
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism in the Light of *Preface to Shakespeare*

Wu Yue

College of Foreign Languages, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

Corresponding Author: Wu Yue, E-mail: 2493561403@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Preface to Shakespeare has long been considered a classic document of English literary criticism. In it, Johnson sets forth his editorial principles and provides an appreciative analysis of the merits and defects of the work of the great Elizabethan dramatist—Shakespeare. The present paper mainly discusses Johnson's literary theories proposed in *Preface to Shakespeare* which can be concluded as follows: First, Johnson's famous theory of "general nature," in which he emphasizes the importance of the universality of literary works. Second, the importance of morality and didacticism in literature. Third, Johnson's opposition to confirming "three unities" dogmatically, especially the unity of time and the unity of place. Except for the discussion of Johnson's theories, the present paper also summarizes the features and the limitations of Johnson's criticism. Through the analysis of Johnson's views on literature in *Preface to Shakespeare*, the present paper provides a general overview of Samuel Johnson's literary criticism.

KEYWORDS

Samuel Johnson; literary criticism; general nature theory; didacticism; three unities

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 11 November 2022

PUBLISHED: 26 November 2022

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2022.5.11.19

1. Introduction

Samuel Johnson, an esteemed English writer who became a prominent literary figure in England in the 18th century, is known for writing profound poetry, fiction, moralizing essays, and political pieces. Besides, as an important figure of literary criticism of the eighteenth century, "many modern literary critics and theorists have returned to Johnson's critical writings as the starting point for their own discussions of early English literature" (Tomarken, 1991, p.130).

According to Horace: "Poets would either delight or enlighten the reader or say what is both amusing and worth using. When you instruct, be brief, so the mind can clearly perceive and firmly retain" (H. Richter, 2019, p.91). Like most of Johnson's contemporaries, his literary criticism derives its principles from Horace. His ideas like "The end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing" in *Preface to Shakespeare* have a similarity to Horace's mind.

By looking past the *Preface* and concentrating attention on Johnson's Notes, both his commentary and summary statements or "strictures," ... Johnson goes beyond the familiar moral and didactic statements in the *Preface* to contribute to our understanding of eighteenth-century editorial practices and performances as well as interpretation of character and humor (Tomarken, 1991, p.131).

As a critic, Johnson has developed many incisive theories and made some contributions to literary criticism. And his *Preface to Shakespeare* is quite representative of the understanding of his literary thought.

2. Literature Review

As one of the most important writers in neo-classical history in Britain, Samuel Johnson's major achievement is the dictionary he compiled: *Dictionary of the English Language*. So antecedent scholars have tended to focus on his achievements as a famous lexicographer and on the analysis of his other important work, like his *Lives of the Poets*, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, and a series of critical essays. Jeffrey Meyers (2007) praised Johnson as an imaginative writer and analyzed the great influence his important works, such as his *Lives of the Poets*, have had on subsequent writers (Meyers, 2007). Besides, there are a number of scholars who have reviewed Johnson's life, like Jacob M. Appel's "'book-review' Samuel Johnson: A Life" (2010), Robert Gary, and Walker's "The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D" (2010). However, the author notes that there is not much research has been done on his literary criticism and theories. Therefore, based on previous studies, this paper focuses on Johnson's literary criticism by analyzing his books, especially his *Preface to Shakespeare*. Through a detailed analysis of Johnson's work, this paper summarizes and extracts the main literary thought of this important 18th-century writer, thus completing the current literary study of Johnson.

3. "General Nature" Theory

Johnson begins his text with this famous assertion: "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature" (Martin, 2009, p.355). He believes that only things that are universal can resonate with readers and be accepted and loved by the public. Things that are too personal can only satisfy the needs and interests of a small group of people and is not representative enough to survive in the future. "This imperative to generalize and universalize, which is evident in his parodiable fondness for aphorism, is central to Johnson's thinking" (James, 2014, p.10). Therefore, Johnson advocates that poets should grasp the whole and give priority to universality. He has repeatedly mentioned this idea in his writings. In the fourth issue of his periodical magazine *The Rambler*, he said: "The task of our present writers is very different; it requires, together with that learning, which is to be gained from books, that experience which can never be attained by solitary diligence but must arise from general converse and accurate observation of the living world" (Martin, 2009, p.174).

