

London



Introduction

"London: A Poem" was published anonymously in 1738.

It was praised by even the most discerning critic like Alexander Pope.

As is, the author states, a poem written "In imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal."

The Third Satire is a poem about the decay of ancient Rome and the decadence which the poet found there.

Juvenal's poem describes Umbricius leaving Rome to live in Cumae in order to escape from the vices and dangers of the capital city.

Where Johnson is highly critical of London and like Blake he looks at the immoral city and its decadent culture as anti-human.

Lines 1 to 8: Stanza 1

no' Grief and Fondness in my Breast
bel,
hen injur'd THALES bids the Town
rewell,
t still my calmer Thoughts his
oice commend,
raise the Hermit, but regret the
riend,
esolved at length, from Vice
d LONDON far,
breathe in distant Fields a purer
r,
nd, fix'd on CAMBRIA's solitary shore,
ve to St. DAVID one *true*
iton more.

- The poet's friend, Thales, wants to leave London.
- He is sad at this but cannot contest the choice of his friend.
- Thales has decided to reject the vice laden city and has chosen the calm atmosphere of Cambria.
- Cambria is in Wales.

Stanza 2: lines 9 to 18

... who would leave,
... brib'd, *Hibernia's* Land,
... change the Rocks of *Scotland* for
... the *Strand*?
... ere none are swept by sudden Fate
... way,
... at all whom Hunger spares, with Age
... decay:
... ere Malice, Rapine, Accident, conspire,
... and now a Rabble Rages, now a Fire;
... ere Ambush here relentless Ruffians
... /,
... and here the fell Attorney prowls for
... prey;
... ere falling Houses thunder on your
... head,
... and here a female Atheist talks you
... ad.

- Hibernia is the Classical Latin name for the island of Ireland.
- The poet says that in places like Ireland and Scotland fate does not have the same impact on the inhabitants. They live their full life in peace and are troubled by nothing more severe than hunger.
- But in London every kind of immorality and crime infest the city and give the law [attorney] the image of a predator.
- The "Strand" in line 10 refers to a busy street in London.
- Female atheist: according to the poet Edward Young, there are no female atheists in England and the arrival of one would signify an apocalypse. No known model of such is presented by Johnson.

Stanza ... 3: 19 to 30

While THALES waits the Wherry that contains

dissipated Wealth the small Remains,

Thames's Banks, in silent Thought we stood,

where GREENWICH smiles upon the silver Flood:

Back with the Seat that gave ELIZA Birth,

kneel, and kiss the consecrated Earth;

pleasing Dreams the blissful Age renew,

and call BRITANNIA'S Glories back to view;

hold her Cross triumphant on the Main,

the Guard of Commerce, and the Dread of *Spain*,

Masquerades debauch'd, Excise oppress'd,

English Honour grew a standing Jest.

- Wherry: a small rowing boat that takes Thales to the ship.
- Greenwich: the birthplace of Elizabeth.
- The age she ruled England is considered the Golden Age in art, culture, literature and science.
- It was also a glorious period of commerce and military expansion including the defeat of the Spanish Armada.
- It was an age when English honour was not considered a joke.

Stanza ... 4: Lines 31 to 34

transient Calm the
happy Scenes bestow,
and for a Moment lull
Sense of Woe.
length awaking, with
temptuous Frown,
ignant THALES eyes
neighb'ring Town.

- While thinking about the Elizabethan Age a pleasurable calm follows.
- But this breaks as soon as the mind touches the present time.
- Thales surveys London with angry eyes.

Stanza ... 5: 35 to 44

Since Worth, he cries, in these
Engen'rate Days,
I want ev'n the cheap Reward of empty
praise;
In those curst Walls, devote to Vice and
Sin,
My unrewarded Science toils in vain;
I chase Hope but sooths to double my
stress,
And ev'ry Moment leaves my Little less;
While yet my steady Steps no Staff
I stain,
And Life still vig'rous revels in my Veins;
Grant me, kind Heaven, to find some
happier Place,
Where Honesty and Sense are no
disgrace;

- In London today. Says Thales, worth not valued. Therefore it demands 'cheap reward' of even 'empty praise' since it would not receive the true price of the discerning.
- London has devoted itself to materialistic gain and every vice to achieve it.
- Science here languishes uselessly.
- Since Thales is hale hearty and energetic he feels that he deserves a happier place where honesty and sense reign.
- He asks God to take him to such a place.

