

RASSELAS

by Samuel Johnson



THE AUTHOR

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) was born in Staffordshire, England, the son of a bookseller and his wife. Childhood infections left him partially blind and deaf; he later was scarred from a bout with smallpox. A precocious but lazy student, he was beaten by his schoolmaster, but later affirmed that he never would have learned otherwise. After a few years working in his father's bookshop, he enrolled at Oxford, which he left without graduating (he finally returned and got his degree in 1755). For the next thirty-three years he lived in poverty, undertaking whatever writing projects came his way.

In 1746, he began the project for which he is most remembered - his great *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), both monumental and whimsical. While working on this enormous project, he published an essay called *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), the theatrical tragedy *Irene* (1749), the *Rambler* essays (1750-1752). After the publication of the *Dictionary* he began work on a new edition of the plays of Shakespeare, which he completed in 1765. More essays followed, this time called *The Idler* (1758-1760), and his only novel, *Rasselas* (1759).

When George III came to the throne in 1762, Johnson, much to his embarrassment, was granted a pension of £300 per year (he had defined "pension" in his *Dictionary* as "pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country"), but this assured that he no longer would need to struggle to support himself financially. At this point he entered into the stage of his career during which he became the defining literary figure of the age, the greatest man of letters of English Neo-Classicism; in fact, the latter half of the eighteenth century in England is often referred to as the Age of Johnson. In 1764, he formed the Literary Club, which included among its members David Garrick (Johnson's former pupil and the greatest actor of the era), Conservative M.P. Edmund Burke, fellow author Oliver Goldsmith, dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan, historian Edward Gibbon, economist Adam Smith, painter Joshua Reynolds, and Johnson's protégé and biographer James Boswell. Johnson suffered a stroke in 1783 and died the following year. He was buried, along with many other literary heroes of England, in Westminster Abbey.

Rasselas, Johnson's only novel, was written in the remarkable span of a single week in 1759 prior to the death of his mother; he claimed that he had to write it quickly in order to get enough money for her funeral. It deals with the theme of the human search for happiness and concludes that such a search is doomed to failure. The work, which has been criticized by many as pessimistic because no fulfilling "Choice of Life" (the book's original title) is to be found,

nonetheless ends with the affirmation that the “choice of eternity” is far more important. Unlike the novels that appeared in the centuries that followed, *Rasselas* is openly didactic, seeking to provide moral instruction to the reader and promoting a Christian view of life that has much in common with the book of Ecclesiastes.

PLOT SUMMARY

The author introduces us to the title character, Rasselas, a prince of Abyssinia, raised in unimaginable wealth, and yet confined to the palace until he should be required to ascend the throne, which is unlikely because he is the fourth son of his father. The palace was located in a verdant valley between high mountains, accessible only by a narrow defile hidden behind a rock in the midst of a forest and guarded on the inside by a heavy iron gate. The valley is described as a sort of Eden, filled with all kinds of plants and animals with all signs of evil removed. The Emperor, who visited his children in their confinement once a year, sought anything that would increase their pleasure and granted their every wish. The palace itself was enormous, filled with secret passages known only to a few, and filled with treasures concealed in secret compartments. The royal offspring were constantly entertained and also well educated, but were told by their tutors nothing of the outside world except for the evils to be found there.

Rasselas, however, in his twenty-sixth year began to tire of his life in the Happy Valley. He begins to wonder why he, unlike the animals all around him, cannot be fulfilled with the satisfaction of his wants and desires. One of his tutors notices the change in him and seeks to assist him with his concerns, but Rasselas shows no interest in his counsel. When the old man suggests that he takes no pleasure in his present condition because he has never seen the miseries of the outside world and thus learned appreciate his privileges, he responds that he desires more than anything else to see the world’s miseries. The prince then enters again into the life of the community, intending to give others pleasure in what he himself cannot enjoy while using his precious hours of solitude to imagine what the outside world must be like. He goes on like this for the next two years, then suddenly realizes that he is wasting time that could have been employed in attaining his goal. When he by chance hears a young girl, having broken a cup, say that what cannot be repaired is not to be regretted, he decides to break out of his turpitude and take action.

He then devotes time to plotting his escape from the valley, but the mountains are impenetrable, the gate unable to be breached, and the outlet of the stream too narrow to admit a human body. His search for an exit occupies ten months during which he enjoys life as he learns more about his surroundings, but he is unable to discover any means of egress from his prison. He then consults an engineer in the valley who had made great wonders for the sustenance of life there. The man believes he can make wings that will enable him to fly, but says that he will need a year and that his work must be kept in the strictest secrecy. Rasselas agrees, but at the end of a year the man leaps from a tower wearing his wings and plunges into the water below, nearly killing himself in the process.

