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Rasselas: A Realist's Narrative on the Quest for Ideal Happiness

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Lauren is an English major contemplating transitioning her area of study toward Biology, for which she also has enthusiasm. She is very reluctant to part with an immensely endearing major that has introduced her to countless classics and other interesting texts while driving her analytical skills and creativity through writing. Likely, she will keep English as a minor. This essay was written for a course entitled Age of Johnson, taught by Dr. Thomas Curley, who conveys his enthusiastic passion for Samuel Johnson's works and the period through his breadth of knowledge and delightful animation.

A prevalent subject in English critic Samuel Johnson's literary compositions, based on keen observations of the human experience, is the theme of the individual's struggle to find lasting happiness amidst the illusions and self-deceptions that distort reality and lead to vain hopes. Illusory perspectives that sustain a perverted reality drive the perpetual, quixotic search for a pure, ideal happiness despite experiences that continually demonstrate the impossibility of such a sound condition in the imperfect human existence. Johnson's *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* depicts the journey of naively romantic hopefuls exploring different choices of life in expectation of finding one that would ensure them immaculate happiness. Through the work, Johnson denounces the evasion of reality (real circumstances) in favor of the imagination (fantasy) that deludes and exposes the folly of consequentially attending to the quixotic pursuit of perfect happiness.

Upon opening the narrative, Johnson draws the attention of an audience for whom his philosophical fable in the guise of an Oriental romance is targeted: "Ye who listen with credulity to the whispers of fancy, and pursue with eagerness the phantoms of hope" (2680). The whole narrative is composed of a series of alternating cursory encounters and comprehensive investigations into various modes of life. Through the introduction of restless and discontented Prince Rasselas, Johnson immediately dismisses the opinion that ideal happiness is necessarily connected with corporeal gratification. In the paradoxical prison of the lavish Happy Valley, Rasselas feels the oppression of some *thing* missing, amidst the overindulgence of sensual pleasures, that deprives him of a sound mind and perfect felicity. To impress the surface irony of oppression within the happy valley, Johnson embellishes the luxurious setting of diverse floral and faunal plentitude, perpetual security from evil, freedom from labor, and constant gaiety—"revelry and merriment was the business of every hour" (2682)—into the hedonist's paradise. The façade of perpetual happiness maintained by the endless festivities to delight the senses dissipates before Rasselas in his agitated lone wanderings and ruminations over his unhappiness. Hedonism as a lifestyle of pleasure that indulges only the senses lacks the capacity for fulfilling complete happiness. Chapter 2 finds Rasselas, during one of his lone outings, conjecturing what may be that void in the happy valley that prevents him from experiencing complete happiness. In a monologue in which he muses over this substantial feeling of vague emptiness, he considers a "latent sense" that cannot be satisfied with corporal gratification alone: "I am pained with want, but am not [...] satisfied with fullness. [...] Man has surely some latent sense for which

[the happy valley] affords no gratification, or he has some desires distinct from sense, which must be satisfied before he can be happy" (Johnson 2683). In observation of his sullen attitude and withdrawal from the revelry of royal society, one of Rasselas' old instructors contends that his discontent has no concrete basis in the happy valley, where there is "neither labor to be endured nor danger to be dreaded, yet [there] is all that labor and danger can procure" (Johnson 2684). Against this reasoning, the prince expresses that having all means of corporal satisfaction at his disposal has infused in him a need to pursue something, to which desire his former instructor admonishes that had he "seen the miseries of the world, [he] would know to value [his] present state" (Johnson 2684). The instructor's response stirs in Rasselas a desire to witness first-hand the miseries of the world because he is now convinced that it is only through his direct observations of the human plight that he can appreciate his supposed blessings.

