

The Vanity of Human Wishes

“The Vanity of Human Wishes” has been considered to be a challenging poem ever since it was first published in 1749. Like Johnson’s poem “London,” “The Vanity of Human Wishes” is an *imitation* of one of the *Satires* of the Roman poet Juvenal, whose works date to the first and second centuries. And as was the case with “London,” by an *imitation* Johnson means a poem that is not a strict translation of the original but something looser. In this case, Johnson is building his poem on the framework provided by Juvenal’s tenth Satire, a poem about the futility of human aspirations in the face of the indifference of nature and the gods. Both poems present a sequence of people who desire something—power, glory, fame, a long life—but who then inevitably discover that their wishes are hollow. Where “London” was more or less a political poem taking a stance in opposition to the Walpole government and its corruption, “The Vanity of Human Wishes” is more moralistic and philosophical, pondering the place of desire in human life.

In this poem, Johnson replaces the particular examples that Juvenal uses with his own. Often these are examples of people drawn from English history, like Cardinal Wolsey, or contemporary European figures, like Charles XII, the Swedish king who fought several wars against Russia early in the eighteenth century. In other cases, Johnson uses examples from antiquity, like Xerxes or Alexander the Great. Throughout, though, “The Vanity of Human Wishes” creates a dense web of allusions to historical figures, and even the educated among Johnson’s contemporary readers would have had difficulty identifying all of them. In this edition, these allusions have been annotated to enable modern readers to follow the course of Johnson’s argument.

In adapting a poem by a Roman author, Johnson is also trying to translate Juvenal’s pagan morality to a Christian context.

Johnson was a devout member of the Church of England, and one of the challenges he must have faced was reconciling the Latin poem's fatalism with a Christian sense of redemption. At the same time, Johnson has clearly made the decision not to be explicit about this—he does not invoke the Christian god in any direct way. To get a sense of how Johnson attempted to give a sense of optimism, pay attention to the end of the poem, where the figure of “celestial Wisdom”—which has no parallel in Juvenal—appears. What *are* we supposed to do? what are we supposed to wish for? what kind of moral universe does Johnson imagine here?

Johnson seems to have liked this poem. Later, he recalled that he composed the first seventy lines or so in his head, all at once, while taking a walk in the garden. And, unlike “London,” his name appears on the title page, which is probably a sign of Johnson's pride in the work. It is also a sign that Johnson, after more than a decade of anonymous writing, much of it for the *Gentleman's Magazine*, was in a position to assert his authorship more publicly. And this poem was written when Johnson was hard at work at the book that would bring him fame, the *Dictionary of the English Language*, which was published in 1755.

But “The Vanity of Human Wishes” does not seem to have been a huge commercial success in its day. Compared to “London,” which went through multiple editions, this poem was not reprinted in Johnson's lifetime. The difficulty of the poem—its allusiveness and the dense texture of Johnson's heroic couplets—surely accounts for a lot of this. David Garrick, Johnson's friend and former student, and the most famous actor of the eighteenth century, joked that “The Vanity of Human Wishes” was “as hard as Greek.” In the last few decades, though, critics have returned to this poem, and many rate it as a masterpiece, one of the most powerful long poems of the eighteenth century.

THE
TENTH SATIRE
OF
Juvenal

LET [Observation](#) with extensive View,
Survey Mankind, from [China to Peru](#);
Remark each anxious Toil, each eager Strife,
And watch the busy Scenes of crowded Life;
Then say how Hope and Fear, Desire and Hate, [5]
O'erspread with Snares the clouded Maze of Fate,

Where wav'ring Man, betray'd by vent'rous Pride,
To tread the dreary Paths without a Guide;
As treach'rous Phantoms in the Mist delude,
Shuns fancied Ills, or chases [airy good](#). [10]
How rarely Reason guides the stubborn Choice,
Rules the bold Hand, or prompts the suppliant Voice,
How Nations sink, by darling Schemes oppress'd,
When Vengeance listens to the Fool's Request.
Fate wings with ev'ry Wish th' afflictive Dart, [15]
Each Gift of Nature, and each Grace of Art,
With fatal Heat impetuous Courage glows,
With fatal Sweetness Elocution flows,
[Impeachment](#) stops the Speaker's pow'rful Breath,
And restless Fire precipitates on Death. [20]
But scarce observ'd the Knowing and the Bold,
Fall in the gen'ral Massacre of Gold;

Wide-wasting Pest! that rages unconfin'd,
And crowds with Crimes the Records of Mankind,
For Gold his Sword the [\[infopopup:Hireling\]](#) Ruffian draws,
[25]
For Gold the hireling Judge distorts the Laws;
Wealth heap'd on Wealth, nor Truth nor Safety buys,
The Dangers gather as the Treasures rise.
Let Hist'ry tell where rival Kings command,
And dubious Title shakes the madded Land, [30]

When Statutes glean the Refuse of the Sword,
How much more safe the Vassal than the Lord,
Low sculks the [infopopup:Hind] beneath the Rage of Pow'r,
And leaves the [infopopup:bonnytraytor] in the Tow'r,
Untouch'd his Cottage, and his Slumbers sound, [35]
Tho' Confiscation's Vulturs clang around.