Shortly after the failure of the experiment in flight, heavy rains inundate the valley, leaving only the palace and the sides of the mountains above water. During this time of enforced inactivity Rasselas is entertained by the poet Imlac, who tells the story of his experiences in the outside world and how he came to confine himself to the Happy Valley. Imlac was born in Africa near the source of the Nile. His father was a wealthy merchant who was forced to hide his wealth

lest it be unjustly confiscated by the rulers of his home province; he wanted his son to be a merchant as well, but Imlac loved the life of a scholar. Nonetheless his father gave him ten thousand gold pieces to do with as he pleased, but promised that if he doubled his capital in four years, he could become a partner in his father's business.

Imlac instead decides to use his money to travel. He takes passage on a ship, but in time finds the sea monotonous. Upon landing at his destination he joins a caravan, but his fellow travelers delight in seeing him defrauded in his innocence. He visits Agra in India, where he gains a reputation as a great scholar, then travels through Persia and Arabia. Wherever he goes, he finds that poets are held in high esteem, so he determines to become a poet. He realizes that in order to do so, he must learn to know both nature and man so he can communicate the truth of one to the heart of the other. He continues his travels through Syria and Palestine, where he meets representatives of Western nations far wiser and more powerful than Africans and Asiatics. Power and possessions do not produce happiness, however, and Imlac concludes that people of all nations are unhappy, doing little more than enduring life rather than enjoying it. He returns to Abyssinia after twenty years abroad hoping to find his father proud of his achievements and his friends eager to hear his stories. Instead, his friends do not remember him, his father is dead, and his relatives have moved elsewhere. At this point he decides to enter forever the Happy Valley, with its peace and pleasures. When Rasselas asks him whether or not he regrets his decision, however, he acknowledges that he does; furthermore, he insists that all who have chosen to enter the valley would reverse their decision if such a thing were possible. Rasselas then shares with him his desire to escape from the valley and invites him to join him in his endeavor.

Soon the flood waters recede and Rasselas and Imlac again consider their predicament. Imlac notices that during the flood conies had dug burrows in the mountainside and proposes that they should learn from the humble creatures and do the same, seeking to tunnel through the upper part of the mountain to freedom. This they proceed to do. When they are about halfway through, Rasselas' sister Nekayah, having observed their daily journeys to the same place, comes to their cavern and begs to join them in their venture. They agree, and she keeps watch while the work is finished. When the tunnel is completed, they gather enough jewels to make them rich in the outside world and set out to explore what is beyond the Happy Valley.

The traveling party consists of four people – Rasselas, Imlac, Nekayah, and Pekuah, one of her maidservants. At first they travel slowly because the royals are unaccustomed to long journeys. Furthermore, both Rasselas and Nekayah have grown up with everyone around them serving them and showing them obeisance and have trouble adjusting to the society of those who do not fawn over them. They learn gradually of the outside world, first encountering shepherds, then living briefly in a village, visiting a port city, then traveling by sea to Suez, and thence to the great metropolis of Cairo. Imlac tells them that all kinds of people gather here, and that through contact with people from many different places and from many different backgrounds, the curious royals should be able to choose the kind of life they would most desire to pursue. Imlac hires a house, furnishes it lavishly, and then invites people of all sorts to dine with the travelers. In this way Rasselas and his sister can not only observe people from all over the world, but also begin to learn languages. This continues for two years, during which the royals also learn the strange custom of money – exchanging bits of metal of little value for all the needs they might have at the time. To Rasselas all around them seem to be happy while he alone is unhappy, but Imlac assures him that they, like he, mask inner unhappiness with a pleasant outward countenance. Though this news is discouraging, Rasselas continues to believe that some choice must lead to happiness, though Imlac tells him that few people are even able to make a choice of life at all.

Rasselas begins his experiment by spending time with young men who devote all their time to pleasure. He quickly finds their society empty, since they care only for the sensual, scorn to use their minds, scoff at wisdom and reject authority. He warns them against the folly of their ways, but they mock him and drive him from their midst. Several days later, he goes to hear a great rhetorician who speaks of the importance of living a rational life divorced from the influence of the passions. Rasselas is impressed and seeks to make him his guide in life, but then finds that the speaker, after having lost his daughter to a fever, is unable to live by his own precepts and falls into deep despair. He and his companions next visit a group of shepherds in order to observe the lifestyle so much praised by bards and poets, but find the shepherds rude, ignorant, and discontented with their lot. Continuing into a forest, they find beautiful manicured trails and streams around a great palace, where they are kindly received. The owner of the palace is wealthy and all around him appear happy. But when Rasselas asks him whether he and his people are indeed happy, he learns that the man, envied because of his wealth, is planning to flee to a far country because the ruler of the land is about to plunder his riches.