Out of the conversation between the two emerges the philosophical truth that it is only through hardship that one can truly know happiness; our possessions, whether of materials, rank, or others' affection and esteem, are of higher value when they are earned with difficulty. Pekayah, Princess Nekayah's favored maid and fellow companion on the journey, shares her encounter with this universal truth in her account of the interaction between the Arab chief and the uneducated, illiterate woman he kept in captivity away from worldly society on an island on the Nile River: "when they vied for his regard, he sometimes turned away disgusted. [...] as they had no choice, their fondness, or appearance of fondness, excited in him neither pride nor gratitude; he was not exalted in his own esteem by the smiles of a woman who saw no other man" (Johnson 2729). Even the absolute shield from human evil and corruption is detestable if its extreme protection robs an individual of experiencing and understanding human nature and the multifaceted human condition, thereby impeding mental growth and realistic perception. Also, through Rasselas' communication of his weariness with life in utopia, Johnson imparts that happiness, in whatever form it may take, cannot last in a condition of constancy—even one of constant luxury—because the mind is inclined toward novelty, and always anticipates its pursuit to engage and excite it. Although Rasselas acknowledges that the condition of constancy detracts from mental excitement (an important element of happiness) as it relates to his existence in the happy valley, he fails to apply this knowledge in his pursuit of the one ultimate form of happiness. All states of happiness are liable to fall into a perpetual haze; in vain will Rasselas and his party hope to find that one choice of life that will endow perfect, lasting happiness.

Toward the end of their journey, Nekayah communicates the discernment that "such is the state of life, that none are happy but by the anticipation of change; the change itself is nothing;

when we have made it, the next wish is to change again," to which Rasselas concurs that "variety is so necessary to content" (Johnson 2739). Through their conversation Johnson's rationale for the evasiveness of a lasting mode of happiness is revealed.

A man of reason, Johnson, through his writings, often censured the predominance of the imagination or the fancy over reason and the sense of reality. *Idler* #32 focuses on the distortion of reality and the illusion of happiness achieved by succumbing to the imagination: "Many have no happier moments than those they pass in solitude, abandoned to their own imaginations [...]. All this is a voluntary dream, a temporary recession from the realities of life to airy fictions; and habitual subjection of reason to fancy." Chapter 44 of *Rasselas*, entitled "The Dangerous Prevalence of Imagination," is devoted to the discussion of disorders of the mind—self-deception, delusions, loss of reality—that overcome rationality when human fancy is allowed to consume the mind unchecked. The delusional astronomer who imagines himself the administrator of the weather and controller of the elements succumbs to this deviation from the sound balance of reason and fantasy from too much time spent in study and meditation without the alleviation of mental distortion from regular companionship.

A realistic scheme that lends much to pessimism pervades Johnson's tale of the vain quest for ideal happiness. James Boswell in his renowned biography of Johnson captures this seemingly pessimistic nature in a dialogue between Johnson and him concerning the accessibility of happiness. In this particular exchange, Johnson imparts his conviction that happiness relates to the capacity to hope, and, as hope is an act of placing faith and possessing confidence in the future in anticipation of positive outcomes, happiness is not to be experienced in the present. Boswell picks at this opinion, asking Johnson if, despite this supposed rarity of human happiness, there are valid times when one experiences true happiness in the present, to which he exclaims: "Never, but when he is drunk" (253). His declaration that "misery is the lot of man" can be extracted specifically from *Rambler* #45, *Adventurer* #120, and *Idler* #32, though this attitude finds expression in various other essays from the three series. In *Rasselas*, he voices this melancholic outlook and details many dismal aspects of human existence relating to this perspective through the poet, Imlac, who tells the prince that "human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed" (2696). The inexperienced and hopeful young prince initially rejects such a gloomy assessment of the human existence, supposing that leading a kind, virtuous life can immunize one from treachery and suffering. Imlac presses on with his grim perspective of the reality of the human condition, stemming from his own observations and experience, while issuing a warning against Rasselas' naïve perception of the real world beyond his secluded haven: "The world, which you figure to yourself smooth and quiet as the lake in the valley, you will find a sea foaming with tempests, and boiling with whirlpools: you will be sometimes

overwhelmed by the waves of violence, and sometimes dashed against the rocks of treachery. Amidst wrongs and frauds, competitions and anxieties, you will wish a thousand times for these seats of quiet, and willingly quit hope to be free from fear” (Johnson 2698).

