

SAMUEL JOHNSON AND JAMES BOSWELL

This handout was prepared by Dr. William Tarvin, a retired professor of literature. Please visit my free website www.tarvinlit.com. Over 500 works of American and British literature are analyzed there for free.

An ANSWER KEY is provided at the end of this handout (p. 6).

Note: Text used: W. H. Abrams, ed., The Norton Anthology of English Literature, 7th ed. Vol. 1. New York: Norton, 2000.

I. SAMUEL JOHNSON

A. INTRODUCTION

1. The domineering writer of the second half of the 18th century was Samuel Johnson (1709-1784). Thus this period is sometimes called the Age of _____.

2. Today, little of his prose literary work is read, and he is mainly remembered for the following:

(1) Compiling the first significant _____ of the English language.

(2) The witticism of his conversation, particularly as recorded by his friend James Boswell in his Life of Johnson, usually considered the greatest _____ ever written.

B. JOHNSON'S THE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

1. In 1746, a group of London publishers commissioned Johnson to compile a full-fledged _____ of English (2719).

2. While it took _____ Frenchmen working for _____ years to compile the authoritative Dictionary of the French Language, Johnson working principally by himself—he had the aid of only six part-time assistants—finished his great Dictionary of the English Language in only _____ years (2660, 2719).

3. This epical book has provided the basis for all English _____ since, and no dictionary has exercised the authority on our language that Johnson's dictionary has.

4. What are seven characteristics of Johnson's Dictionary which make it notable in the history of dictionary-making?

(1) It was the first _____-fledged dictionary. Earlier English dictionaries were merely word _____, but Johnson gave complete information (definitions, _____, parts of speech, etymology, etc.) for around _____ words (2719).

(2) It was the first dictionary to employ illustrative _____ from significant writers to elucidate the meaning of words. It contains around 140,000 quotations from 16th to 18th century writers, showing what words meant and how they were used (2719).

(3) It established the central principle of dictionary-making, that a dictionary should be genuinely _____, rather than proscriptive. Johnson is the first dictionary-maker to _____ how a language is and works, not _____ how he or she wants the language to be or to work. Johnson's decision set the course followed ever since by _____ dictionary-makers.

(4) Many of Johnson's _____ are still repeated in modern dictionaries (2719).

(5) The usage as well as the _____ of English words was fixed forever by Johnson in the case of many words.

(6) Johnson's dictionary also explored and established the _____ of many words.

(7) Johnson affirmed that written language will always be determined by spoken language: "The pen must at length comply with the _____" (2721).

C. "FROM A DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE: FROM 'PREFACE'"

1. He says when he began the project he had hoped his dictionary "should fix our language, and put a stop to those _____ [of] time and chance" (2719).

2. However, once he was into work on it, he realized the fantasy of trying to keep language from _____ (2719-20).

3. Thus dictionary-makers, Johnson concludes, must resign themselves to language _____ (2722).

4. Johnson affirms that "the chief glory of every people arises from its _____" (2722).

5. He continues that “no dictionary of a living tongue ever can be _____” (2722), since while the dictionary is being published new words appears and others fall away (2722).

6. Movingly, Johnson states that the person he most wanted “to please” by finishing his dictionary—his beloved _____—had “sunk into the _____” before the project was finished (2723). Note: Mrs. Johnson died in 1752, three years before the work was published.

II. JAMES BOSWELL

A. INTRODUCTION

1. The name of James Boswell (1740-1795), a Scotsman, is fixed with that of Johnson because of The _____ of Samuel Johnson which he wrote.

2. Boswell was 23 when he met Johnson (who was _____) in 1763, and they remained close _____ for the next 22 years (until Johnson’s death in 1784).

3. Boswell recorded many _____ between him and Johnson and between Johnson and other people; these records make up the heart of the book.

4. Only very rarely, it seems, did Boswell ever take _____ of Johnson’s conversations while they were in progress, which might have inhibited the speakers. Boswell’s unusual _____ enabled him to retain what was said until he found time to set it down in writing (2749).

