



A Dictionary of the English Language and A Brief to a Slave
Samuel Johnson page 619-625

About the Author

1. What did Johnson do after his school failed?
2. What brought him a lot of attention?
3. What is considered Johnson's greatest work?
4. What awards did he receive for his lifetime of work?
5. Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* is the first what in English Literature?
6. What does he include other than just definitions?

A Dictionary of the English Language

1. Define denotation.
2. Define connotation.
3. In what ways is a collection of poems or stories similar to a collection of flowers?
4. How does Johnson define lexicographer? What part of this definition is meant to be humorous?
5. Look at the many definitions of nature. Write a sentence showing the definitions of three from the list.
6. What are the two definitions of oats? In which countries are oats used in these ways?
7. Based on the definition of patron, how do you think Johnson felt about depending for his livelihood on patrons?
8. Where does Johnson insert connotations instead of denotations?

A Brief to Free a Slave

1. Define thesis.
2. Define argument.
3. Why does the author discuss the history of slavery?
4. What argument is Johnson refuting?
5. What sentence shows he subscribed to the notion that people are "created equal"?
6. What does Johnson say people are in their "original state"?
7. How can an individual forfeit his liberty?
8. What do Jamaica's laws say about Knight's situation?
9. What is considered "sufficient testimony" against Knight's bid for freedom?
10. What should never give in to political convenience?
11. Is the author's argument based on law, morality, or political convenience?
12. What arguments are being made in favor of slavery?
13. Why does Johnson bring up these arguments in his brief?
14. Does Johnson think slavery is morally wrong? Explain your response.

Selections from Samuel Johnson's Dictionary

Directions: Read the following selections from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*. Then complete the exercise.

air	The element encompassing the terraqueous globe. If I were to tell what I mean by the word air, I may say, it is that fine matter which we breathe in and breathe out continually; or it is that thin fluid body in which the birds fly, a little above the earth; or it is that invisible matter, which fills all places near the earth, or which immediately encompasses the globe of earth and water.
alliga' tor	The crocodile. This name is chiefly used for the crocodile of America, between which, and that of Africa, naturalists have laid down this difference, that one moves the upper, and the other the lower jaw; but this is now known to be chimerical, the lower jaw being equally moved by both.
a' row	The pointed weapon which is shot from a bow. Darts are thrown by the hand, but in poetry they are confounded.
ba'llerdash	Any thing jumbled together without judgment; rude mixture; a confused discourse.
bu' tterfly	A beautiful insect, so named because it first appears at the beginning of the season for butter.
chicken	A term for a young girl. Then, Chloe, still go on to prate Of thirty-six and thirty-eight; Pursue your trade of scandal-picking, Your hints, that Stella is no chicken. Swift
dull	Not exhilarating; not delightful; as, to make dictionaries is <i>dull</i> work.
electri' city	The industry of the present age . . . has discovered in electricity a multitude of philosophical wonders. Bodies electrified by a sphere of glass, turned nimbly round, not only emit flame, but may be fitted with such a quantity of the electrical vapour, as, if discharged at once upon a human body, would endanger life. The force of this vapour has hitherto appeared instantaneous, persons at both ends of a long chain seeming to be struck at once.
el' ephant	The largest of all quadrupeds, of whose sagacity, faithfulness, prudence, and even understanding, many surprising relations are given.
to hiss	To utter a noise like that of a serpent and some other animals. It is remarkable, that this word cannot be pronounced without making the noise which it signifies.
horse	A neighing quadruped, used in war, and draught and carriage. Joined to another substantive, it signifies something large or coarse: as, a horseface, a face of which the features are large and indelicate.
lexico' grapher	A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the significance of words.
net' work	Any thing reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections.
nood'le	A fool; a simpleton
oats	A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.
to sneeze	To emit wind audibly by the nose.
states' woman	A woman who meddles with public affairs. In contempt.
watch'ing	Inability to sleep.
youth	The part of life succeeding to childhood and adolescence; the time from fourteen to twenty-eight.

