

Q. Critically analyse Samuel Johnson's essay *On Idleness*

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Or

Bring out the autobiographical elements in the essay *On Idleness*

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*Ans:* Samuel Johnson, 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. We know well that Joseph Addison and Richard Steele created with their *Tatler* and *Spectator* papers a vogue for the periodical essay and both of them lasted almost to the end of the eighteenth century. One of their greatest successors in this genre was, Samuel Johnson who wrote three series of articles for weekly newspapers, naming them for the personae he adopted in each. The *Rambler* essays were published between 1750 and 1752; the *Adventurer*, in 1753 and 1754; and the *Idler*, in the *Universal Chronicle*, in 1758 and 1759.

*On Idleness*, is an essay by Samuel Johnson, taken from 'The Idler'. Here, Johnson says that idleness is a silent and peaceful quality, that neither raises envy by ostentation, nor hatred by opposition; and therefore no body is busy to censure or detect it. As Pride sometimes is hid under humility, Idleness is often covered by turbulence and hurry.

In the essay, Johnson refers the moralists who like to say that pride is the most widespread vice. But idleness, Johnson argues, is perhaps even more widespread, largely because it doesn't involve anybody else but its practitioner, so it flies under the radar. There are of course people who are conspicuous consumers of idleness, sleep so long they never see the light of the sun, move only from bed to couch and back, and like to boast about it. Then there are those who seem to be very busy because they always make plans and preparations, but they never accomplish anything. There are also those who fill their days with various occupations to avoid what they are really meant to do. Johnson here uses the example of his fictitious friend Sober (himself in reality) who spends his life practising carpentry, shoemaking, being a plumber etc. and especially chemical experiments, producing various useless substances; he "counts the drops as they come from his retort and forgets that, while a drop is falling, a moment flies away". Johnson says he often teased Sober about it, and Sober promised reformation, but always failed. Johnson hopes he is going to become usefully diligent. This essay is written by such a thinker who really knew what idleness was, and as one being guilty of it himself.

In fine, we can conclude saying that Johnson talks about the many forms idleness can take. There are idlers who are proud to call themselves idle, and there are idlers who disguise their idleness with pointless bustling. There are those who occupy themselves by making plans that will never come about. Then there are those who prefer "to fill the day with petty business, to have always something in hand which may raise curiosity, but not solicitude, and keep the mind in a state of action, but not of labour." The exemplar of this type is Mr Sober and Johnson himself as his journey of life reflects. Full of ideas but too lazy to carry them out, he distracts himself with conversation and hobbies and characterises the self. From this point of view, it can be reiterated that there are autobiographical elements present in the essay "On Idleness". But, whatever be the thematic analysis, it is true that Johnson began to be recognised as having had a lasting effect on literary criticism, and even as the only great critic of English literature.