Stanza ... 5 continued: Lines: 45 to 56

me pleasing Bank where verdant Osiers play,
me peaceful Vale with Nature's Paintings
y;
here once the harass'd BRITON found Repose,
nd safe in Poverty defy'd his Foes;
me secret Cell, ye Pow'rs, indulgent give.
t — — live here, for — — has learn'd to live.
ere let those reign, whom Pensions can incite
vote a Patriot black, a Courtier white;
plain their Country's dear-bought Rights
ay,
nd plead for Pirates in the Face of Day;
ith slavish Tenets taint our poison'd Youth,
nd lend a Lye the confidence of Truth.

- He wants to go to a pleasing peaceful valley.
- Ossiers: a small Eurasian willow which grows mostly in damp habitats.
- He wants to leave the London contains citizens who monetary incentive would vote patriot as an evil person and corrupt courtier as a sage.
- The rulers easily deprive people their rights they have won through long struggle.
- They plead for pirates, poison youth and make a dent in confidence of truth.

Image of 18th century London



Stanza ... 6: Lines: 57 to 61

Let such raise
palaces, and
Manors buy,
Collect a Tax, or
Form a Lottery,
With warbling
Eunuchs fill a
Licens'd Stage,
And lull to
Servitude a
Thoughtless Age.

- Let such sycophants prosper and shine
such a debauched city.
- Let them make servants the thoughtless
inhabitants who do not know what is real
good for them.
- Line 60: The "**warbling eunuchs**" are
Italian *castrati* singers of the opera house,
an entertainment greatly patronized
George II, and excepted in 1737 from
restrictions of the Licensing Act, which
reduced the number of London theatres
to two and required all plays to be approved
the Lord Chamberlain's office, thereby
eliminating theatrical satire on Walpole's
government.

Stanza ... 7: Lines: 62 to 66

heroes, proceed! What
bounds your Pride shall
hold?

What Check restrain your
first of Pow'r and Gold?
Hold rebellious Virtue
quite o'erthrown,
Hold our Fame, our
wealth, our Lives your
own.

- In such a land the heroes are also bound to be corrupt and vicious.
- They are allowed unrestricted access to property and power and material acquisitions.
- They are also given unlimited license to loot people's farms, Wealth and lives.

Stanza ... 8: Lines: 67 to 70

such, a groaning Nation's Spoils
e giv'n,
hen publick Crimes inflame the
rath of Heav'n:
ut what, my Friend, what Hope
mains for me,
ho start at Theft, and blush at
erjury?

- Thales says that he inherited such a city where a groaning nation is looted and the 'spoils' collected by administrators.
- Where crimes done in public life makes his blood boil with fury and hatred.
- Here he has no hope since he cannot adjust himself with the immoralities of the Londoners.

Stanza ... 7 ... contd: Lines: 71 to 76

no scarce forbear, tho' BRITAIN'S Court
sing,
pluck a titled Poet's borrow'd Wing;
Statesman's Logic, unconvinc'd can
ar,
d dare to slumber o'er the *Gazetteer*;
spise a Fool in half his Pension drest,
d strive in vain to laugh at *H—y's* jest.

- He loves his country but cannot tolerate its present administrators.
- The poets write lines they have copied from other poets.
- The statesman's sense of logic is faulty and unconvincing.
- The *Daily Gazetteer*, "the paper which that time contained apologies for the Court".
- H – y's jest: H----y's: John "Orator" Henley (1692-1759), a clergyman who set up his own proprietary place of worship and drew large crowds with unconventional preaching, which often included coarse jokes. He was paid by Walpole to edit a pro-government paper.

Stanza ... 8: Lines: 77 to 83

thers with softer Smiles, and subtler
t,
n sap the Principles, or taint the
heart;
with more Address a Lover's Note
nvey,
r bribe a Virgin's Innocence away.
ell may they rise, while I, whose
stic Tongue
e'er knew to puzzle Right, or varnish
rong,
urn'd as a Beggar, dreaded as a Spy,
ve unregarded, unlamented die.