The travelers next journey to the cave of a hermit, seeking to find out if solitude is the key to happiness. He shows them hospitality, but when they ask him whether he has found happiness in his retreat, he answers that he has become bored with the limitations of his world, that the escape from evil men has also robbed him of the company of the good, and that he fully intends to return to Cairo the following day. Back in Cairo, Rasselas seeks the company of a group of learned men who spend every day disputing popular ideas. They agree in censoring the monk, but can find no agreement among themselves. One man rises and discourses at great length on the virtue of living by natural law, inborn in all men, but when Rasselas asks him what he means, he is unable to give a coherent answer and the prince leaves, discouraged once more.

At this point Rasselas and Nekayah conclude that social status could hold the key to happiness. They agree that he will seek the life of the powerful while she will live in modest circumstances, then the two will compare notes. The next day Rasselas journeys to the court of the Bassa of Egypt and presents himself as a prince from a far country. He is cordially received, but soon recognizes that such pleasure as power provides can be enjoyed only by one person, and thus yields no formula for general happiness. Furthermore, he soon learns that the Bassa is surrounded by jealous courtiers seeking his downfall, resulting in his being arrested and taken away in chains. Clearly power is not the source of happiness. Nekayah fares no better, finding that those who live modestly live empty lives filled with useless activities and petty jealousies, occupying themselves with nothing that remotely approximates serious thought or reflection. Families are torn by discord, parents against children and children against parents, siblings rivaling one another for their parents' affections and parents seeking advantages over one another in the hearts of their offspring. Nor do the unmarried fare any better, wasting their lives in trivial amusements and longing for the end of each pointless day. The two thus conclude that even the best cannot avoid unhappiness and that good and bad happen to all regardless of desert.

As their conversation continues, Rasselas accuses Nekayah of generalizing particular miseries and using them to reject an entire institution. He argues that, though marriage may bring its share of unhappiness, it is nonetheless a necessary and beneficial practice. Too often the great calamities of life are more often feared than experienced, so no philosophy should be built on what is essentially rare and often does not even touch the common life of man. Instead, they should focus their attention on their own dilemma rather than trying to solve the problems of society in general. Their quest involves, in the end, their own life choices. With regard to marriage,

Rasselas argues that delaying marriage cannot but be advantageous because it would avoid the decisions of youth made in haste and regretted in leisure. Nekayah responds that late marriages are often difficult because habits of life have already been fixed. Rasselas insists that the problem could be avoided in his case because he would seek a wife who is amenable to reason, but Nekayah argues that most of the daily decisions people make have nothing to do with reason, and to approach them in that way would lead to interminable and fruitless disputes. Rasselas then suggests that some happy medium might be attained, but Nekayah responds that the joys of life tend to stand opposed to one another so that one who seeks both will attain neither.

At this point Imlac joins their conversation and accuses the royals of spending so much time talking about life that they forget to live. He reminds them that they are in a land rich with history and art. The two insist that they have no interest in such things, but intend to find out all they can about man as he is now. Imlac responds that the relics of the past tell more about the nature of human life than any snatches of conversation with those engaged in their daily business, especially since the present has been formed by the past. Rasselas and Nekayah submit to his line of argument and determine to understand the present better by learning the wisdom of the past.

They begin their quest with a visit to the Pyramids. They marvel at the sheer size of the structures, then prepare to enter one of the compartments of the Great Pyramid. Pekuah, however, is afraid that restless spirits wander within and might shut them in forever. Rasselas tries to reassure her, but Imlac reminds them that belief in the apparitions of the dead is universal, and that such widespread belief must be based at least somewhat on truth. This, of course, is no comfort at all to Pekuah, who decides to remain behind while the others explore. They view the wonders in the various chambers of the great tomb and question why so much effort was expended when something much smaller must have served the same purpose. Imlac explains that such projects demonstrate the insatiable nature of the human imagination; one who has everything must constantly create new projects to feed his vanity, putting others to work on enormous tasks for his own amusement and glory.

When they emerge from the Pyramid they find everyone in the camp in tears. They had been attacked by Arabs who had carried off Pekuah. Turkish horsemen had driven the Arabs off and pursued them in an attempted rescue, but soon returned empty-handed. Nekayah is heartbroken, and the next day Rasselas goes to the Bassa to demand action. The ruler, however, claims that nothing can be done without a clearer description of the perpetrators. Imlac seeks information in the seamier parts of the city, but repeatedly finds that the sums given for information or attempted recovery were simply stolen by the pretended informants. Two months pass, and Nekayah blames herself for not insisting that Pekuah stay with them in the Pyramid. Imlac comforts her by saying that those who act from a desire to do good leave the consequences of their actions in the hands of God.