In *Rasselas*, he said: "'This business of a poet,' said Imlac, 'is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances... But the knowledge of nature is only half the task of a poet; he must be acquainted likewise with all the modes of life'" (2002, p.28). The poet must not be confused by the various contingencies that occur in life, and poetry must reveal the universality of life from a holistic perspective so that humans can ultimately transcend the limits of time and space. In *Preface to Shakespeare*, he clearly stated that the reason why Shakespeare's plays were so popular among people of his time and later generations was due to his wide extension of design:

Shakespeare is, above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life. His characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpracticed by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions, which can operate but upon small numbers; or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity...in those of Shakespeare, it is commonly a species. It is from this wide extension of design that so much instruction is derived. It is this which fills the plays of Shakespeare with practical axioms and domestic wisdom (Martin, 2009, p.355-356).

Therefore, he is also one of the admirers of Shakespeare. Johnson held that compared with the universal things and ideas, those shallow and personal views could only cause a momentary sensation. They are destined to dissipate over time. This view can be seen in his comments on the metaphysical school of the 17th century. The "metaphysical poets" is a term coined by literary critic Samuel Johnson to describe a loose group of English lyric poets of the 17th century, who shared an interest in metaphysical concerns and a common way of investigating them, and whose work was characterized by the inventiveness of metaphor (these involved comparisons being known as metaphysical conceits). In Johnson's description of metaphysical poets in *The Lives of the Poets*, he said that what they wanted, however, of the sublime, they endeavored to supply by hyperbole; their amplification had no limits; they left not only reason but fancy behind them and produced combinations of confused magnificence that not only could not be credited but could not be imagined (1929). So, although the whims of the metaphysical poets could make a sensation for a while, their works and ideas are not representative and could not last forever.

Although this is only his personal opinion and the influence of the metaphysical poets in literary history cannot be simply justified by his words, he gives us a glimpse of the problems of the metaphysical poets. According to Johnson, metaphysical poets paid too much attention to novelty. And because of their excessive pursuit of ingenious conceits, unusual comparisons, and unexpected similes and metaphors, their language was obscure and incomprehensible. Therefore, Johnson's critique of the metaphysical poets shows that he places great importance on this theory.

4. Morality and Didacticism in Literature

Samuel Johnson believed that writers should emphasize the depiction of universality; only such literature could achieve its purpose of moral teaching. That's why he placed great importance on the "general nature" theory. He takes the didactic purpose of literature far more seriously than either Horace or Dryden. This is closely related to the social environment of the 18th century. In the 18th century, Britain became the leading power in the world and the first industrialized country. With the growth of the economy and the development of society, problems such as unequal distribution of wealth, crime, poverty, and the ensuing spiritual crisis and confusion of the people emerged in British society.

"Although the nation rose between 1700 and 1800 from being a minor European power struggling with its identity to being a great imperial and industrial power, the intervening century of change was, as I will stress throughout the book, filled with anxiety and painful adjustments to a new social reality" (Hudson, 2003, p.5).

Johnson witnessed these great changes and took the responsibility of maintaining social stability and morality in a period of transition. His moral outlook and his thoughts and words on literature truly reflect different aspects of English social life in the 18th century, so ethics was one of his core concerns.

4.1 Morality

The moral and ethical influence of literary works can be traced back as far as Plato. In *Republic*, Plato said: "And still he (the imitative poet) will go on imitating without knowing what makes a thing good and or bad, and may be expected therefore to imitate only that which appears to be good to the ignorant multitude?" "Just so" (2000, p.415). The poet is only an imitator, and thus he considers the moral influence contained in the poet's literary work to be negative as well. So, in Plato's ideal city, poets would be cast out of the city, along with the rhetoricians.

However, Plato's great pupil, Aristotle, did not agree with Plato's opinion. In Aristotle's definition of tragedy in *Poetics*, "Tragedy is, then, an imitation of a noble and complete action... and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents" (2013, p.135). He believed that tragedy could affect people's emotions, and it cultivates that emotion through pity and fear evoked by tragedy.