- There is a second type of swindle in London. They do not use the roving hand but can turn smiles into a lethal weapon and destroy principles and corrupt hearts.
- They appear even more sincere to the lovers and can even bribe an innocent maiden before seducing her.
- It is they who succeed in London while Thales who was never an expert in such arts is called a beggar and a spy and is allowed to live with his name being taken seriously.

Stanza ... 9 : Lines: 84 to 92

... what but social Guilt the Friend
dears?
... who shares *Orgilio's* Crimes, his
fortune shares.
... it thou, should tempting Villainy
present
... *Marlb'rough* hoarded, or
Villiers spent;
... rn from the glitt'ring Bribe thy
ornful Eye,
... or sell for Gold, what Gold could
ever buy,
... e peaceful Slumber, self-approving
... y,
... sullied Fame, and Conscience ever
... y.

- *Orgilio*: *Orgilio*: from French *orgueil*, pride; an imaginary character exemplifying any successful racketeer.
- *Marlborough* and *Villiers*: John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722) had a reputation for avarice; George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham (1628-1694) squandered a vast fortune.
- *Thales* would rather prefer a peaceful sleep over material acquisitions.
- He would prefer to have an untarnished fame and conscience and not wealth derived through corrupt means.

Stanza ... 9: Lines 93 to 100

the cheated Nation's happy Fav'rites,
e!
mark whom the Great caress, who
own on me!
LONDON! the needy Villain's gen'ral
ome,
the Common Shore of *Paris* and
Rome;
with eager Thirst, by Folly or by Fate,
cks in the Dregs of each corrupted
ate.
rgive my Transports on a Theme
e this,
annot bear a *French* metropolis.

- He leaves London because London like other great cities the world like Paris and Rome has become the den of corruption either through th or folly. It is also possible that these cities are fated to become corrupt.
- He begs forgiveness from before leaving the city.

Stanza ... 10 : Lines: 101 to 108

industrious EDWARD! from the Realms
Day,
the Land of Heroes and of Saints
urvey;
nor hope the *British* Lineaments to
face,
the rustic Grandeur, or the surly
face;
not lost in thoughtless Ease, and
empty Show,
whilst the Warriour dwindled to a
beau;
Purse, Freedom, Piety, refin'd away,
FRANCE the Mimic, and of SPAIN the
they.

- Edward: Edward III (1327-1377) initiator of the Hundred Years War against France, and highly successful commander in this enterprise; victories of Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356) were particularly important
- England can never replicate simple grandeur achieved during reign of Edward.
- Today London has lost itself 'thoughtless ease' and 'empty pomp'
- By copying France and preying on Spain England has rejected serenity, freedom and even purity in religion

Stanza ... 11 Lines: 109 to 114

l that at home no more can beg
r steal,
r like a Gibbet better than a
Wheel;
iss'd from the Stage, or hooted
om the Court,
heir Air, their Dress, their
oliticks import;
bsequious, artful, voluble and
ay,
n *Britain's* fond Credulity they
rey.

- There are some who have the ability to beg or steal.
- Gibbet: hanging
- Wheel: in France the criminals were broken down on a wheel
- They are liked neither in opera house nor at court.
- They use their pleasing [nature] and speak in [many] volumes and try to catch hold of the easy credulity of the people through some false story.

Stanza: 11 contd ... Lines: 115 to 118

o gainful Trade their
Industry can 'scape,
they sing, they dance,
lean Shoes, or cure a
lap;
All Sciences a fasting
Monsieur knows,
and bid him go to Hell,
to Hell he goes.

- These fops live by pleasing their patron. They can even clean the shoes of this patron.
- They are not well off but they pretend to be a master of varied knowledge.
- He is highly loyal to his patron and can dutifully carry out any task given to him by his patron.

