### Introduction

Samuel Johnson was a famous poet, playwright, and essayist during the neoclassical era of English literature, which comprised the first half of the eighteenth century under the reigns of Queen Anne, King George I, and King George II.

This era is also known as the Augustan Age, which name refers to the Augustan period of the Roman Empire, when Latin literature and philosophy flourished. Johnson subtitled his poem “A Poem in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal” in order to directly name the inspiration of the poem: the satirist Juvenal. Juvenal wrote a series of satires during the second century CE that critique the decline and degeneration of the Roman Empire, much as Johnson’s poem critiques the decline and degeneration of the city of London.

Part of the attack included, as Brean Hammond puts it, **"a nostalgic glorification of English history that went hand-in-hand with the representation of the present as in the grip of forms of corruption never previously encountered**

### Plot Summary

The poem begins with an epigraph in Latin quoting Juvenal , “Who can endure this monstrous city: who is so iron-willed he can bear it?”

The speaker waits with his friend Thales by the River Thames. He feels sorrowful, because his friend has decided to leave London for the country Wales ( Cambria ) .

**Tho’ grief and fondness in my breast rebel,**

**When injur’d Thales bids the town farewell. ( line 1-2 )**

, but he respects and supports Thales’s decision.

‘**Yet still my calmer thoughts his choice commend,**

**I praise the hermit, but regret the friend.**

The speaker claims that London is a dangerous place for the average citizen. His friend Thales agrees, believing that London has become so full of crime and violence that he no longer feels safe walking through its streets:

**Prepare for Death, if here at Night you roam,**

**And sign your Will before you sup from Home. [ 224-225]**

The two men look over London, and for a moment, things seem calm. Then Thales frowns and begins to explain why he has chosen to leave the city.

**Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,**

**And now a rabble rages, now a fire**

To emphasise his message, these various abstract problems are personified as beings that seek to destroy London**.**

**] Thus, the characters of Malice, Rapine, and Accident "conspire" (line 13)**

to attack those who live in London

Thales feels that London—and all of England, for that matter—has declined under the current government and its policies. The nation used to be nobler and more just. There were courageous kings such as Edward and Henry, who both won great military victories against England’s enemies.

Illustrious Edward ! from ***the realms of day,*** [ Heaven ] 99

***The land of heroes and of saints survey100***

There were also kings such as Alfred the Great, who was righteous and inspiring. Such monarchs created a climate that curtailed criminality. Thales believes that during Alfred the Great’s reign, a single jail could have held half of England’s criminals.

**A single jail, in Alfred’s golden reign,**

**Could half the nation’s criminals contain (248-249)**

He invokes these old rulers to illustrate the heights of greatness from which London and England have fallen.

London is now full of criminals; those who aren’t breaking the law fall prey to those who are.

**Their ambush here relentless ruffians lay**

**And here the fell attorney prowls for prey 15-16**

And, politicians are not far behind. They “devote [themselves] to Vice and Gain.” By hoarding and lavishly spending so much wealth that could be used to help the poor, the elite classes create an atmosphere of desperation in which the poor must resort to lives of crime in order to survive.

People everywhere are going hungry. They are taken advantage of by the government, which supports “pirates” who prey on Englishmen. Meanwhile, the nation’s leaders are allowed to grow rich by running lotteries and collecting taxes from the poor.

**The guard of commerce, and the dread of Spain,**

**Ere masquerades debauch’d , excise oppress’d 28-29**

Further in lines 58-59

**Let such raise palaces, and manors buy**

**Collect tax, or farm a lottery**

These leaders are now driven by the love of money rather than the pursuit of noble aims, leaving Londoners at the mercy of such plutocrats/ tycoons/big shots.

It is said that Walpole spent around 50,000 pounds (from 1731-1741) in an effort to propagandise everybody through his control over the papers like Gazetteer and Hyp- Doctor. Walpole’s efforts to control the work of outspoken writers are what probably lead to the most famous lines from this poem.

***“This mournful truth is everywhere confest***

***SLOW RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPREST****”*

It was through measures like the Licensing Act of 1737, which required every production to go through the Chamberlain’s Men before public viewership that created a festering resentment in the minds of struggling writers like Johnson. **These lines are In Capital letters to highlight the pain felt by Johnson as a poet who had his dreams of advancement being abbreviated due to inadequate funds.**

Especially in a London **“Where all are slaves to gold/ Where looks are merchandise, and smiles are sold/ where won by bribes, by flatteries implor’d. ( 178-180)**

The working classes are subject to the whims of those with less character but more money. Thales feels that the entire city is falling into ruin as

“**falling houses thunder on your head**. **17**

Thales argues that the status of education in London is deplorable. He claims that “unrewarded Science toils in vain,” indicating that the city no longer prioritizes education and higher learning.

**All sciences a fasting Monsieur knows**

**And bid him go to hell, to hell he goes** ! 115

The narrator attributes these maladies to the misguided culture but lays most of the blame on the greedy and indifferent government, lamenting how each official constantly tries to “ **raise his treasures higher than before”. 205**

Thales asks to be given a place where honor, kindness, and wisdom aren’t looked down upon. He wants a better life than the one he has in London.

Pastoral Life

While giving his harangue/ diatribe / attack against London, Thales stands ready to disembark for Wales, which was then known as Cambria. He encourages his audience to do likewise:

Quick let us rise, the happy Seats explore,

And bear Oppression’s Insolence no more…

For Thales, London’s problems are unsolvable, meaning that the only real solution is to move away. Even though the speaker regrets his friend’s decision to leave, he can understand it as well. They share the romanticized vision of the countryside that characterizes pastoral literature, which looks to the country as a place “Where honesty and sense are no disgrace.” Thales imagines escaping to “[s]ome pleasing Bank where verdant Osiers play” or a “peaceful Vale with Nature’s Paintings gay.” He longs for a natural setting full of life and color as opposed to the decay and filth of the streets of London near the Thames.

At the end of the poem, he tells the speaker that he still has much to add—but they’ve run out of time, since his boat has arrived. He foresees a time when his friend will also flee London—when his “youth, and health, and fortune” are gone—and then feel enraged enough to pen a satire against the city, presumably in the form of the poem “London” itself.