Who Was Samuel Johnson?

Next only to William Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson is perhaps the most quoted of English writers. The latter part of the eighteenth century is often (in English-speaking countries, of course) called, simply, the Age of Johnson.

Johnson was born in Lichfield, Staffordshire, England, in 1709. His mother did not have enough milk for him, and so he was put out to nurse. From his nurse, he contracted a tubercular infection called scrofula, which spread to the optic and auditory nerves, leaving him deaf in the left ear, almost blind in the left eye, and dim of vision in the right eye.
In October, 1728, having just turned nineteen, Johnson entered Pembroke College, Oxford. Short of money, after one year Johnson was forced to drop out of Oxford.

Before 1748, Johnson published practically nothing under his own name. He wrote extensively—the Parliamentary Debates, the poem London, numerous articles, a few sermons and other speeches. He made one last effort to obtain permission to practice law even though he had not a degree. It was refused. He began work on a Dictionary of the English Language, almost single-handedly.

In addition to his Dictionary and the philosophical romance of The Prince of Abyssinia (1759, later known as Rasselas), Johnson published essays in The Adventurer (1752-54) and The Idler (1758-60).

The new monarch George III awarded Johnson in 1762 an annual pension, which improved his circumstances. He spent his time in coffee houses in conversation and in idleness; in the 1770s, after Johnson was widowed, he had a close relationship with the society hostess, Hester Thrale.

In 1763 Johnson met the young Scot James Boswell who became later his biographer at Tom Davies's book shop. Johnson's biographical essays at Tom Davies's book shop of English poets were published in 1781 as The Lives of The Poets.

He died of pneumonia during the night of December 13 and was buried in Westminster Abbey. Before his death, Johnson threw into the fire a number of his manuscripts, letters, and personal papers.

The bulk of his estate was left in trust for his black manservant, Francis Barber, a former slave from Jamaica. Although Johnson's celebrity at that time was phenomenal, views about him as a witty but pedantic and pompous writer came to dominate the 19th century.

Walter Raleigh's Six Essays on Johnson in 1910 and T.S. Eliot's essay Johnson as Critic and Poet (1944) made evident the need for a thorough re-evaluation of Johnson's work.