Aristotle's opinion was further concluded by Horace. In *The Art of Poetry*, Horace mentioned that: "Poets would either delight or enlighten the reader or say what is both amusing and really worth using. But when you instruct, be brief, so the mind can clearly perceive and firmly retain" (H. Richter, 2019, p. 91). And by instructing, it means moral education. Johnson inherited the tradition from ancient Greece and Rome that literature comes from the imitation of nature. Johnson believed that literature is a truthful reflection of real life, and thus the ethics and virtues embedded in literature can instruct people in real life. So, in his evaluation of Shakespeare, he praises that Shakespeare is more true to life than other authors: "The poet (Shakespeare) that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life...It will not easily be imagined how much Shakespeare excels in accommodating his sentiments to real life" (Martin, 2009, p. 355).

4.2 Didacticism

Influenced by his contemporary philosophers and ethicists, Johnson believed that the nature of humans was inherently evil and therefore required severe regulation and control. So, he tended to use a series of moral principles to regulate people's behavior and thus compensate for the moral deficiencies of human beings. Therefore, whether a literary work has its moral and ethical purpose or not becomes the basis of his literary criticism. Though Johnson believed that Shakespeare's plays were true to life, he didn't use the truths embedded in real life to teach and instruct. So, Johnson accuses his lack of didacticism: "He (Shakespeare) sacrifices virtue to convenience and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that seems to write without any moral purpose" (Martin, 2009, p.362). For example, Johnson didn't agree with the bad ending of *King Lear*. According to the code of general ethics, good people should be awarded while bad people should be punished. However, the ending of *King Lear* is opposite to this code: The kind and honest Cordelia, the youngest daughter of King Lear, dies trying to save her father. Johnson is on the side of the public, he advocated that *King Lear* should have a happy ending, but that does not mean he is sentimental and can't accept a bad ending. According to Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, Johnson agreed with the ending of Shakespeare's great tragedy, *Othello*. Because he believed that people could learn some useful moral values from this play: "Do not trust others easily,;" "Don't enter into a mismatched marriage,;" "Deception and doubt are obstacles to happiness."

In conclusion, as a responsible writer and critic of his time, Johnson advocated that writers should take responsibility for rebuilding the moral principles of human society. Therefore, literary creation should be true to life and acquire writers to seek the truth in the real world and in their personal life experiences to convey the moral values of their works.

5. Samuel Johnson's Breakthrough of "Three Unities."

"Three unities" evolved from Aristotle's unity of action in his *Poetics*. These three unities were redefined in 1570 by the Italian humanist Lodovico Castelvetro in his interpretation of Aristotle, and they are usually referred to as "Aristotelian rules" for dramatic structure. Later, it developed to be the golden rule of drama and play creation by classicism in the seventeenth century, which especially prevailed in France of that period. On the one hand, "three unities" is positive for a while as it is helpful for writers to arrange the plot in a clear way. Besides, it is also helpful for the audience to catch the information at a time when the stage design and other dramatic workmanship are undeveloped. On the other hand, as time went by, this kind of standardization became an obstacle to artistic creation. To a certain degree, "three unities" is irrational.

Firstly, the unity of time. It limits the supposed action to the duration, roughly, of a single day. Aristotle meant that the length of time represented in the play should be, ideally speaking, the actual time passing during its presentation. But it kills the writer's imagination and creation, and it prevents them from creating various works. Secondly, the unity of place: a play should cover a single physical space and should not attempt to compress geography, nor should the stage represent more than one place. It is suitable for some onefold and simple story, but a story with a complex plot is impossible to be set in one place. Therefore, with the development of society and the improvement of people's spiritual needs, this principle is not rational. Thirdly, the unity of action. The unity of action limits the supposed action to a single set of incidents which are related as cause and effect, "having a beginning, middle, and an end. No scene is to be included that does not advance the plot directly. No subplots, no characters who do not advance the action. But like Johnson said, "the action is not supposed to be real, and it follows that between the acts a longer or shorter time may be allowed to pass..." (Martin, 2009, 368). So "three unities" is no longer fit for literary creation. Samuel Johnson, in his *Preface to Shakespeare*, clearly proposed the breakthrough of the shackles of "three unities" by the study of Shakespeare.