Stanza 12: Lines 119 to 124

...n! what avails it, that, from
...av'ry far,
...drew the Breath of Life
...*English Air*;
...as early taught a *Briton's* Right
...prize,
...nd lisp the Tale
...F HENRY's Victories;
...the gull'd Conqueror receives
...e Chain,
...nd what their Armies lost, their
...rings gain?

- He wants to reject such a life of slavery and breathe the air of freedom which he also enjoyed in his own country in the past.
- He was taught about the right of a Briton to be rewarded for every man's work he did.
- Lisp: here, to speak like a young child.
- HENRY's Victories: Henry V (1413-1422) won several victories in his campaigns in France, most notably at Agincourt (1415).
- But now the monarch is betrayed by his own men.

Stanza ... 13: Lines 125 to 133

udious to please, and ready to
bmit,
e supple *Gaul* was born a Parasite:
ill to his Int'rest true, where'er he
oes,
it, Brav'ry, Worth, his lavish Tongue
estows;
ev'ry Face a Thousand Graces
ine,
om ev'ry Tongue flows Harmony
vine.
ese Arts in vain our rugged Natives
y,
rain out with fault'ring Diffidence a
e,
nd get a Kick for awkward Flattery.

- The people in power are basic parasitic in nature. They learnt art from the French [Gaul].
- He talks about wit, bravery and worth but he is not those in real life.
- He can pretend to be full of human feelings and can speak effortlessly about divine harmony.
- The Britons are not adapted to living with such sophistication.
- Hence they get caught easily and kicked for their flattery and deceiving French become favorites of the king.

Stanza ... 14: Lines: 134 to 139

besides, with Justice, this discerning
age
admires their wond'rous Talents for
the Stage:
Well may they venture on the Mimic's
art,
who play from Morn to Night a
borrow'd Part;
actis'd their Master's Notions to
embrace,
repeat his Maxims, and reflect his
vice;

- This age also admires the
talent for mimicking more
deserving people and rev
in playing borrowed ro
derived from the masters.
- In short they have no origi
contributions to make a
only practice eleme
borrowed from their maste

Stanza ... 14: Lines: 140 to 145

With ev'ry wild Absurdity
Comply,
And view each Object with
Another's Eye;
To shake with Laughter ere the
First they hear,
To pour at Will the counterfeit'd
Tear;
And as their Patron hints the
Cold or Heat,
To shake in Dog-days,
December sweat.

- These lines are almost adopted from Juvenal.
- They are simpletons and do not have any sense of Judgment. They can only appreciate something if others praise it. Even before hearing a joke they start laughing. They also simulate pretended tears at such events. When they are suggested to be hot or cold by their patrons they start sweating or shaking at words.

Stanza ... 15: Lines: 146 to 153

How, when Competitors like these
pretend,
Can surly Virtue hope to fix a Friend?
How does that with serious Impudence
guile,
And lye without a Blush, without a
smile;
What each Trifle, ev'ry Vice adore,
Your Taste in Snuff, your Judgment in
Whore;
How in *Balbo's* Eloquence applaud, and
How
How he gropes his Breeches with a
Monarch's Air.

With false praises
the air and everybo
trying to please
patron how can the
be sincere apprais
and the opinion of
real friend in Londo
Asks Thales.

Stanza ... 16: Lines: 154 to 159

Arts like these preferr'd,
Whom you lov'd, carest,
They first invade your Table, then
Your Breast;
To pry your Secrets with insidious
Wiles,
To catch the weak Hour, and ransack
The Heart;
When soon your ill-plac'd
Confidence repay,
To commence your Lords, and govern
To betray.

- The sycophants of London through their art of pampering and praising invade the tables and the hearts of the aristocracy and win a position of trust.
- They spread their tentacles and look for the guilty secrets of the lords and take advantage of them by blackmailing their lords.

Stanza ... 16 Contd ... Lines: 160 to 171

Numbers here from Shame or
insure free,
Crimes are safe, but hated Poverty.
is, only this, the rigid Law pursues,
is, only this, provokes the snarling
use;
The sober Trader at a tatter'd Cloak,
wakes from his Dream, and labours for a
ke;
With brisker Air the silken Courtiers gaze,
and turn the varied Taunt a thousand
ays.
All the Grievs that harrass the Distrest,
where the most bitter is a scornful Jest;
None never wounds more deep the
n'rous Heart,
Than when a Blockhead's Insult points
the Dart.