Nekayah then stops blaming herself, but still mourns the loss of her beloved companion. Rasselas tries everything he can think of to comfort her and distract her from her grief, but nothing seems to work. She determines to give up her search for happiness and retire into solitude and meditation, waiting only for the death that will reunite her with her beloved Pekuah. Imlac chides her for seeking a permanent remedy for a temporary sorrow, advising her that grief fades over time. Finally Rasselas convinces her to avoid making any rash decisions for a year while the search for Pekuah continues. Imlac and Rasselas prove right, for during the year Nekayah's grief gradually becomes less severe until she almost seems her old self, though she is determined to protect herself against future sorrows by not committing her heart to anyone else ever again.

One day a messenger arrives with news that Pekuah is being held by a bandit chieftain who demands two hundred ounces of gold for her return. Imlac advises that the bandit cannot be trusted, so arrangements are made to exchange the gold for the captives at a monastery halfway between Cairo and the outlaw's castle. After her safe return a joyous reunion ensues, after which Pekuah tells her story. After she was kidnapped, her abductors treated her with kindness and consideration. Seeing her fine clothes, they thought her to be a princess, though she denied any such elevated position. The bandit chief assured her that he would do her no harm, but merely sought ransom, which he had no doubt someone of her evident wealth could easily provide. They finally arrived at a splendid house on an island in the Nile, Pekuah rested while the bandit continued his raids. She saw hippopotami and crocodiles, but was disappointed that no mermaids or tritons appeared. She found no suitable companionship among the handmaids of the Arab, who were ignorant and inexperienced, but the chieftain himself enjoyed her company – so much so that he was reluctant to release her. When the ransom arrived, however, he could not refuse, and Pekuah was restored to the arms of her loving mistress.

Rasselas next turns his attention to the world of science, deciding that the study of the stars would be a noble pursuit. Imlac then tells him of his experience with a famous astronomer who was so wearied by the monotony of his work that he welcomed the world traveler with his tales. The scientist was an honest and charitable man, but something clearly troubled him, though Imlac was at a loss to explain its cause. One day the astronomer confides in Imlac his secret: he not only studies the heavens, he also controls their movements. The weight on his shoulders has become unbearable because of the need to apportion the blessings of sun and rain, flood and drought with justice and fairness. The winds alone are not under his control, and he grieves at the carnage wrought by these throughout the world. Imlac obviously doubts his claims, but the astronomer assures him that, for ten years now, his commands have been followed by the heavenly bodies and the weather. In fact, he is near death and desires Imlac to take his place in carrying out this vital and horrifying responsibility. He warns Imlac not to experiment or innovate, but rather to be a faithful steward of a system that cannot be improved by human initiative. Imlac agrees to undertake the charge. Nekayah and Pekuah collapse in laughter, sure that Imlac is joking, but he insists that he is serious in what he says. In fact, the scientist had gone mad as a result of his single-minded studies; what he said was not true, but Imlac recounts it to demonstrate the dangers of scientific pursuits and the threat they pose to human reason. He then goes on to argue that all who allow imagination to dominate reason are to some extent mad, and that those who live lives of isolation are particularly prone to such maladies. Pekuah then swears that she will no longer dream of being a princess, and Nekayah insists that she will imagine the life of the humble shepherdess no more. Rasselas confesses his dream to be even more dangerous – that he could someday create the perfect government ; his imagination has taken him so far as to consider with little pain what would happen if his father and brothers were to die and leave the government of Abyssinia in his hands.

On the way home the travelers meet a wise old man and decide to ask him for his assessment of his own state, hoping to ascertain whether discontent is the result of youth alone, and thus may be overcome in time. When they begin to question him, they find that what had given him much pleasure in youth is now filled with sad memories of friends who are no more and a life of often-regrettable choices. But if youth is full of longing and old age full of regrets, may then the noon hours of life be where fulfillment may be found? Imlac knows the answer, but has no desire to discourage his young companions.

At this point Nekayah and Pekuah decide they would like to meet the mad astronomer. They determine to present themselves as students seeking to pursue the studies Pekuah had begun under the tutelage of the Arab in the desert. Imlac accompanies them, and after an initial period of awkwardness they come to enjoy their sessions together. The old man takes such pleasure in their visits that his mad belief in his ability to regulate the heavens seems to fall into abeyance, especially when he is in the presence of Pekuah. They invite him often to Imlac's home, and he gradually becomes accustomed to life in the outside world. When they share with him their desire to understand the wisest choice of life, he replies that he has no answer except to say that his choice was a bad one, devoting all his time to studies that were only marginally useful to mankind and cutting himself off from the simple pleasures of companionship and domestic bliss.

