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A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE BIOGRAPHY AND WORKS OF SAMUEL JOHNSON

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Abstract

In this article, we provide a detailed account of the life and work of the great English poet, lexicographer and critic Samuel Johnson. Furthermore, we discuss his contribution to English literature and also we analyse his works. It analyses the structure of Johnson's "The Lives of English Poets" and some of the author's critical views in the work.

Keywords: Biographers, poets, lexicographer, critic views, satirical works, memoirs, poetic style, playwright, tragedy, bookseller.

Introduction

One of the greatest figures in English literature, Samuel Johnson, was born in Lichfield on 18 September 1709. His father, Michael Johnson, was a bookseller and stationer there and was married to Sarah Ford. Boswell described Johnson's father as "educated but rather unsuccessful in commercial affairs, a man of philosophical disposition." [2:5]. His mother, Sarah Ford, came from a wealthy family but was not particularly well-educated. Boswell noted that Johnson attributed his parents' unhappiness to his mother's lack of education and sought a clever wife for himself. It is said that Johnson's birth and health were problematic. He was born "almost dead" and suffered from scrofula in his youth. This illness affected his sight and hearing, as well as his physical appearance, and the effects remained with him for life. Boswell's "The Life of Samuel Johnson" records that

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he was blind in his left eye and deaf in his left ear. He first learned English at a school opened by the widowed Dame Oliver in Lichfield. He then continued his education under his tutor, Tom Brown. After mastering Latin lessons with Mr. Hawkins, he continued his studies under Mr. Hunter two years later. There, Johnson was distinguished by his intellect but was always afraid of his tutor Mr. Hunter's severity. On 31 October 1728, at the age of nineteen, he came to Oxford to study and continued his education under Mr. Jorden. At the University he attracted the attention of his tutors with his intellectual ability and outlook. However, owing to financial difficulties, he was only able to study there for thirteen months after that, he was forced to leave the university without a degree. After that, in a helpless and melancholic mood, he returned to his father's bookshop and busied himself with writing poems. He established his own school and worked as a teacher. Later, he moved to London and began writing for The Gentlemen's magazine. There was insufficient information about his personal life, his family and his children, but his contemporaries, friends and biographers record that he married a widow 20 years older than him. According to one of his biographers, "Johnson's Birmingham connections next brought him a wife. She was Elizabeth Porter, a lady nearly twice his age, recently the widow of a Birmingham woollen draper. She and Johnson rode horseback to church in Derby on the morning of their wedding (with his mother's consent) 9 July 1735." [1:2]. There is no information that they had a child. Thus, the brilliant poet, playwright, lexicographer and critic Samuel Johnson devoted his entire life to his creative work and lived to the age of 75. He died of illness in 1784 and was buried in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. Many of his works stand out for their originality, not only for that period but also today.

Materials and Results

When discussing his works, he dabbled in various genres and succeeded in each; in particular, as a translator he rendered Pope's *Messiah* into Latin and published

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it under the title "A Miscellany of Poems". He created "The Vanity of Human Wishes" based on Juvenal's satirical works. As a playwright, his tragedy "Irene" is very famous and is the only tragedy attributed to him. In addition, he also produced a collection of moral essays entitled "The Rambler" and "The Idler". In 1738, he published a satirical collection called "London", and in 1744, he produced the biographical work which was named "An Account of the Life of Mr. Richard Savage". The number of his work is substantial, and each piece holds its own place. However, his three major works occupied a significant position not only in English but also in world literature. The first, "The Plays of William Shakespeare" (1765), is a work that offered an edition and analysis of Shakespeare's plays, and it was precisely this work that ushered in a new era for a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's creativity. The second is his dictionary, "A Dictionary of the English Language" (1755), one of his greatest works, which established the standards of the English language. The third is his critical work on the lives and works of poets who lived and worked in the 17th and 18th centuries, titled "The Lives of the English Poets".

