

Beyond mere style in rasselas



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Samuel Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, which follows Rasselas and his companions as they search for the choice of life that generates the most happiness, influenced Johnson's generation so profoundly that the period from 1750 to 1784 has been dubbed the "Age of Johnson." Along with Johnson's philosophical ruminations pondered in the course of this satirical moral apologue, Johnson's writing was, and remains, renowned for its style. Writing with a paralleling Neoclassical structure, with periodic sentences that emphasize the last words of the sentences, and with constant negation, Johnson's style became a distinguishing feature of his work and has inspired a slew of authors to use his techniques in their own work. Given the import centered on Johnson's style by his contemporaries and modern audiences, one must question whether there is significance to Johnson's techniques beyond mere writing style. Portraying paralleling incidents which foreshadow the novel's inconclusive conclusion, emphasizing the weightiness of his novel's ending which changes the novel's entire argument, and negating the entire trajectory of *Rasselas* with his conclusion, Johnson constructs the novel's events to mimic his literary style, thereby amplifying the importance of his literary style.

The novel's events, centered upon Rasselas' journey to discover the nature of happiness, parallel Imlac's own journey, and by concluding that absolutely nothing has changed, the novel negates the possibility of completing its entire mission, to pursue happiness. In this way, Johnson's style, employed all throughout *Rasselas*, anticipates the novel's conclusion, foreshadowing the flabbergasting "conclusion, in which nothing is concluded" (111).

Despite the seemingly nihilistic conclusion that the novel leaves the reader

with, the reader may perceive Johnson's sense of hope, not simply by his mention of G-d and eternal life, but by understanding the paralleling sequence of events in *Rasselas*, which enable one to anticipate another chance for *Rasselas* to pursue happiness. Ultimately, by discerning the manner in which *Rasselas*' sequence of events parallel Johnson's writing style, one can distinguish that the negating conclusion, which seemingly overturns the novel's purpose, is more hopeful than it initially seems.

Notably, the novel's concluding chapter exemplifies Johnson's writing style, which involves parallelism, periodic sentences, and negation. The description of Nekayah's unfulfilled resolution makes use of parallelism: " She desired first to learn all sciences, and then proposed to found a college of learned women, in which she would preside, that, by conversing with the old and educating the young, she might divide her time between the acquisition and communication of wisdom, and raise up for the next age models of prudence and patterns of piety" (112). By placing two antithetical phrases, each beginning with gerunds, side by side (" conversing with the old" and " educating the young,") as well as by including the paralleling phrases " models of prudence" and " patterns of piety," one can perceive Johnson's use of parallelism. The final sentence in the novel is periodic, relying on the last word to make its essential point—the point which overturns the entirety of the novel: " They deliberated a while what was to be done, and resolved, when the inundation should cease, to return to Abyssinia" (112). Finally, the novel portrays negation in its expression of the characters' conclusion that " none" of their goals are procurable: " Of those wishes that they had formed they well knew that none could be obtained" (112). Clearly, Johnson employs

parallelism, periodic sentences, and negation as a part of his writing style in Rasselas.

The significance of these writing techniques increases as one perceives their presence in the plot's structure: as Rasselas' journey mirrors Imlac's travels and as Rasselas and Pekuah make mistakes that parallel their own past blunders, the novel's ending can become understood as a deferment of events, thereby changing the reader's perception about the possibility of the best "choice of life."

Imlac's journey foregrounds Rasselas' and his companions' paralleling journey of searching for happiness and their ultimate abandonment of their search. Early in the novel, Imlac tells the prince his own story about how he came to live in the Happy Valley, describing: how he came from a wealthy family; how he learned and grew to realize that all men, even wise men, have flaws; how he travelled and grew weary of his surroundings; how he learned all he could in the lands he travelled to; how he returned home and failed in his endeavors there; and how he ultimately retreated to the Happy Valley in order to escape life's sombering realities. Imlac concludes his story by admitting to Rasselas that he, like the other attendants in Rasselas' employ, is unhappy. As the privileged Prince Rasselas leaves the Happy Valley in order to travel, to search for the best way to gain happiness through the accumulation of knowledge by researching various modes of living, and to finally return to the confining Happy Valley, one can perceive the manner in which Rasselas' journey parallels Imlac's.

The novel also portrays parallelism by illustrating the manner in which Rasselas and Pekuah repeat their past errors in the novel's conclusion. Early on in the novel, after deciding to leave the Happy Valley, for the span of twenty months Rasselas manages to please himself with imaginative reveries of his impending journey in the outside world, until he regretfully realizes what he's done:

He considered how much might have been done in the time which had passed, and left nothing real behind it. He compared twenty months with the life of man. "In life," said he, "is not to be counted the ignorance of infancy or imbecility of age. We are long before we are able to think, and we soon cease from the power of acting. The true period of human existence may be reasonably estimated at forty years, of which I have mused away the four-and-twentieth part." (15)

This quote proves that Rasselas, upon realizing how quickly twenty months have gone by, understands that he ought to utilize his time wisely and make use of his life while he is physically capable of doing so (before the "imbecility of age" comes upon him). While this awareness prompts Rasselas to finally reinvest himself in seeking passage out of the Happy Valley, he ultimately fails to use this knowledge in making his choice of life at the end of the novel, returning to the utopian Happy Valley rather than living out a productive, fulfilling life.