Daily excursions lead them from one new experience to another. They begin to wonder if novelty itself is what they crave rather than the experiences themselves. Rasselas muses about the monotony of the Happy Valley and compares it with the regularity of the lives of the monks in the desert, realizing that the monks were happier than the princes. Imlac suggests that this is true because their monotony is purposeful and contributes to their welfare and that of others, while that of the princes in the valley does neither. Nekayah then wonders if a life that pursues the ultimate goals of the monks - conversation, charity, teaching and learning, and useful labor - without partaking of their strictures might be the life they seek, one in the world, enjoying innocent pleasures, yet avoiding the vain and immoral. Imlac reminds her that no pleasure is innocent when it becomes an obsession, and that not everyone is able to enjoy the pleasures of life without being tempted by them.

The astronomer then suggests that they pay a visit to the Catacombs beneath the city. This time Pekuah insists that she will not be left behind no matter what her fears of the dead may be. The bodies in the Catacombs have been embalmed in order to preserve them, and the travelers discuss why this practice may have developed. Imlac suggests that the ancient Egyptians believed that the soul exists only as long as the body is preserved, which all think a foolish notion. This then leads to a discussion of the nature of the soul. Imlac insists that the soul must exist and be immaterial and eternal because matter is not sentient, but inert and lifeless. Their meditations lead them to the conclusion that the choice of life is not the real issue, but rather the choice of eternity.

Soon the flood season of the Nile arrives and the travelers are confined to their house. They discuss what they would like to do when the floods recede. Pekuah wants to become the prioress of a convent, Nekayah wants to study and teach the sciences, and Rasselas would still like to govern his own kingdom, however small. Both Imlac and the astronomer refuse to choose, preferring rather to let the stream of life take them wherever it may. They realize, of course, that their dreams are futile, and when the flood recedes they all return to Abyssinia.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Rasselas – The title character is a prince of Abyssinia who, dissatisfied with his life, goes on a journey to seek answers and meaning in life.
- Imlac – A poet who entertains Rasselas by telling of his experiences in the outside world. At the request of the prince, he accompanies him on his escape and travels.
- Nekayah – A princess and sister of Rasselas, she accompanies him and Imlac on their escape from the Happy Valley and subsequent journeys.

- Pekuah – Maidservant of Nekayah, she accompanies her mistress on her journey.
- The Arab Chieftain - He kidnaps Pekuah for ransom, treats her kindly, and instructs her in much of the knowledge he has gained.
- The Astronomer - A great and wise scientist who, because of his life of isolation, has become convinced that the heavenly bodies and the weather move at his command. When he meets the travelers, he is gradually drawn out of his madness by their friendship.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow; attend to the history of Rasselas, prince of Abyssinia.” (ch.1, p.7)

“What makes the difference between man and all the rest of the animal creation?” (Rasselas, ch.2, p.10)

“Now you have given me something to desire; I shall long to see the miseries of the world, since the sight of them is necessary to happiness.” (Rasselas, ch.3, p.12)

“No form of government has yet been discovered, by which cruelty can be wholly prevented.” (Imlac, ch.8, p.21)

“Pride is seldom delicate, it will please itself with very mean advantages; and envy feels not its own happiness, but when it may be compared with the misery of others.” (Imlac, ch.9, p.24)

“I am not yet willing to suppose that happiness is so parsimoniously distributed to mortals; nor can believe but that, if I had the choice of life, I should be able to fill every day with pleasure. I would injure no man, and should provoke no resentment; I would relieve every distress, and should enjoy the benedictions of gratitude. I would choose my friends among the wise and my wife among the virtuous; and therefore should be in no danger from treachery or unkindness. My children should, by my care, be learned and pious, and would repay to my age what their childhood had received. What would dare to molest him who might call on every side to thousands enriched by his bounty, or assisted by his power? And why should life not glide quietly away in the soft reciprocation of protection and reverence?” (Rasselas, ch.12, p.30)

“We are long before we are convinced that happiness is never to be found, and each believes it possessed by others to keep alive the hope of obtaining it for himself.” (Imlac, ch.16, p.38)

“The first years of man must make provision for the last. He that never thinks never can be wise. Perpetual levity must end in ignorance; and intemperance, though it may fire the spirits for an hour, will make life short and miserable.” (Rasselas, ch.17, p.40)

