitements to immorality. Johnson attacks Walpole saying that the government is too selfish and has increased the rate of taxes.

He says that now the people of England have forgotten the victory led by Queen Elizabeth. They are full of the senses of woe and hypocrisy. Thereafter, Thales looks forward to the country he is going to. He reminds himself of London and the days he spent there.
From this section (line 35), Thales speaks and remembers all the days he has lived in this city London. He says that nobody wants to get any “cheap reward of empty praise”. None wants to return to those cursed walls behind which people shamelessly commit vices and only think of personal gain.

Those who devote themselves to science, art, and knowledge, are wasting their toil in vain. There is none to recognize their efforts and hard work. The speaker is hopeful that one day everything is going to be fine. But, his hope doubles his distress. Every moment he spends in this city lessens his hope.
The speaker does not how long he remains steady. Though he thinks so, he can sense the warmth of life is still there reveling in his veins. He prays to the almighty to grant him his wish to find a happier place. The speaker wants to go to a place where honesty reigns and commonsense is no disgrace.

In the following lines, Johnson depicts a beautiful picture of serene rustic life. The depiction of a rural and purer landscape creates a [contrast](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/juxtaposition/) with the harsh city life. According to the speaker, he would like to visit a pleasing bank where green willows (“verdant osiers”) play. Some peaceful valley might be there where nature’s gay paintings soothe his eyes.

When he thinks of London, it distresses him. He just wants to leave this place with no heavyweight on his back. And all the time he has spent here is with force, making it all in vain. Thales asks his friend to wish him success and wishes him to live in a place that is as kind as heaven, where there is all honesty and there should be no disgrace.
Thales says that he would go to the place where once the Britons took refuge. When the Germanic tribes, especially Saxons invaded their land, they retreated to Wales. He says that he can be safe in poverty but he will live in peace there. The speaker prays to God to provide him with some secret cell to live in. Thus he can easily avoid the despotic ruler’s sway.

Johnson hasn’t used any name in line 50. According to Fred Springer-Miller, the name hinted here is George II or Robert Walpole, who are depriving people of their rights and filling their pockets with people’s money. This line is a close [paraphrase](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/paraphrasing/) of Boileau: “Que George vive ici, puisque George y sait vivre”. Apart from that, the blanks can be filled with any name who learned to live in London, symbolizing national vice and shame.
Hales says to let those people live who get a pension from the government for not opposing it. They are such people who can make a patriot a scapegoat and a courtier feel proud despite him being fake and vivacious. Thales satirizes the government and says that the courtier is proud because he is bribed by the government and does not oppose the fake policies of the government, and what type of government it is: a government that bribes its people and is leading them to the wrong path.

Then, Thales tells his friend and readers, about the followers of the government. He describes them as the people who can take people’s rights away. The government is no longer the people’s government because it is pleading to pirates who will make the country hollow one day. These people can lie so well that it can look like the truth. They will make all of the other people slaves if they do not oppose them. Thales, in his anger, says that let those people live in this place and make their palaces, made from the tax and lottery collected by wrong methods. These taxes can be called the plunder because it is almost looted from the commoners.
In 1737, most theaters were given to the opera singers, and a licensing servitude [act](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/act/) was passed in favor of this and most of the theaters were closed. So, Thales is saying that the people in power can do anything because none can stop them from doing what they think is right. No one can restrain them in any manner.

He says that all their plundered money from colonies has been taken by these rulers. Now, they can live in great wealth and fame because no one is going to rebel against them. Because of these things, one day the public crimes will fill the pot of goodness in heaven with their sins and cross their limit. Then, he says to his friend that there is no hope for him to live because there are such people who do a lot of thieveries and, after being caught, tell lies in court.
He says that he can not tolerate these things, so there’s not a single hope for him to live in such a suffocating place. Neither can he be convinced by a diplomat, nor can he be convinced by a poet. He cannot be overwhelmed by any of them.

The speaker is not one of those people who can be bribed. Nor does he have the power to go against The Daily Gazetteer. It was the paper that contained the apologies for the court. He can not be like those orators (such as John “Orator” Henley) who preach in their own house to be praised by the hypocrites in government. Thales can not cut his principles. He says to his friend that there are such types of people in this city, who can bribe a lover or a virgin to take their innocence away.
In this section of *‘London,’*Thales tells his friend that those leaders can rise by their sweet tongue. In contrast, he has a rustic and innocent self. He does not know how to deceive someone or do something wrong. He can not accept to be a beggar, nor be a spy. Neither can he live a life with no regard, nor can he die without being lamented. He says that these people do not have an ounce of social guilt. They are not endeared by social guilt but are such racketeers that do not let their future get affected by it. In the last line of this section, the speaker alludes to Orgilio, an imaginary character successful in racketeering.
Thales says that the people who have been bribed by the government seem inclined towards Marlborough. John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, is referred to here. He had a reputation for avarice. Likewise, George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham, squandered a vast fortune.

In the following lines, the speaker tells his friend to turn his eyes from the “glitt’ring bribe”. Some things are much greater than the value of gold such as “peaceful slumber”, “self-approving day”, “unsullied fame”, and ever-gay conscience.