The needy Traveller, serene and gay,
Walks the wild Heath, and sings his Toil away.
Does Envy seize [infopopup:thee]? crush th'upbraiding Joy,
Encrease his Riches and his Peace destroy, [40]
New Fears in dire [infopopup:Vicissitude] invade,
The rustling Brake alarms, and quiv'ring Shade,
[infopopup:Nor] Light nor Darkness bring his Pain Relief,
One shews the Plunder, and one hides the Thief
Yet still the gen'ral Cry the Skies assails [45]
And Gain and Grandeur load the tainted Gales;
Few know the toiling Statesman's Fear or Care,
Th' insidious Rival and the [infopopup:heir].

Once more, [infopopup:Democritus], arise on Earth,
With chearful Wisdom and instructive Mirth, [50]
See motley Life in modern Trappings dress'd,
And feed with varied Fools th'eternal Jest:
Thou who couldst laugh where Want enchain'd Caprice,
Toil crush'd Conceit, and Man was of a Piece;
Where Wealth unlov'd without a Mourner dy'd; [55]
And scarce a [infopopup:Sycophant] was fed by Pride;
Where ne'er was known the Form of mock Debate,
Or seen a new-made Mayor's unwieldy State;
Where change of Fav'rites made no Change of Laws,
And Senates heard before they judg'd a Cause; [60]
How wouldst thou shake at Britain's [infopopup:modish] Tribe,
Dart the quick Taunt, and edge the piercing [infopopup:gibe]?

Attentive Truth and Nature to descry,
And pierce each Scene with Philosophic Eye.
To thee were solemn Toys or empty Shew, [65]

The Robes of Pleasure and the Veils of Woe:
All aid the Farce, and all thy Mirth maintain,
Whose Joys are causeless, or whose Griefs are vain.
Such was the Scorn that fill'd the Sage's Mind,
Renew'd at ev'ry Glance on Humankind; [70]
How just that Scorn ere yet thy Voice declare,
Search every State, and canvass ev'ry [\[infopopup:Prayr\]](#).
Unnumber'd Suppliants croud [\[infopopup:Preferment\]](#)'s Gate,
Athirst for Wealth, and burning to be great;
Delusive Fortune hears th' incessant Call, [75]
They mount, they shine, evaporate, and fall.

On ev'ry Stage the Foes of Peace attend,
Hate dogs their Flight, and Insult mocks their End.
Love ends with Hope, the sinking Statesman's Door
Pours in the Morning [\[infopopup:Worshiper\]](#) no more; [80]
For growing Names the weekly [\[infopopup:Scribbler\]](#) lies,
To growing Wealth the Dedicator flies,
From every Room descends the painted Face,
That hung the bright [\[infopopup:Palladium\]](#) of the Place,
And smok'd in Kitchens, or in Auctions sold, [85]
To better Features yields the Frame of Gold;
For now no more we trace in ev'ry Line
Heroic Worth, Benevolence Divine:
The Form distorted justifies the Fall,
And Detestation rids th'indignant Wall. [90]

But will not Britain hear the last Appeal,
Sign her Foes Doom, or guard her Fav'rites Zeal;
Through Freedom's Sons no more [\[infopopup:Remonstrance\]](#) rings,
Degrading Nobles and controuling Kings;
Our supple Tribes repress their Patriot Throats, [95]
And ask no Questions but the [\[infopopup:Price\]](#) of Votes;
With Weekly Libels and Septennial Ale,
Their Wish is full to riot and to rail.
In full-blown Dignity, see [\[infopopup:Wolsey\]](#) stand,
Law in his Voice, and Fortune in his Hand: [100]

To him the Church, the Realm, their Pow'rs consign,
Thro' him the Rays of regal Bounty shine,
Turn'd by his Nod the Stream of [infopopup:Honour] flows,
His Smile alone Security bestows:

Still to new [infopopup:Heights] his restless Wishes tow'r,
[105]