“The life of a solitary man will be certainly miserable, but not certainly devout.” (Hermit, ch.21, p.46)

“Perhaps command and authority may be the supreme blessings, as they afford most opportunities of doing good; or, perhaps, what this world can give may be found in the modest habitations of middle fortune; too low for great designs, and too high for penury and distress.” (Nekayah, ch.23, p.49)

“Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures.” (Nekayah, ch.26, p.54)

“At least we compare our own with former times, and either rejoice at our improvements, or, what is the first motion toward good, discover our defects.” (Imlac, ch.30, p.62)

“Whoever thou art that, not content with a moderate condition, imaginest happiness in royal magnificence, and drestest that command or riches can feed the appetite of novelty with perpetual gratifications, survey the Pyramids, and confess thy folly.” (Imlac, ch.32, p.65)

“When we act according to our duty, we commit the event to Him by whose laws our actions are governed, and who will suffer none to be finally punished for obedience. When, in prospect of some good, whether natural or moral, we break the rules prescribed us, we withdraw from the direction of superior wisdom, and take all consequences upon ourselves. Man cannot so far know the connection of causes and events, as that he may venture to do wrong in order to do right.” (Imlac, ch.34, p.67)

“Do you think that the monastic rule is a more holy and less imperfect state than any other? May not he equally hope for future happiness who converses openly with mankind, who succors the distressed by his charity, instructs the ignorant by his learning, and contributes by his industry to the general system of life; even though he should omit some of the mortifications which are practiced in the cloister, and allow himself such harmless delights as his condition may place within his reach?” (Nekayah, ch.47, p.93)

“He who will determine against that which he knows, because there may be something which he knows not; he that can set hypothetical possibility against acknowledged certainty, is not to be admitted among reasonable beings. All we know of matter is, that matter is inert, senseless, and lifeless; and if this conviction cannot be opposed but by referring us to something that we know not, we have all the evidence that human intellect can admit. If that which is known may be overruled by that which is unknown, no being, not omniscient, can arrive at certainty.” (Imlac, ch.48, p.96)

“It is no limitation of omnipotence to suppose that one thing is not consistent with another, that the same proposition cannot be at once true and false, that the same number cannot be even and odd, that cogitation cannot be conferred on that which is created incapable of cogitation.” (Imlac, ch.48, p.96)

“To me the choice of life is become less important; I hope hereafter to think only on the choice of eternity.” (Nekayah, ch.48, p.97)

“Of these wishes that they had formed they well knew that none could be obtained. They deliberated a while what was to be done, and resolved, when the inundation should cease, to return to Abyssinia.” (ch.49, p.98)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Compare and contrast Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* with the book of Ecclesiastes. How are the reflections of Johnson’s title character and King Solomon similar in their scope, content, and conclusions? What differences do you see in the two works? Be sure to use quotations from both works to illustrate your analysis.
2. Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* has often been compared with the book of Ecclesiastes. Compare and contrast the endings of the two works. Be sure you include chapter 48 as well as chapter 49 from Johnson’s fable and consider the last chapter of Ecclesiastes in its entirety.
3. In Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*, the prince and his companions meet a hermit who shares with them the shortcomings of a life of solitude. Compare these reflections with your knowledge of the lives of the hermit monks in the fourth century such as Anthony of Thebes and Simon Stylites. To what extent is the hermit’s critique an accurate assessment of the monastic life?
4. Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* are both fictional travelogues. To what extent are these works intended, not to discuss life abroad, but rather to critique life in the English society common to both authors? Compare and contrast the conclusions of the two authors, both in their criticisms of English society and in the approaches to life they advocate.
5. At the end of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the wedding guest, having heard the Mariner’s tale, is described by the words, “A sadder and a wiser man he rose the morrow morn.” The same may be said of the protagonists of Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* after they return home from their journeys. Compare and contrast the two works with regard to what they say about the society in which the authors lived and the road of life along which all travel. Use supporting details from both works in your analysis.
6. In chapter 34 of Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*, the wise Imlac discourses on the difference between actions based on moral principle and those based on prospective consequences. Evaluate his discourse biblically. How does the issue he addresses relate to modern ethical systems such as Utilitarianism and Situation Ethics?

