

the life of samuel johnson sparknotes

The life of Samuel Johnson is an intriguing journey through the 18th century, marked by intellectual brilliance and a profound impact on English literature. Samuel Johnson, born on September 18, 1709, in Lichfield, Staffordshire, was a poet, essayist, and lexicographer, whose contributions continue to resonate in the realms of literature and language today. This article delves into the various facets of Johnson's life, including his early years, literary achievements, personal struggles, and legacy.

Early Life and Education

Samuel Johnson was the son of Michael Johnson, a bookseller, and his wife, Sarah. Growing up in a modest household, he was exposed to literature from an early age. His early education began at the Lichfield Grammar School, where he exhibited a keen intellect.

- **Family Background:** Johnson was born into a family of modest means, with his father being a bookseller.
- **Early Education:** Attended Lichfield Grammar School, where he developed a love for reading and literature.
- **University Life:** He later enrolled at Pembroke College, Oxford, but his time there was cut short due to financial difficulties.

Despite these challenges, Johnson's thirst for knowledge remained unquenchable. After leaving Oxford, he took various jobs, including teaching, while continuing to write and study independently.

Struggles and Triumphs

The life of Samuel Johnson was not without its struggles. He faced significant challenges, including poverty, illness, and personal insecurities.

Health Issues

Johnson suffered from a variety of health problems throughout his life, including:

1. **Scrofula:** A disease that caused skin lesions and was a source of great discomfort.

2. **Depression:** Johnson experienced episodes of depression, which he referred to as "the black dog."
3. **Physical Ailments:** He struggled with various physical ailments that affected his mobility and overall well-being.

These health challenges often contributed to his sense of isolation and introspection, shaping his worldview and literary voice.

Literary Career

Despite his struggles, Johnson's literary career flourished. In 1738, he published his first major work, "London," a poem that established him as a serious literary figure.

Major Works

Some of Johnson's most notable contributions to literature include:

- **"A Dictionary of the English Language" (1755):** A groundbreaking work that provided comprehensive definitions and usages of words, setting standards for future dictionaries.
- **"The Lives of the Poets" (1779-1781):** A series of biographical sketches that explored the lives and works of prominent poets, showcasing his critical acumen.
- **"Rasselas" (1759):** A philosophical tale that delves into the nature of happiness and the human condition.

Johnson's writing was characterized by its clarity, wit, and moral insight. He often engaged with themes of human experience, morality, and the complexities of life, providing readers with profound reflections.

Influence and Contributions

The impact of Samuel Johnson on English literature and language cannot be overstated. His meticulous approach to lexicography and literary criticism laid the groundwork for future scholars and writers.

Lexicography

Johnson's dictionary was revolutionary for several reasons:

1. **Comprehensive Coverage:** It included thousands of words and provided detailed definitions, making it one of the first dictionaries to attempt such thoroughness.
2. **Literary Quotations:** Johnson used literary quotations to illustrate the meanings of words, enhancing the reader's understanding.
3. **Standardization:** His work contributed to the standardization of the English language, influencing how words were understood and used.

His dictionary remained the preeminent English dictionary until the publication of the Oxford English Dictionary in the late 19th century.

Criticism and Literary Theory

Johnson was also a formidable literary critic. He believed in the importance of moral purpose in literature and often critiqued works that he felt lacked depth or ethical consideration. His critical essays, particularly those published in "The Rambler," showcased his thoughts on literature, society, and human behavior.

Personal Life

Samuel Johnson's personal life was filled with complexities. He had a close relationship with his friends, most notably James Boswell, who became his biographer and chronicler. Their friendship was pivotal in capturing Johnson's thoughts and experiences, providing insight into his character.

Friendships and Relationships

Johnson's relationships were marked by loyalty and affection.

- **James Boswell:** Their friendship produced one of the most famous biographies in literary history, "The Life of Mr. Samuel Johnson."
- **Mrs. Thrale:** A close friend and confidante, she provided emotional support during difficult times.

Despite his many friendships, Johnson often struggled with feelings of loneliness and inadequacy.

Legacy

Samuel Johnson passed away on December 13, 1784, leaving behind a rich literary legacy. His works and ideas continue to be studied and celebrated for their depth and insight.

Influence on Literature

Johnson's influence can be seen in various aspects of literature:

1. **Lexicography:** His dictionary set a precedent for future dictionaries and lexicographical methods.
2. **Essay Writing:** His essays influenced later essayists, including the likes of Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt.
3. **Character Development:** Johnson's exploration of human nature and morality has inspired countless authors in their portrayals of characters.

Continued Relevance

Today, Johnson is regarded as one of the most significant figures in English literature. His insights into language, morality, and human experience continue to resonate with readers and writers alike.

Conclusion

The life of Samuel Johnson encapsulates a remarkable journey through adversity, intellect, and creativity. From his humble beginnings to his towering achievements in literature, Johnson's legacy is one of resilience and profound impact. As we delve into his works and life story, we not only appreciate the man behind the words but also the enduring significance of his contributions to literature and language. Through his writings, Johnson invites us to reflect on the complexities of life, the nature of happiness, and the power of words—an invitation that remains as relevant today as it was in the 18th century.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Samuel Johnson?

Samuel Johnson was an English writer and lexicographer, best known for his dictionary, 'A Dictionary of the English Language', published in 1755, which was one of the first comprehensive dictionaries of English.

What is the significance of 'A Dictionary of the English Language'?

Johnson's dictionary was significant because it provided a systematic approach to English vocabulary and usage, influencing the development of dictionaries and the English language itself.

What are some major works by Samuel Johnson?

In addition to his dictionary, major works by Johnson include 'The Lives of the Poets', 'Rasselas', and 'The Idler', showcasing his literary prowess and diverse contributions to literature.

What were some challenges Samuel Johnson faced in his life?

Johnson faced numerous challenges, including poverty, illness (he had a form of Tourette syndrome), and the struggle for personal and professional recognition in a competitive literary world.

How did Samuel Johnson influence English literature?

Johnson influenced English literature through his critical essays, biography work, and his role in shaping literary criticism, paving the way for future writers and thinkers.

What role did Samuel Johnson play in the development of the English novel?

Johnson's essays and critiques contributed to the development of the English novel by establishing standards for character development, moral themes, and narrative structure.

What is 'The Rambler' and its importance?

'The Rambler' was a series of periodical essays published by Johnson, which is important for its exploration of moral and philosophical issues, influencing both readers and writers during the 18th century.

What is the legacy of Samuel Johnson today?

Samuel Johnson's legacy today includes his profound impact on lexicography, literary criticism, and the English language, making him a central figure in the study of English literature.

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