Those who have now become the favorite of the nation spend their days there peacefully. They are the real villain and enemies of London, and they have made it their comfortable home. These people are much worse and smelly than the “common shore” (the common sewer where the corrupt cities dispose of their refuse) of continental Europe.

Their eager thirst will never stop, and they will quench their lust either by fate or by folly. They shall lead the country towards corruption. Thales cannot tolerate such rules and doesn’t want to live in a place that is similar to a “French metropolis”.

According to Thales, London used to be the land of the heroes where once King Edward III, who was also a successful commander, reigned and initiated the Hundred Years War against France. London used to be the land of heroes and saints. It had its grandeur once upon a time and used to be graceful, which was also praised by other people.

But now the people of London have become thoughtless and Edward’s victory has dwindled. It is far from its sense of freedom and piety. Now, England imitates France which has won. They mimic the people who are living there. They are not better than a wheel. Thales says that their people have been degraded from their past glory. People from other countries think that the  English people are no longer that strong, hence, no need to servile them.

The people of England are no longer artful, valuable, fluent, and flexible. The bad rulers have made their country weaker in comparison to the foreign powers. Because of them, London’s industry is not able to trade more, as it used to do before. Everyone knows that they have tied the science industry. Forgetting their real duties for their nation, they are now singing, dancing, cleaning shoes, or curing a clap. That’s why “sciences” are compared to a “fasting monsieur”. The speaker ironically remarks that the rulers bid the sciences “go to hell, to hell he goes”. And if the people keep tolerating, then they are not very far from slavery.

He says that he saw how the Britons fought with Saxons, and he did take a breath in the air when King Henry V defeated the French. King Henry V was the conqueror of the conquerors and was very down to earth. He used to forgive people easily. But, when he was outraged, no one could stop him. He had wit and was worthy of his bravery. According to the speaker, Henry was honey-lipped and strong. At the time of his rule people lived happily.
In this section, Johnson criticizes contemporary art forms. In the first two lines, he talks about how a thousand graces shined in every face during king Henry’s reign. At that time, a divine harmony existed in the country. The same was reflected in everyone’s tongue, a reference to their spoken words.

From the following lines, the speaker starts satirizing his country’s artists. According to him, English artists try to imitate the foreign trend in vain. They receive awkward flattery from the commoners as well as the rulers. Along with that, the speaker says the “discerning age” admires their talents for the stage. But, they venture on imitating others’ art and perform the borrowed part. It means they lack originality and creativity. Still, they are praised by the rulers.
In this section of *‘London,’*Thales remarks about how the writers of his time imitated their master’s ideas. They repeated the old maxims and ironically in their works the speaker can find the old faces. The artists try to comply with the classical form in wild absurdity. They do not even look at things with their own eyes. Their lack of originality is severely criticized here.

Moving on to the following lines, the speaker highlights that the people who followed those in power not only lacked original thoughts but their emotions were also controlled by someone else. Moreover, they lacked common sense. That’s why they did not even know when to laugh or when to cry. They are so timid that they start to tremble in dog days and keep sweating in December if the master tells them to feel that way. For all the reasons given above, the speaker finally asks how he can dwell in such a place. Nothing can fix them at all.
Thales says that in London some deceptive slaves live. They can lie in front of the rulers without feeling guilty. Those spineless men can make one believe their lies at the very first glance. In the city, they celebrate these vices. And the judgment of the new King can lead them to death. His judgment can’t be appreciated like a stammerer’s or stutterer’s [speech](https://poemanalysis.com/literary-device/dialogue/).

He is groping and breaching his people and promoting obscene arts. The people who are bribed by the rulers are fake. First, they invade one’s mind and get their feelings or secrets and then stab them right in the chest. They influence a person in a manner that makes a person follow these bad rulers. They also rob one of his confidence to go outside.
Several crimes are committed daily in this place but no one is as shameful as poverty. The only shame is being poor. The law does not pay any attention to this. It only cares for those who don’t object to them and worship them like a muse. Now those people who work hard have become a joke. They don’t even have money to buy some clothes. When the fake courtiers see them they make fun of them and look down upon them. They taunt them every day in thousands of ways.
Thales says that of all the harassment to the innocent people, the tickling, scornful, or taunting jest’s words make them feel bitter and worse. It makes them feel distressed. Their heart is wounded by these scornful comments that it’s really difficult to heal. And these hypocrites and blockheads insult them by saying: they are so poor that it is seldom that there is a place reserved for them in heaven. The hypocrites say that they are pitiful and God is also not going to waste a seat in heaven for them. They can live on no secret island and are not able to claim their part as Spain laid claim to some of the British colonies in 1738.
Thales urges the public and says that they should rise against this rude oppression, and they should not bear it anymore. But, then accepting the truth he says that they can’t be able to rise rapidly because they are depressed by poverty. He says that, in London, the process is slower. Everyone is enslaved by gold or wealth. It seems as if materialism has bought their souls into a good bargain. Here, people’s behavior is controlled by money, and the pensioners have sold people’s rest for their good. Their smiles are fake and their looks are like merchandise. In this way, Johnson criticizes the people of his time.
In these lines of *‘London,’*Thales says that pensioners have been bribed by the present rulers and, thus, they have become flatterers. They only do things to please their rulers but not to serve the country. Thales says that the flatterers should listen to the public and their problems. He says that if they go through every street they will find the problems faced by the common people. Johnson uses hyperbolic language in this section to emphasize the distress of the commoners, ignored by the rulers.
By pointing at the rulers, Thales says that they have been raised from this site and have gained wealth and beautiful palaces. After gaining more wealth, they look down upon the public. He urges the rulers to look at the bad and tremendous situation of the people and the things they are going through. The flatterers’ sight will start aching if they look into the circumstances of common people. Now he advises the rulers that they should take the public’s horrors away and leave them a sense of security. They should give food to the one who is starving instead of leading him to death.
Johnson’s speaker says to his friend that the flatterers are not going to listen to this advice and are not going to apply it to themselves. Most of this is going to be in vain. They’ll neglect it and are going to insult this speech. On a clear day, people who come to know of these racketeer pensioners’ wealth become surprised after knowing this. They only discussed this among themselves, due to which it became a rumor and spread like a flame.