Name _____

Date _____

1. Which words seem to have had different meanings in the eighteenth century than they do today?
2. Occasionally Johnson incorporates humor into his definitions. Find examples.
3. Does Johnson ever use language that is too difficult for an effective definition? Explain your answer.
4. Are there any errors in these definitions?
5. Do you note any biases?

Name _____

Date _____

Boswell on Johnson

Directions: Read the following excerpts from James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Be prepared to discuss Boswell's attitude towards Johnson and Johnson's attitude toward his work, his king, and his mortality.

In this passage, Boswell discusses the definitions in Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*:

(1755) Mr Andrew Millar, bookseller in the Strand, took the principal charge of conducting the publication of Johnson's *Dictionary*; and as the patience of the proprietors was repeatedly tried and almost exhausted by their expecting that the work would be completed within the time which Johnson has sanguinely supposed, the learned author was often goaded to dispatch, more especially as he had received all the copy money, by different drafts, a considerable time before he had finished his task. When the messenger who carried the last sheet to Millar returned, Johnson asked him, "Well, what did he say?"—"Sir", answered the messenger, "he said, 'Thank God, I have done with him.' " "I am glad," replied Johnson, with a smile, "that he thanks God for anything."

The definitions have always appeared to me such astonishing proofs of acuteness of intellect and precision of language as indicate a genius of the highest rank. This is what marks the superior excellence of Johnson's *Dictionary* over others equally or even more voluminous, and must have made it a work of much greater mental labor than mere lexicons, or word-books, as the Dutch call them. They who will make the experiment of trying how they can define a few words of whatever nature will soon be satisfied of the justice of this observation, which I can assure my readers is founded upon much study and upon communication with more minds than my own.

A few of his definitions must be admitted to be erroneous. Thus *windward* and *leeward*, though directly of opposite meaning, are defined the same way; nor was he at all disconcerted when an instance was pointed out to him. A lady once asked him how he came to define *pastern* "the knee of a horse"; instead of making an elaborate defense, as she expected, he at once answered, "Ignorance, madam, pure ignorance." His definition of *network*¹ has often been quoted with sportive malignity, as obscuring a thing in itself very plain. But to these frivolous censures no other answer is necessary than that with which we are furnished by his own preface:

"To explain requires the use of terms less abstruse than that which is to be explained, and such terms cannot always be found."

His introducing his own opinions, and even prejudices, under general definitions of words, while at the same time the original meaning of the words is not explained, as his *Tory*,² *Whig*,³ *pension*,⁴ *oats*,⁵ *excise*,⁶ and a few more cannot be fully defended, and must be placed to the account of capricious and humorous indulgence. Talking to me upon this subject

¹His definition of network: "anything reticulated or decussated, at equal distances, with interstices between the intersections."

²Tory: "One who adheres to the ancient constitution of the state and apostolical hierarchy of the Church of England, opposed to a Whig."

³Whig: "the name of a faction."

⁴pension: "an allowance made without an equivalent, in England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country."

⁵oats: "a grain which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people."

⁶excise: "a hateful tax levied upon commodities, and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but by wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid."

when we were at Ashbourne in 1777, he mentioned a still stronger instance of the predominance of his private feelings in the composition of this work than any now to be found in it. "You know, sir, Lord Gower forsook the old Jacobite interest. When I came to *renegado*, after telling that it meant 'one who deserts to the enemy, a revolter,' I added, "Sometimes we say a Gower.' thus it went to the press, but the printer had more wit than I, and struck it out."

Let it, however, be remembered that this indulgence does not display itself only in sarcasm toward others, but sometimes in playful allusion to the notions commonly entertained of his own laborious task. Thus: "*Grub Street*, the name of a street in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems; whence any mean production is called *Grub Street*."—*Lexicographer*, a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge."