Pekuah also fails to learn from her trials on their journey as she ultimately avoids the unknown and any change in life. Through Pekuah, Johnson demonstrates the problem with surrendering to one's imagination. The Arab

has the opportunity to kidnap Pekuah only because she retreats to the tents as her imagination gets the better of her and her fear prevents her from accompanying her mistress. When asked by Nekayah what it is that she fears, Pekuah responds: ““ Of the narrow entrance . . . and of the dreadful gloom. I dare not enter a place which must surely be inhabited by unquiet souls. The original possessors of these dreadful vaults will start up before us, and perhaps shut us in for ever”” (71). This fear of entering into the unknown “ dreadful gloom,” a dark “ gloom” in which her safety is uncertain to her, can be understood as Pekuah’s fear of change. Because of her unchecked imagination, Pekuah fears the dark unpredictability of the cave, just as one might fear the unpredictability that accompanies change in life. However, Johnson demonstrates the problem with living in fear of change and unpredictability as this fear only serves to place Pekuah in an unforeseeable situation amongst the tiresome seraglio. While it seems that Pekuah has learned her lesson at the end of the novel after her experiences with the Arab and his seraglio, since she insists she will go along with Nekayah to the catacombs despite her past fear (108), she ultimately fails to recognize the importance of change in life by the novel’s conclusion: “ She was weary of expectation and disgust, and would gladly be fixed in some unvariable state” (112). Her desire to be “ fixed in some unvariable state” is of course possible in the never-changing, confined Happy Valley, but, in reverting to fearing the unknown and change, Pekuah fails to pursue her happiness.

By understanding the manner in which Rasselas’ life parallels Imlac’s, “ The conclusion, in which nothing is concluded,” which can easily be perceived as nihilistic, can be understood as deferring a conclusion for the novel. Given

that Samuel Johnson fought depression, struggled a great deal because of his physical impairments (he had scrofula and poor eyesight, was deaf in one ear, and likely has Tourette's syndrome), and wrote *Rasselas* in order to pay for the funeral of his deceased mother, it is understandable to state that the novel's conclusion is meant to be about the pointlessness of life, just as *Rasselas'* journey with his companions ultimately may strike the reader as senseless since they have seemingly learned nothing. However, given the repetitive structure of the novel explored previously, one may conclude that—just as Imlac left the Happy Valley to accompany *Rasselas* in his search for happiness—*Rasselas*, whose life clearly parallels Imlac's, will one day likely venture out of the Happy Valley, accompanying some youth who desires to gain perspective on the choice of life. Thus, in understanding the deliberate paralleling structure of Johnson's novel, one may perceive that *Rasselas* merely defers an ending.

Johnson's evocation of G-d provides further support for this more hopeful reading of the novel, which is enabled by perceiving the parallelism between the lives of Imlac and *Rasselas*. While the novel ultimately instills in the reader that the pursuit of happiness is a fruitless endeavor (as Johnson relays in his poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes*), it also leaves the reader with hope that there may be more beyond life. As Imlac and *Rasselas* discuss the "Supreme Being" (31) and as the main characters consider the nature of one's soul, which has been made by the "Being" (111), one can surmise that in the fictional realm of the novel G-d clearly exists. As a Christian invoking G-d and the concept of eternal heaven, Johnson clearly means to provide a sense of hope for his readers as Nekayah states just before the novel's

conclusion: “‘ To me,’ said the Princess, ‘ the choice of life is become less important; I hope hereafter to think only on the choice of eternity’” (111). By evoking heaven through “ the choice of eternity,” Johnson, who feared the vacuity of life, clearly means to supply his readers with the hope that, even if one’s pursuit of lasting happiness seems pointless, one can still anticipate the glory and respite of eternal heaven.

Clearly, Samuel Johnson’s writing techniques of parallelism, periodic sentences, and negation in *Rasselas* go beyond mere style since they enable one to perceive the way in which Johnson shapes the plot and what may occur subsequent to the novel’s events, consequently enabling the reader to maintain a sense of hope. By understanding the manner in which the sequence of events mirrors Johnson’s sentences, one can foresee the conclusion’s ultimate negation of the novel’s purpose, to discover the nature of lasting happiness. Also, by gaining insight about the parallels between *Rasselas*’ and *Imlac*’s lives, one may perceive the novel results in the hopeful deferment of an ending—a hopefulness which is supported by the novel’s mention of G-d and heaven.