B. THE GREATNESS OF BOSWELL’S THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

1. Published in 1791, Boswell’s The Life of Samuel Johnson by consensus of opinion is the _____ biography ever written.

2. List four characteristics of Boswell’s The Life of Samuel Johnson which make it the greatest biography ever written:

(1) The work captures the brilliant _____ of Johnson, one of the _____ people who ever lived.

(2) Boswell also set the course for modern biography by including all _____ of Johnson, not just his _____ points. The biography shows Johnson as irascible, _____, prejudiced, overbearing, and also as _____ and profound. Significantly, _____ himself had insisted that when Boswell wrote Johnson’s life he should include his _____, not just his virtues.

(3) Boswell used not just his own notes about Johnson, but also Johnson's _____, recollections of Johnson's _____, and citations from Johnson's _____ works.

(4) The biography is a record not only of one man's life but also of literary _____ during the last half of the _____ century. It is a book not just of a _____, but of an _____.

C. "THE LETTER TO CHESTERFIELD"

1. Boswell states that Johnson dedicated the Plan of his Dictionary to Philip Stanhope, the earl of Chesterfield, usually referred to as Lord Chesterfield, a wealthy London _____ (2759).

2. Johnson believed that Lord Chesterfield would provide him _____ support while he worked on the dictionary. However, this financial aid from _____ never came while Johnson was carrying out his enormous task (2759).

3. In fact, Chesterfield had seemed to go out of his way to show "continued _____" and "_____ indifference" toward Johnson through the nine years of the dictionary project (2760).

4. Nevertheless, "when the Dictionary was upon the eve of publication, Lord _____" sent word down that he hoped "Johnson would _____ the work to him" (2760).

5. Furthermore, Johnson was enraged to find Chesterfield suggesting that he had championed the project. "This courtly device," Boswell says, "failed of its effect. Johnson . . . _____ the _____ words [of Chesterfield], and was even indignant that Lord Chesterfield should, for a moment, imagine that he could be [the] _____ of such an artifice" (2760).

6. To expose this deceit, Johnson penned a public _____ to Chesterfield, dated Feb. 7, 1755, which has since been called the Declaration of _____ of authors.

7. In it Johnson chastises Chesterfield and all literary _____ who promise to help authors but do not deliver on their promises: "Seven _____, my Lord, have now passed since I waited in your outward rooms, or was _____ from your door; during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties of which it is useless to _____, and have brought it, at last, to the verge of publication, without one act of _____, one word of _____, or one _____ of favor [from you]. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a [literary] _____ before" (2761).

8. Johnson then writes one of the most famous similes in English literature: "Is not a patron, my lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the _____, and, when he has reached _____, encumbers him with _____? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labors, had it been _____, had been _____; but it has been _____ till I am _____, and cannot enjoy it" (2761).

9. Johnson's letter had the effect of destroying Chesterfield's _____ influence once and for all.

Answer Key

I.

- A. 1. Johnson.
 2. (1) dictionary.
 (2) biography.
- B. 1. dictionary.
 2. forty; forty; nine.
 3. dictionaries.
 4. (1) full; lists; pronunciation; 40,000.
 (2) quotations.
 (3) descriptive; describe; prescribe; reputable.
 (4) definitions.
 (5) spelling.
 (6) etymology.
 (7) tongue.
- C. 1. alterations.
 2. changing.
 3. change.
 4. authors.
 5. perfect.
 6. wife; grave.

II.

- A. 1. Life.
 2. 54; friends.
 3. conversations.
 4. notes; memory.
- B. 1. greatest.
 2. (1) conversation; wittiest.
 (2) aspects; good; dogmatic; brilliant; Johnson; defects.
 (3) letters; friends; literary.
 (4) England; 18th; man; era.
- C. 1. nobleman.
 2. monetary; Chesterfield.
 3. neglect; cold.
 4. Chesterfield; dedicate.
 5. despised; honeyed; dupe.
 6. letter; Independence.
 7. patrons; years; repulsed; complain; assistance; encouragement; smile; patron.
 8. water; ground; help; early; kind; delayed; indifferent.
 9. literary.