Johnson is the first literary critic who states that the unity of time and place should be abandoned: "the unities of time and place are not essential to just drama, that though they may sometimes conduce to pleasure, there are always to be sacrificed to the nobler beauties of variety and instruction" (Martin, 2009, p. 368-369). He believed that the necessity of the unities of time and place arose from the supposed necessity of making the drama credible. But "the truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know, from the first act to the last, that the stage is only a stage, and that the players are only players" (Martin, 2009, p.366). So, since the audience can use their imagination to believe in changes in time, places, and scenes, the rule of unity of time and place is unnecessary. Johnson's attitude to the unity of action is positive. His evaluation of plays of Shakespeare expounds on his preference for the unity of action to the unity of time and place. Johnson held that Shakespeare has well preserved the unity of action. For example, Shakespeare's four great tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*, adhere to the principle of the unity of action. The plots of these plays are a whole action with an atmosphere of melancholy and gloom. But throughout his plays, one can also find that they do not keep this principle to the end. For instance, in *King Lear*, though the whole plot is under the atmosphere of soberness, in the middle of the play, the clowns appear somewhere, which shows that the play interposes some comic situations instead of unchangeable plots. And that is a special style of Shakespeare.

In Shakespeare's plays, one can easily find that there is no limitation of time and space and different plots in one play. Therefore, it is Shakespeare's daring breakthrough of the shackles of "three unities" that make the success of his plays. So combined with Shakespeare's plays, Samuel Johnson stated his proposal of the breakthrough of the rule of "three unities". And his dare view on "three unities" has a great influence on later literature and promotes the progress of literary writing.

6. Features of Johnson's Literary Criticism

As an influential critic of neo-classicism, Johnson's literary criticism greatly influenced later literature. Though the feature of Johnson's literary criticism is not clear enough to see, one can infer from his series of biographical and critical essays, especially his *Preface to Shakespeare*.

First is his pragmatic approach to analyzing literature. His literary theories are all based on reality and evidence. In proving the "general nature" theory, combined with Shakespeare's plays, Johnson gave numerous examples to elaborate on the universality of Shakespeare's plays. Johnson praised Shakespeare's drama as a mirror of life. He used two elements of Shakespeare's plays to prove this. First is the universal agent in every stage: love. Then the characters in Shakespeare's plays. Johnson said in *Preface to Shakespeare*: "Shakespeare has no heroes; his scenes are occupied only by men, who act and speak as the reader thinks that he should himself have spoken or acted on the same occasion" (Martin, 2009, p.357). Besides, except for Shakespeare's famous plays, he has made a comprehensive study of Shakespeare's plays, including tragedies, comedies, and historical plays. So, his theory of "general nature" was basically based on his meticulous study of Shakespeare's plays.

The second feature of Johnson's criticism is that he prefers to prove his theory through a comparative study of literary work. His literary theory that literature is supposed to reflect the universality of things also reflects his use of the comparative method in analyzing his theory. For example, on the one hand, he praised Shakespeare's plays as a faithful mirror of manners and life... in the writings of other poets, a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare, it is commonly a species" (Martin, 2009, p.355). On the other hand, Johnson cites the metaphysical poets as a counterexample. By contrasting the excessive pursuit of novelty and individuality of the metaphysical poets with "the wide extension of design" of Shakespeare's plays, Johnson pointed out the importance of his "general nature" theory.

The last feature of his criticism is his fairness in evaluating writers and literary works. In his evaluation of Shakespeare, Johnson fairly lists what he considers to be the strengths and weaknesses of Shakespeare and his plays. And in the first paragraph of *Preface to Shakespeare*, Johnson is against the opinion that "praises are without reason lavished on the dead, and that the honors due only to excellence are paid to antiquity..." (Martin, 2009, p.353). He held that whether the writer is alive or not, his work is what critics should focus on.

7. Limitation of Johnson's Literary Criticism

In general, though some of Johnson's mind evolved from his previous generations, he also broke through the constraints of his environment and made groundbreaking statements. Despite Johnson's achievements and profound influence on the development of literature and literary criticism, one can find his limitations through a close reading of his ideas.