In this passage, Boswell learns about Johnson's fear of death:

When we were alone, I introduced the subject of death, and endeavoured to maintain that the fear of it might be got over. I told him that David Hume⁷ said to me, he was no more uneasy to think he should *not* be after this life, than that he *had not been* before he began to exist. JOHNSON. 'Sir, if he really thinks so, his perceptions are disturbed; he is mad; if he does not think so, he dies. He may tell you, he holds his finger in the flame of a candle, without feeling pain; would you believe him? When he dies, he at least gives up all he has.' BOSWELL. 'Foote⁸, Sir, told me, that when he was very ill he was not afraid to die.' JOHNSON. 'It is not true, Sir. Hold a pistol to Foote's breast, or to Hume's breast, and threaten to kill them, and you'll see how they behave.' BOSWELL. 'But may we not fortify our minds for the approach of death? Here I am sensible I was in the wrong, to bring before his view what he ever looked upon with horror; for although when in a celestial frame, in his 'Vanity of Human Wishes'⁹, he has supposed death to be 'kind Nature's signal for retreat, from this state of being to 'a happier seat,' his thoughts upon this awful change were in general full of dismal apprehensions. He answered, in a passion, 'No, Sir, let it alone. It matters not how a man dies, but how he lives. The act of dying is not of importance, it lasts so short a time.' He added, (with an earnest look,) 'A man knows it must be so, and submits. It will do him no good to whine.'

I attempted to continue the conversation. He was so provoked, that he said, 'Give us no more of this;' and was thrown into such a state of agitation, that he expressed himself in a way that alarmed and distressed me; shewed an impatience that I should leave him, and when I was going away, called to me sternly, 'Don't let us meet to-morrow.'

I went home exceedingly uneasy. All the harsh observations which I had ever heard made upon his character, crowded into my mind; and I seemed to myself like the man who had put his head into the lion's mouth a great many times with perfect safety, but at last had it bit off.

⁷David Hume: Scottish philosopher

⁸Foote: Samuel Foote, English actor

⁹'vanity of human Wishes': a satirical poem by Johnson

After the success of his dictionary, Johnson was invited to King George III's library at the Queen's house:

His Majesty having been informed of his occasional visits, was pleased to signify a desire that he should be told when Dr Johnson came next to the library. Accordingly, the next time that Johnson did come, as soon as he was fairly engaged with a book, on which, while he sat by the fire, he seemed quite intent, Mr Barnard¹⁰ stole round to the apartment where the King was, and, in obedience to his Majesty's commands, mentioned that Dr Johnson was then in the library. His Majesty said he was at leisure, and would go to him; upon which Mr Barnard took one of the candles that stood on the King's table, and lighted his Majesty through a suite of rooms, till they came to a private door into the library, of which his Majesty had the key. Being entered, Mr Barnard stepped forward hastily to Dr Johnson, who was still in a profound study, and whispered him, 'Sir, here is the King.' Johnson started up, and stood still. His Majesty approached him, and at once was courteously easy.

His Majesty began by observing, that he understood he came sometimes to the library; and then mentioning his having heard that the Doctor had been lately at Oxford, asked him if he was not fond of going thither. To which Johnson answered, that he was indeed fond of going to Oxford sometimes, but was likewise glad to come back again. His Majesty enquired if he was then writing any thing. He answered, he was not, for he had pretty well told the world what he knew, and must now read to acquire more knowledge. The King, as it should seem with a view to urge him to rely on his own stores as an original writer, and to continue his labours, then said, 'I do not think you borrow much from any body.' Johnson said, he thought he had already done his part as a writer. 'I should have thought so too, (said the King,) if you had not written so well!—Johnson observed to me, upon this, that 'No man could have paid a handsomer compliment; and it was fit for a King to pay. It was decisive.' When asked by another friend, at Sir Joshua Reynolds's,¹¹ whether he made any reply to this high compliment, he answered, 'No, Sir. When the King had said it, it was to be so. It was not for me to bandy civilities with my Sovereign.' Perhaps no man who had spent his whole life in courts could have shewn a more nice and dignified sense of true politeness, than Johnson did in this instance.

¹⁰Mr. Barnard: the librarian

¹¹Sir Joshua Reynolds: English painter and friend of Johnson