- In London all criminal activities except 'shameful poverty' forgiven.
- Law pursues it; hurtful poems written against it.
- The poor trader as well as a 'silken courtier' are butts of a joke here. But the distressed is most rudely jolted by a crude joke in London.
- But most of the insults hurled at the unfortunate comes not from fate but from foolish people.

Stanza ... 17... Lines: 172 to 183

Heaven reserv'd, in Pity to the Poor,
pathless Waste, or undiscover'd Shore?
secret Island in the boundless Main?
peaceful Desart yet unclaim'd by SPAIN?
Oh let us rise, the happy Seats explore,
and bear Oppression's Insolence no more.
The mournful Truth is ev'ry where confest,
WHERE RISES WORTH, BY POVERTY DEPRESSED:
where more slow, where all are Slaves to
Gold,
where Looks are Merchandise, and Smiles
sold,
where won by Bribes, by Flatteries
colored,
the Groom retails the Favours of his Lord.

- Didn't the heaven create a haven for the poor?
- We must explore the world for a safe haven for them where they would not have tolerated oppression.
- We all know that in London worth is slow in being appreciated but poverty causes rapid depression.
- In London commerce incentives can buy everything from smile to favors.

Stanza 18: lines 184 to 195

Hark! th' affrighted Crowd's tumultuous Cries
thro' the Streets, and thunder to the Skies;
'd from some pleasing Dream of Wealth and
/r,
ne pompous Palace, or some blissful Bow'r,
ast you start, and scarce with aching Sight,
tain th' approaching Fire's tremendous Light;
ft from pursuing Horrors take your Way,
l Leave your little ALL to Flames a Prey;
n thro' the World a wretched Vagrant roam,
where can starving Merit find a Home?
ain your mournful Narrative disclose,
ile all neglect, and most insult your Woes.

- If by some twist of hostile fate all that has been acquired by unscrupulous Londoners are razed to the ground by a devastating fire then they will understand the plight of the wretched who have lost all and roam the streets hungry and shelterless.
- But such an event will never occur because neglect and insult are reserved only for the upright.

Stanza ... 19 ... Lines ... 196 to 211

ould Heaven's just Bolts *Orgilio's* Wealth
ound,
spread his flaming Palace on the Ground,
t o'er the Land the dismal Rumour flies,
publick Mournings pacify the Skies;
Laureat Tribe in servile Verse relate,
y Virtue wars with persecuting Fate;
n well-feign'd Gratitude the pension's
d
ind the Plunder of the begger'd Land.
while he builds, the gaudy Vassals come,
crowd with sudden Wealth the rising
ne;
Price of Boroughs and of Souls restore,
raise his Treasures higher than before.
y bless'd with all the Baubles of the Great,
polish'd Marble, and the shining Plate,
lio sees the golden Pile aspire,
hopes from angry Heav'n another Fire.

- Even if his wealth is accidentally taken away from him and he loses his palace in a fire, the rich have a loyal and servile band of poets who would make a sentimental appeal to the people by relating how virtuous he has waged a losing battle with fate. The courtiers too would now refund to him a portion of the money he had given to them in the past. With all this money he would build an even grander palace.
- Seeing the restoration of the grandeur and accumulation of an even greater pile of wealth the racketeer hopes for another fire because that would leave him even richer.

Stanza ... 20: Lines ... 212 to 225

ld'st thou resign the Park and Play content,
the fair Banks of *Severn* or of *Trent*;
ere might'st thou find some elegant Retreat,
the hireling Senator's deserted Seat;
stretch thy Prospects o'er the smiling Land,
less than rent the Dungeons of the *Strand*;
ere prune thy Walks, support thy drooping
v'rs,
ct thy Rivulets, and twine thy Bow'rs;
, while thy Beds a cheap Repast afford,
pise the Dainties of a venal Lord:
ere ev'ry Bush with Nature's Music rings,
ere ev'ry Breeze bears Health upon its Wings;
all thy Hours Security shall smile,
bless thine Evening Walk and Morning Toil.