Countering Rasselas’ notion that virtue can safeguard one against the vice and malice of others, Imlac explains that if the malevolent must suffer ignominy and unhappiness, by their wretched and miserable nature, they will not forbear from disturbing the mental peace of others. With such admonitions against his callow perceptions did hopeful Rasselas embark on the journey to discover the choice of life that could afford him the greatest degree of happiness. In Cairo, Rasselas observed ubiquitous gaiety and benevolence, but, after having entered into the social circles of the city’s mirthful denizens, found his mind agitated and himself unable to share their joviality. Seeking Imlac’s counsel on his mental unrest, he is informed of the deceptiveness of appearances by the poet, who explains that within such seemingly jovial, content society, “there was not one who did not dread the moment when solitude should deliver him to the tyranny of reflection” (Johnson 2702). En route its excursion to seek discourse with a hermit renowned in the country of his habitation for his pious virtue, the party encounters pastoral life, the reality of which leaves it disenchanted. Nekayah, who cherishes the innocence and tranquility traditionally associated with simple pastoral life, is incredulous at rustic reality and particularly disgusted by the rural folks’ ignorance, unrefined nature, and callous malevolence. Johnson, who supported cultured society, debunks the myth of pastoral life as a serene lifestyle of idyllic simplicity and harmony with nature, shattering the deceptive allure. Continuing on their travel toward the hermit’s residence, they find shelter from the heat in the abode of a man of prosperity

Surrounded by fertile nature and domestic joy, Rasselas supposes that the choice of a prosperous life could offer the happiness he seeks, only to be disappointed in his presumption by the affluent man, who discloses the true nature of his situation: that his wealth and popular influence endanger his life by making him the enemy of those envious of his prosperity. As the example of the man of wealth illustrates, prosperity, for all its accompanying comforts and luxury, brings with it a level of uneasiness and fear of victimization—envy makes enemies.

Finally, the three travelers reach the mountain-cave dwelling of the man who has been leading a life of solitude. Through conversation, the hermit reveals his discontent with solitary life, divulging the mental turmoil that plagues the individual who lacks regular company to engage his mind with conversation and activities, describing how such a mind unexercised for want of fresh, external conversation can warp into a muddled state:

“[the] mind is disturbed with a thousand perplexities of doubt, and vanities of imagination, which hourly prevail upon [the individual], because [there is] no opportunities of relaxation or diversion” (Johnson 2707). In addition to this knowledge, the hermit imparts his belief that for the individual that “lives well” and observes virtue, satisfaction can be found in any form of life. Discovering the life of solitude unsound, the three continue on their quest for elusive pristine happiness. Nekayah takes opportunities to observe humble life for traces of felicity and her scrutiny of modest living circumstances and the nature of families eventually lead to an extensive discussion with Rasselas on the dynamics of domestic life. The princess observes that within the range of families, domestic discord exists independent of each family’s economic situation. Although these domestic “civil wars” are not necessarily inevitable, Nekayah perceives that they are generally difficult to avoid because the different years of life bring about significant changes to the overall perspective of the individual, and children by their lesser development cannot “credit the assertions of parents, which their own eyes show them to be false” (Johnson 2712).

Besides the friction between parents and children, family conflicts also arise out of spousal tension caused by iniquities committed by either partner. Repelled by talk of such infelicity that seemed inherent in family life, Rasselas considers the single life, but is deterred by Nekayah’s subsequent description of the bachelorhood: “To live without feeling or exciting sympathy, to be fortunate without adding to the felicity of others, or afflicted without tasting the balm of pity, is a state more gloomy than solitude. [...] Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures” (Johnson 2712).

Having, as yet, no luck in tracing the mythical pristine bliss—though, for their originally callow minds, they have gained a great depth of invaluable knowledge to understand life (Johnson indirectly helping his audience to understand the nature of happiness)—they consult an old man still of reason, hoping to hear that perfect happiness, though it eludes youthful pursuit, approaches the individual later in life. The old man offers no solace in his account of his present condition, relating that, for him, “the world has lost its novelty,” (Johnson 2735) that he has lost interest in the physical properties of a world he is soon to quit upon Nature’s beckoning.

Johnson’s poverty and constant struggle for livelihood during most of his life contributes to the aura of pessimism that hovers about the characters’ pursuit of pure happiness, an ideal state that Johnson must have felt was not accessible in earthly existence. Despite the fame attained by his monumental achievement of *A Dictionary of the English Language*, money continued to be a pressing concern.