First is his theory of "general nature". It is irrational that Johnson focuses too much on the universality of literary works but devalues their particularity. A great literary work should be a combination of universality and particularity. In Shakespeare's plays, though overall he values the universality of his plays so that they can be accepted by the public, he didn't ignore the particularity of his work. For example, the Jew, Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*, the villain, Iago, in *Othello*, Sir John Falstaff in *Henry IV...*, etc. These minor but distinctive characters enrich the work immensely, and some of their personalities are also attractive. Therefore, a good literary work should have a universal meaning that can resonate with most readers while also incorporating a certain personality in the work. While literature presents universal moral values, it also needs to be enriched and illustrated by concrete and detailed things. This shows that a good literary work should be both holistic and individual. Except for Johnson's overmuch emphasis on the "general nature" theory, His view lacks systematicity. In *Preface to Shakespeare*, although many of his sharp remarks on literary criticism can be found from it, the distribution of his ideas is too scattered. So, one can find the standards and the methods of Johnson's literary criticism are not systematic. Therefore, some of his remarks should be viewed critically in the context of the times and other factors.

8. Conclusion

"He has made a chasm, which nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up.-Johnson is dead.-Let us go to the next best:-there is nobody;-no man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson.' Thus, the words of William Hamilton as reported by James Boswell at the end of his *Life of Johnson*" (Clingham, 2000, p.1). Johnson's criticism is, perhaps, the most significant part of his writings. Although some have spoken of Johnson as a "literary dictator," he rejected this role for himself and spoke against the notion of enforcing precepts in general. As a critic and editor, through his *Dictionary*, his edition of Shakespeare, and his *Lives of the Poets*, in particular, he helped invent what we now call "English Literature." As a great critic of the eighteenth century, Johnson's views of literary criticism can be found in his critical essays like *The Rambler*; *The Adventurer*; *The Idler*; *Lives of the Poets*, and so on. The present paper mainly takes the *Preface to Shakespeare*, one of the typical ones, into consideration.

Through a detailed study of Johnson's *Preface to Shakespeare*, the present paper mainly summarizes and discusses Johnson's major theories, like the "general nature" theory, the importance of didacticism in literature, and Johnson's dare breakthrough of "three unities". One can also find the method and features of Johnson's literary criticism through his words in *Preface to Shakespeare*. And due to the limitations of the times, his statements were bound to have certain limitations. "Perhaps more than any other English writer, including Shakespeare, Johnson's words have been quoted and misquoted in almost every form of public discourse, and his works have been interpreted and misinterpreted, not only by eighteenth century scholars but by specialists in other areas" (Clingham, 2000, p.1). Therefore, no matter what his reputation is in the eyes of the later generation, the importance of his literary criticism, both in the context of his contemporaries and in the larger context of his age, is unquestionable.

Founding: This research received no external funding

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations or those of the publisher, the editors, and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Aristotle, P. (2013). New York: Oxford University Press.
- [2] Clingham, G. (2000). *The Cambridge Companion to Samuel Johnson*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- [3] Clifford, L. J. & JGreene, J. D. (1970). *Samuel Johnson: A Survey and Bibliography of Critical Studies*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- [4] HRichter, D. (2019). *The Critical Tradition, Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. London: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- [5] Hudson, N. (2003). *Samuel Johnson and the Making of Modern England*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- [6] James, L. (2014). *The Critic in the Modern World: Public Criticism from Samuel Johnson to James Wood*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- [7] Johnson, S. (2002). *Selected Readings in Classical Western Critical Theory: Preface to Shakespeare*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching Reading Press.
- [8] Johnson, S. (1929). *Lives of the English Poets*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [9] Johnson, S. (2009). *The History of Rasselas: Prince of Abissinia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [10] Martin, P. (2009). *Selected Writings by Samuel Johnson*. Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- [11] Meyers, J. (2007). "Samuel demands the muse: Johnson's stamp on imaginative literature". *The Antioch Review*. 65 (1), 39-49.
- [12] Plato. (2000). *The Republic*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Tomarken, E. (1991). *Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare: The Discipline of Criticism*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.