7. Though Samuel Johnson was enormously popular in the latter part of his life, he became the object of intense criticism in the Romantic era that followed. Why do you think this was the case? Use Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* in your analysis, being sure to address both content and language.
8. Compare and contrast Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* and Voltaire's *Candide*. Be sure to consider matters of structure - both are fictional travelogues; tone - both are comedies based on an underlying pessimism about life; and theme. Despite the similarities, what differences result from the fact that Johnson was a Christian while Voltaire clearly was not?
9. Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* ends with the travelers returning to their home in Abyssinia without a clear answer to their questions about life, while Voltaire's *Candide* ends with an exhortation that "we must cultivate our garden." How similar are these endings? Do both authors conclude that the best life can offer is found in simplicity, without thinking too much about the big questions of existence? What are the most important differences in the approaches to life advocated by the two eighteenth-century writers?
10. In Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the saintly Helen Burns occupies herself by reading Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. The choice was surely no accident. Compare the basic themes of Johnson's novel with the attitude toward life reflected by the sickly young girl at Lowood School. To what extent do these same themes infuse the whole of Bronte's great novel? Cite incidents and quotations from both books in your analysis.
11. Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* begins with the following words: "Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope; who expect that age will perform the promises of youth, and that the deficiencies of the present day will be supplied by the morrow; attend to the history of Rasselas, prince of Abyssinia." Many critics have argued that the morality tale found in the novel portrays a pessimistic view of human experience. What do you think? Is the moral of the story pessimistic or biblical? Support your conclusion with quotations from both the novel and Scripture.
12. In chapter 3 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, the title character says, "Now you have given me something to desire; I shall long to see the miseries of the world, since the sight of them is necessary to happiness." Augustine of Hippo, among many others, argued that evil was necessary in the world in order for man to appreciate good. Did Samuel Johnson agree with the words he put into the mouth of his protagonist, or was this simply one stage of his quest for knowledge? What do you think about the validity of this statement? Support your answer from the novel and from the Bible.
13. In chapter 9 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, the poet Imlac says, "Pride is seldom delicate, it will please itself with very mean advantages; and envy feels not its own happiness, but when it may be compared with the misery of others." Evaluate this statement on the basis of Scripture. How does the novel illustrate the truth of Imlac's words?

14. In chapter 12 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, the protagonist describes the life he considers to be ideal in these words: "I am not yet willing to suppose that happiness is so parsimoniously distributed to mortals; nor can believe but that, if I had the choice of life, I should be able to fill every day with pleasure. I would injure no man, and should provoke no resentment; I would relieve every distress, and should enjoy the benedictions of gratitude. I would choose my friends among the wise and my wife among the virtuous; and therefore should be in no danger from treachery or unkindness. My children should, by my care, be learned and pious, and would repay to my age what their childhood had received. What would dare to molest him who might call on every side to thousands enriched by his bounty, or assisted by his power? And why should life not glide quietly away in the soft reciprocation of protection and reverence?" How would you answer the questions with which he concludes his description of the ideal life? What is missing from his view of the world?
15. In chapter 23 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, the princess Nekayah says, "Perhaps command and authority may be the supreme blessings, as they afford most opportunities of doing good; or, perhaps, what this world can give may be found in the modest habitations of middle fortune; too low for great designs, and too high for penury and distress." Compare her thoughts with the words of Agur in Proverbs 30:7-9. How do the incidents in the novel illustrate the truth of both the princess' words and those of Agur?
16. In chapter 30 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, Imlac speaks of the importance of the study of history when he says, "At least we compare our own with former times, and either rejoice at our improvements, or, what is the first motion toward good, discover our defects." In what ways is this statement a criticism of the prevailing attitudes of the Enlightenment era in which Johnson was living?
17. Evaluate Imlac's defense of the existence of the soul in chapter 48 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. How effective is his attack on materialism and the folly of denying something one cannot see? Be sure to use Scripture in building your argument.
18. Skeptics often flippantly try to undermine belief in the God of the Bible by asking, "Can God make a rock so big He can't lift it?" What assumptions underlie this argument? How does Imlac's discourse in chapter 48 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* address the question, and how convincing is his answer?
19. At the end of chapter 48 of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, Nekayah and the others give up on their search for the "choice of life." She expresses her conclusion in these words: "To me the choice of life is become less important; I hope hereafter to think only on the choice of eternity." What would such a life look like for the characters in the book? What would it look like for you? Support your analysis from both the novel and the Bible.