Rasselas was crafted by Johnson in the span of, astoundingly, one week in January 1759 under the necessity of money to attend to his dying mother—to provide comfort for her on her deathbed, finance funeral expenses, and pay off her minor debts. Johnson did not receive the money for the first edition of *Rasselas* in time to attend to her deathbed and funeral. The reader can perceive Johnson's desolate outlook on human existence in the speech of the old man of reason when he expresses that praises are meaningless to him who has "neither mother to be delighted with the reputation of her son, nor wife to partake the honors of her husband" (2735). Before leaving the company of the group, the man of age and reason indirectly advises the youths to live effectively and attentively to their fullest potential while time and the vigor of youth are still on their side: "My retrospect of life recalls to my view many opportunities of good neglected, much time squandered upon trifles, and more lost in idleness and vacancy. I leave many great designs unattempted, and many great attempts unfinished" (Johnson 2735). He leaves them with what is Johnson's own message to the audience on his impression of ideal happiness: "[I] expect, with serene humility, that hour which nature cannot long delay; and hope to possess, in a better state, that happiness which here I could not find, and that virtue which here I have not attained" (Johnson 2735). The dissatisfaction that the weary, yet hopeful, travelers in search of immaculate happiness continually load onto their minds with each deterring experience in society and each discouraging interview with individuals of different stations in life—which develops the pessimism that characterizes the story—is somehow allayed by Johnson's subtle message of turning to "hope as form of anticipatory happiness" (Joeckel 31).

As Johnson's Christian religion was a significant influence on his life, the hope that he tries to inspire in his audience is a message advising individuals to put faith in the future, and even beyond (i.e. the afterlife), toward indefinite times that still holds the promise of idealized happiness (Joeckel 31). In one of his moral essays, Johnson urges his readers as "candidates of learning" to "[fix] their eyes upon the permanent luster of moral and religious truth, [in which] they would find a more certain direction to happiness" (*Rambler* 180).

Critic Samuel T. Joeckel, in his essay on the Enlightenment's influence on Johnson, believes that there is another reason for his characters' inability to secure general happiness: the particularity of the individual's experience is rejected in preference for the universal human experience. Enlightenment thought denied the notion of happiness in the particulars of unique individual experiences and subjected individuals' experiences to be judged through the universal perspective, by which the unique instances of happiness is devalued. Imlac, who embodies many of Johnson's values, is the medium by which he champions the generalizing

inclination of Enlightenment thinking; he describes the laudable nature of poetry thus: "The business of a poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances [...], neglect the minuter discriminations. [...] He must [...] rise to general and transcendental truths [...]" (Johnson 2694). The problem with this principle of universal uniformity when applied to the judgment of happiness is that it shamefully renders insignificant the valid instances of an individual's particular happiness, which, as Joeckel contends, is "often the locus of true experiences of happiness" (22).

Although *Rasselas* seems to narrate a series of trials with disappointing outcomes, Johnson as a moralist provides a foundation for understanding the nature of happiness while providing valuable lessons and advice for his audience. That Johnson is of the opinion that knowledge, education, and the ability to think and reflect under reason are key to any form of happiness is implicit in recurrent situations in the narrative. *Rasselas*' innate ability to think alienates him from the society of the young men of gaiety of Cairo, whom he repels for their shallow joy: "Their mirth was without images, their laughter without motive; their pleasures were gross and sensual, in which the mind had no part [...] Perpetual levity must end in ignorance; and intemperance, though it may fire the spirits for an hour, will make life short and miserable" (Johnson 2703). *Nekayah*, in her observation of humble life, also encounters excessive mindlessness and frivolity among the daughters of the families, indulging in their artificial happiness at times and absorbed in petty bickers at others. *Pekuah* likewise dealt with the frustrating emptiness of the mind in her exasperating company with the uneducated and mindless women at the Arab chief's abode. Johnson also encourages the balance of study with experience, and through Imlac's dialogue with *Rasselas*, this value is emphasized when the poet avows, "I am less unhappy than the rest, because I have a mind replete with images [...] The rest, whose minds have no impression but of the present moment, are either corroded by malignant passions, or sit stupid in the gloom of perpetual vacancy" (2697).

For all his support of Christian morality, Johnson is not blind to the truth that virtue does not guarantee happiness, only "quietness of conscience" (2714). Relating back to Enlightenment ideals prevalent during the 18th century of reason over fancy, transcendental truth, and universal generalizations of the human happiness, Johnson's fable demonstrates through its inconclusive ending of the vanity of an earthly pursuit of happiness and imparts the moralist's own belief in hope as the only true medium by which the possibility of ideal happiness in the future exists.

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