"Johnson's Career as a literary scholar is marked by three prolonged major undertakings – one lexicographical (his English Dictionary, 1755), one editorial (his Shakespeare, 1765), and one biographical (his Prefaces to the English Poets, 1779-1781)." [1:6]. The work that Johnson produced at the end of his life is considered to be "The Lives of the English Poets". This work had its own history of composition. In 1777, a group of London booksellers or publishers recommended Johnson to write prefaces on certain poets, and an agreement was signed to pay him 200 guineas in return. According to Johnson's biographers, there were forty booksellers involved in the project, and the names of Thomas Davies, William Strahan and Thomas Cadell were mentioned. Johnson agreed to the proposal because he took great pleasure in writing anecdotes and biographies. For Johnson, who had already written biographies of several people, this was a highly engaging undertaking. Initially his work comprised ten volumes, but it

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later expanded considerably to fifty-six volumes. The list of poets in the work was provided by booksellers, and Johnson included only Isaac Watts, Sir Richard Blackmore, John Pomfret, Thomas Yalden and James Thomson. The entries on the poets are arranged chronologically by their dates of death rather than their dates of birth, and vary in length from a few pages to an entire volume. Among the principal lives are those of Abraham Cowley, John Milton, John Dryden, Joseph Addison and Alexander Pope; some minor lives, such as those of William Collins and William Shenstone, were also noteworthy.

Discussion

During the creation of the work, Johnson met many people and sought information about the poets he was writing about. He sought to gather information from people who had met and spoken with the poet he was writing about. In the book currently in existence, 52 poets are presented in the following order. In the first volume the authors were listed in the following order: Cowley, Denham, Milton, Butler, Rochester, Roscommon, Otway, Waller, Pomper, Dorset, Stepney, J.Philips, Walsh, Dryden, Smith, Duke, King, Sprat, Halifax, Parnell, Garth, Rowe, Addison, Hughes and Sheffield. In the second volume, the following authors were featured: Prior, Congreve, Blackmore, Fenton, Gay, Granville, Yalden, Tickell, Hammond, Savage, Swift, Broome, Pope, Pitt, Thomas, Watts, A. Philips, West, Collins, Dyer, Shenstone, Young, Mallet, Akenside, Gray, Lyttelton, and William Somerville. The work included critical views alongside praises; for example, it noted that Jonson disliked Thomas Gray and John Milton personally, yet offered critical commentary on their work. However, these criticisms were not based on mere conjecture or superficial observations, but on a meticulous study of their work, from which conclusions were drawn. For example, his opinions on a poet and his works sometimes differ, as in the case of Collins. Johnson liked him as a person, but was displeased with his poetic style. When assessing Sheffield's work, Johnson quoted the following

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sentences: "His poems are often insipid, but his memoirs are lively and pleasing; he had the lucidity and elegance of a historian, but lacked the fire and imagination of a poet." [3:412]. Pope's life was regarded as the longest and the best. Because his life and work were relatively recent and well known to the public, they had provided a wealth of biographical material. Johnson found Pope's poetry highly fitting. In his impressive, dispassionate account of Pope's life, he showed sensitivity to his physical sufferings, yet refused to treat them as an excuse. Johnson organized his biographies into three separate sections: a description of the poet's life, an analysis of his character (personality traits), and a critical evaluation of his major works. He took this stance not due to a lack of understanding regarding the link between the poet's life and his creations, but because he thought a great poet wasn't always a good person.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that every minute of Johnson's life was spent on creativity and research. He was not merely a writer, as his contemporaries described him, but a man of powerful intellect and thought. He left his mark on literature not only with his works but also with his incisive criticism and his art of conversation. For this reason, the phrase "the eighteenth century is the age of Johnson" has been vindicated in literature. It was an honour for any writer to chronicle his life and pass it on to future generations. His close friend, James Boswell, provided a detailed account of his biography. Boswell's "The Life of Samuel Johnson" was one of the greatest works chronicling Johnson's life, through which we discover him not only as a poet but also as a great man. Furthermore, J. Hawkins, Hester Thrale, F. Burney, A. Seward, E. Montague, H. More, authors such as J. Hawkins, Hester Thrale, F. Burney, A. Seward, E. Montague, H. More, H. Walpole, J. Bate, J. Wain, P. Martin, and H. Hitch have provided a variety of information about his personal life, literary legacy, political views, and his contribution to English literature. While Johnson wrote about more

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than fifty poets in his "The Lives of the English Poets", the fact that more than fifty authors have written about the life of this great creator is a testament to his greatness. His wholehearted approach to each work, and taking attention to even the smallest details, was further proof of his being a natural-born for literature. Today, Johnson's works are considered an integral part of English literature. He remained a source of inspiration not only for his own time but for generations to come. His work serves as an important guide for modern playwrights and writers, as he has a profound understanding of the complexities of human nature and social issues.

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