

# London by samuel johnson essay sample

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London: A Poem” was published anonymously in 1738, and was immediately popular, perhaps because, unlike the later “ The Vanity of Human Wishes,” it is fairly easy to read: Alexander Pope praised it, and the impoverished Johnson received ten guineas from Edward Cave, the publisher, for the copyright. It is, the author states, a poem written “ In imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal.” The Third Satire is a poem about the decay of ancient Rome and the decadence which the poet found there: how closely, (for those of you who care to look at the original) do Johnson’s Heroic Couplets echo Juvenal’s themes, images, and emphasis? In what ways does Johnson’s version differ?

What sort of London does Johnson present us with? Can you relate his vision of London to Blake’s? To Dickens’s in Great Expectations? To Eliot’s in The Wasteland? What is he implying about the state of English society in general and government in particular? Is he being realistic, or is he so intent on political satire, directed at George II (who appears here as the “ k — g”) and at Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister, that he exaggerates or distorts facts and contexts? What is the point, for example, of his sardonic references (which at the time were rather daring and even dangerous) to the King’s sexual proclivities? How does the tone of this poem reflect Johnson’s own perspective on government and on the corruption and violence the policies of this government have fostered, and on his own private state of mind (and affairs) at the time?

In what ways, that is, is “ London” a poem about the loss of illusions, about the bitterness of failure?) In what senses is this (in theme, in tone, in structure, in verse form) a Neo-classical poem? How does Johnson contrast

the city with the country, the present with the past, the honest with the corrupt, the wealthy with the poor?