- Hence one should quit the city and go to some riverside far away from London.
- There he may find a manor or a senator at a low rent and spend his time amid nature in the country.
- In the country he would find cheap but wholesome food which is much better than the repast offered by some corrupt lord.
- In the country nature sings and every bush and every breeze brings with it the happiness of good health.
- One would live happy and secure in the village.

Stanza 21.....Lines 226 to 237

beare for Death, if here at Night you roam,
sign your Will before you sup from Home.
The fiery Fop, with new Commission vain,
who sleeps on Brambles till he kills his Man;
The frolick Drunkard, reeling from a Feast,
who wokes a Broil, and stabs you for a Jest.
Ev'n these Heroes, mischievously gay,
Rogues of the Street, and Terrors of the Way;
Wh' d as they are with Folly, Youth and Wine,
Their prudent Insults to the Poor confine;
For they mark the Flambeau's bright
approach,
and shun the shining Train, and golden Coach.

- London on the contrary is a de
trap.
- Here even a simple pleasure
dining away from home can b
death either in the hand of a 'f
fop' or in the jesting action o
'frolic drunkard'.
- These drunken youth – 'the lon
the street' – insult the poor.
- Flambeau: : torch; the rich
powerful rode by night in coac
accompanied by nume
servants and linkboys with torc
to light the way.
- These drunken killers who strik
night avoid the light of a con
flambeau but do not shirk f
their criminal activities.

Stanza: 22 Lines: 238 to 243

vain, these Dangers past, your Doors
you close,
and hope the balmy Blessings of
 repose:
wiel with Guilt, and daring with
 despair,
the midnight Murd'rer bursts the
deathless Bar;
invades the sacred Hour of silent Rest,
and plants, unseen, a Dagger in your
breast.

- One cannot avoid these dangers even if he closes doors against murderers.
- When one is sleeping his door can be felled by cruel men and he can be stabbed through them.

Stanza: 23 Lines: 244 to 249

force can our Fields, such Crowds
Tyburn die,
with Hemp the Gallows and the
net supply.
propose your Schemes, ye
Parliamentarian Band,
those *Ways and Means* support
sinking Land;
let Ropes be wanting in the
empting Spring,
bring another Convoy for the K—

- Tyburn: the place of execution on the outskirts of London.
- Ways-and-means bills were voted for money for government purposes. Johnson in a note calls "Ways and Means" a "cant [political jargon] term" used in the House of Commons to describe various methods of raising money."
- K—g: King: George II of Great Britain was also the Prince-Elector of Hanover in Germany, where he liked to spend his summers; these absences were unpopular in England.

Stanza: 24 ... Lines: 250 to 255

ingle Jail, in ALFRED's golden
gn,
uld half the Nation's Criminals
ntain;
r Justice then, without Constraint
or'd,
stain'd the Ballance, but resign'd
e Sword;
Spies were paid, no *Special*
ies known,
st Age! But ah! how diff'rent
m our own!

- The speaker once again goes back to the golden past of England.
- He says that a prison-ho during the reign of king Alf to contain half of the nation criminals.
- Justice did not need the aid cruelty [sword] to reform wayward.
- That was blessed age and v different from the age of speaker.

Stanza 25 ... lines ... 256 to 265

... ch could I add, — — but see the Boat at
... d,
... Tide retiring, calls me from the Land:
... wel! — — When Youth, and Health, and
... une spent,
... u fly'st for Refuge to the Wilds of *Kent*;
... tir'd like me with Follies and with
... nes,
... ngy Numbers warn'st succeeding Times;
... n shall thy Friend, nor thou refuse his
... Foe to Vice forsake his *Cambrian* Shade;
... irtue's Cause once more exert his Rage,
... Satire point, and animate thy Page.

- The speaker says that he could have said a lot more but his boat has arrived and he would have to leave.
- He says that when the poet would be tired like him at the follies and crime of London he too would want to leave the city.
- His friend would wait to help him out on that day in the shade of Cambria.
- And then they would make virtue their champion and rage at the reigning state of affairs and would make satire the vehicle of their expression.