It will work like salt works on the wound, on the public’s heart, and they’ll only mourn without doing anything. These racketeers should not only keep their wealth and luxury for themselves, but also they should spread it like the light of heaven. But “heaven’s just bolts” will burn all they have piled by deceiving others.
Thales tells his friend the people who are looking honorable and proud in front of people are not like that. They are seizing people of their fate. What they are doing is contemptible. They should pay their gratitude towards the public by refunding the property they have seized.

While building his palace, the ruler should also build houses for people. But, instead of doing this, they only make money for themselves by selling and buying the boroughs: they have made their treasures higher than before. Their palaces are built of polished marble. The symbolic Orgilio does not seem pleased, though his “golden pile aspire(s)”. Those hedonistic people want to make more money. They are still not satisfied.
They have their autonomy over theaters and the country. Nothing [affects](https://poemanalysis.com/definition/affective/) them. They want to rule all the parts, even the rivers. The pensioners only want to make their superiors happy. They don’t want to do anything for London city.

Thales says that he will go to the countryside where he doesn’t have to care about these people. He will live his life happily. There will be his own rules under which he will feel a sense of security. The speaker says he will do whatever he wants to do there. There will be no crisis. That will be a place where he can live happily walking every morning and evening, listening to nature’s endless music.
The speaker wants to stay away from the follies of people. According to him, in London, some people taunt him and the people who present themselves to be heroes are the real stabbers, they seem to be the lords of the streets. They terrorize the people and kill others for the sake of money. These people seem like they are coming with light. But, the speaker advises his friend not to trust their beguilement. They are not going to give him any blessings, so as soon as he sees them he must close his door and go inside.
The rulers are cruel, and they have no sense of guilt. They are like midnight murderers. Those men can kill one anytime and even at one’s funeral. They will behave as if nothing happened. These people do not provide help to people. They can do anything to raise votes and do nothing else. What they are doing is sinking the country back. They do nothing but visit their mistresses.

In this section, Johnson refers to Tyburn. It was a place of execution situated on the outskirts of London. “Ways-and-means” bills were used to raise money for the government. Besides, in the line “To rig another convoy for the k—g”, Joynson satirizes George II’s visits to his mistress, Amalie von Wallmoden, in Hanover.
There was a time when King Alfred the Great ruled this place. In his reign, the crime rate was very low. A single jail could hold half of the criminals. He used to do fair justice. In his time there were no hypocrites, and he didn’t pay anyone to make them obey him. The special juries were not there in Alfred’s time. Wealthier citizens were part of the special jury. The government used them to get their work done in court.

Thales wants to say a lot of things but, just then, his boat arrived. He tells his friend that time has passed and now he must leave. The speaker could have added a lot to his speech but the boat arrived. He asks for a farewell from his friend and wishes his friend youth, wealth, and fortune.
In the last section of Johnson’s *‘London,’* Thales tells his friend he is going to rustic Kent now and find refuge there. The “wilds of Kent” can be a reference to a large wooded area covering part of Surrey and Sussex. He is tired of the follies and crimes of this city. The speaker will not be able to succeed here.

That’s why he wants to leave this place and take refuge in Cambria for his own sake. In the last line, Thales says that this is a satire and animates everything he wants to say.  On this note, the poem ends.

Historical Context

There was a trend for the imitation of classic poets in the mid and late 18th century. It was started by [Alexander Pope](https://poemanalysis.com/alexander-pope/biography/). This trend, also known as [Neoclassicism](https://poemanalysis.com/movement/neoclassicism/), gained a lot of popularity in the [Augustan age](https://poemanalysis.com/movement/augustan-age/) among the youths. Samuel Johnson also followed the trend and imitated Juvenal’s Third Satire out of his fondness for Juvenal. He wrote *‘London’* right after some time of his arrival in London. He moved there with his wife. Since the trend of imitation was at its peak, Johnson decided to walk into the path shown in [Alexander Pope’s poems](https://poemanalysis.com/alexander-pope/).