20. In George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie Tulliver reads Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. The choice was surely no accident. Compare the basic themes of Johnson's novel with the attitude toward life reflected by Maggie at that stage of her life. To what extent do these same themes infuse the whole of Eliot's novel? Cite incidents and quotations from both books in your analysis.
21. The Happy Valley in which Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* begins is an Eden-like paradise, yet the protagonist finds no contentment there. Why not? Does Johnson intend the reader to see *Rasselas*' departure from the Happy Valley as symbolic of the Fall and his return at the end of the book after recognizing the futility of finding happiness in this world a picture of redemption? Discuss this interpretation of the novel and support it or refute it with internal evidence and appropriate scriptural references.
22. Critics have long argued about the ending of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. The reader is told that the travelers intend to return to Abyssinia, but no hint is given as to whether a return to the Happy Valley is in view, or simply a return to the larger kingdom of *Rasselas*' father. Which do you think Johnson intends? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novel.
23. Samuel Johnson, by his own admission, struggled with powerful sexual desires throughout his life, but in his novel *Rasselas*, the protagonist, in his search for happiness, never considers sex as a possible source of it. Why do you think this may be? In your analysis be sure to incorporate references to sexuality in the book and note how they are treated.
24. Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* takes as its central theme "the choice of life." Does the author mean by this the choice of the most fulfilling lifestyle or the choice of life over death? Support your conclusion with specifics from the book.
25. Samuel Beckett, the author of *Waiting for Godot*, paid tribute to Samuel Johnson, the author of *Rasselas*, by saying, "It's Johnson, always Johnson, who is with me. And if I follow any tradition, it is his." Compare and contrast the two works. Does Beckett's discourse on the meaninglessness of life demonstrate a deep understanding of Johnson's work or a misunderstanding of it? Support your conclusion with quotations from both works.
26. Samuel Johnson, the author of *Rasselas*, deplored the American Revolution, calling its perpetrators "a race of convicts." How would Johnson have responded to Thomas Jefferson's insistence on the inalienable right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence? Use specifics from Johnson's novel to answer the question.
27. In Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, the characters in the story are black, yet their race plays absolutely no role in the story. Why might this be the case? Is the author making of his protagonist a sort of Everyman? If so, why then would he place the story in an exotic locale?

28. One critic has argued that the works of Samuel Johnson, though not often explicitly Christian in content, serve the purpose of pre-evangelism, preparing the reader to receive the Gospel by showing him the emptiness of life without Christ. To what extent may this be said of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*? Use specifics from the novel to support your argument.
29. In Acts 17:21, Luke describes the citizens of Athens in these words: "All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas." The poet Imlac in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* describes the inhabitants of the Happy Valley in similar language: "They are weary of themselves, and of each other, and expect to find relief in new companions. They envy the liberty which their folly has forfeited, and would gladly see all mankind imprisoned like themselves." Why is the constant striving after novelty ultimately both boring and depressing? Use specifics from Johnson's novel and passages from Scripture to support your argument.
30. At first glance, the Happy Valley in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* appears like the Garden of Eden, but a closer look leads to the conclusion that it is more like Hell. Why is this the case? What characteristics of the Happy Valley make it such an unsatisfactory and ultimately deadening mode of existence? Why, given the teachings of Scripture, should a Christian not be surprised at this outcome?
31. In I Corinthians 13:13, the Apostle Paul writes, "And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love." To what extent may Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* be viewed as a fable that illustrates Paul's words? How do faith, hope, and love hold the key to the happiness for which the characters search throughout the story? Be sure to cite specifics from the novel in your analysis.
32. Critic Arie Sachs, speaking of Samuel Johnson, says that he "was irritated by the mention of the very possibility of absolute happiness and serenity on earth, for he regarded such talk as inevitably a combination of complacency, hypocrisy, and irreligion." To what extent does Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* illustrate Sachs' assertion? Give attention not only to the book's rejection of the possibility of absolute earthly happiness, but also to the reasons why Johnson rejected such an idea.
33. In number 178 of Samuel Johnson's *Rambler* essays, he says, "It may be observed, in general, that the future is purchased by the present. It is not possible to secure instant or permanent happiness but by forbearance of some immediate gratification. This is so evidently true with regard to the whole of our existence, that all the precepts of theology have no other tendency than to enforce a life of faith; a life regulated not by our senses but our belief; a life in which pleasures are to be refused for fear of invisible punishments, and calamities sometimes to be sought, and always endured, in hope of rewards that shall be obtained in another state." How does the author's *Rasselas* serve as an extended commentary on this statement? How does the statement shed light on the oft-discussed and frequently misunderstood conclusion of the fable?

34. Compare and contrast the picture of the Happy Valley in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* with the Allegory of the Cave in Plato's *Republic*. Give attention to the deception being practiced on the inhabitants of both places, the characteristics of those who seek to overcome those deceptions, and the consequences of their quests.
35. Discuss the view of marriage found in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. Be sure to use quotations from the fable to support your analysis and critique the author's view from Scripture.
36. Compare and contrast the society described in Thomas More's *Utopia* to the Happy Valley in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*. To what extent does Johnson criticize the very kind of society advocated by More? Whose arguments do you find more compelling? Why?