[infopopup:Claim] leads to Claim, and Pow'r advances Pow'r;
Till Conquest unresisted ceas'd to [infopopup:please],
And Rights submitted, left him none to seize.
At length his Sov'reign frowns—the Train of State
Mark the keen Glance, and watch the Sign to hate. [110]
Where-e'er he turns he meets a Stranger's Eye,
His Suppliants scorn him, and his Followers [infopopup:fly];
Now drops at once the Pride of awful State,
The golden Canopy, the glitt'ring [infopopup:Plate],
The regal Palace, the luxurious Board, [115]
The liv'ried Army, and the menial Lord.
With Age, with Cares, with Maladies oppress'd,
He seeks the Refuge of Monastic Rest.
Grief aids Disease, remember'd Folly stings,
And his last Sighs [infopopup:reproach] the Faith of Kings.
[120]

Speak thou, whose Thoughts at humble Peace repine,
Shall Wolsey's Wealth, with Wolsey's End be thine?
Or liv'st thou now, with safer Pride content,
The richest Landlord on the Banks of [infopopup:Trent]?
For why did Wolsey by the Steps of Fate, [125]
On weak Foundations raise th' enormous Weight?
Why but to sink beneath Misfortune's Blow,
With louder Ruin to the Gulphs below?
What gave great [infopopup:Villiers] to th' Assassin's Knife,
And fix'd Disease on Harley's closing Life? [130]
What murder'd Wentworth, and what exil'd Hyde,
By [infopopup:Kings] protected and to Kings ally'd?
What but their Wish indulg'd in Courts to shine,

And Pow'r too great to keep or to resign?

When first the College Rolls receive his Name, [135]
The young Enthusiast quits his Ease for Fame;
Resistless burns the Fever of Renown,
Caught from the strong Contagion of the [infopopup:Gown];
O'er Bodley's [infopopup:Dome] his future Labours spread,
And Bacon's [infopopup:Mansion] trembles o'er his Head; [140]
Are these thy Views? proceed, illustrious Youth,
And Virtue guard thee to the Throne of [infopopup:Truth],
Yet should thy Soul indulge the gen'rous [infopopup:Heat],
Till captive Science yields her last Retreat;
Should Reason guide thee with her brightest Ray, [145]
And pour on misty Doubt resistless Day;
Should no false Kindness lure to loose Delight,
Nor Praise relax, nor Difficulty fright;

Should tempting Novelty thy Cell [infopopup:refrain],
And [infopopup:Sloth]'s bland [infopopup:Opiates] shed their
Fumes in vain; [150]
Should Beauty blunt on [infopopup:Fops] her fatal Dart,
Nor claim the Triumph of a letter'd Heart;
Should no Disease thy torpid Veins invade,
Nor Melancholy's Phantoms haunt thy Shade;
Yet hope not Life from Grief or Danger free, [155]
Nor think the Doom of Man revers'd for thee:
Deign on the passing World to turn thine Eyes,
And pause awhile from Learning to be wise;
There mark what Ills the Scholar's Life assail,
Toil, Envy, Want, the [infopopup:Patron], and the Jail. [160]
See Nations slowly wise, and meanly just,
To buried Merit raise the tardy [infopopup:Bust].
If Dreams yet flatter, once again attend,
Hear Lydiat's Life, and Galileo's End.

Nor deem, when Learning her loft Prize bestows [165]
The glitt'ring Eminence exempt from Foes;
See when the Vulgar 'scap'd, despis'd or aw'd,

Rebellion's vengeful Talons seize on [\[infopopup:Laud\]](#).
From meaner Minds, tho' smaller Fines content
The plunder'd Palace or sequester'd Rent; [170]
Mark'd out by dangerous Parts he meets the Shock,
And fatal Learning leads him to the [\[infopopup:Block\]](#):
Around his Tomb let Art and Genius weep,
But hear his Death, ye [\[infopopup:Blockheads\]](#), hear and sleep.
The festal Blazes, the triumphal Show, [175]
The ravish'd Standard, and the captive Foe,
The Senate's Thanks, the Gazette's [\[infopopup:pompous\]](#) Tale,
With Force resistless o'er the Brave prevail.

Such Bribes the rapid [\[infopopup:Greek\]](#) o'er Asia whirl'd,
For such the steady Romans shook the World; [180]
For such in distant Lands the Britons shine,
And stain with Blood the [\[infopopup:Danube\]](#) or the Rhine;
This Pow'r has Praise, that Virtue scarce can warm,
Till Fame supplies the universal Charm.
Yet Reason frowns on War's unequal Game, [185]
Where wasted Nations raise a single Name,
And mortgag'd States their Grandsires [\[infopopup:Wreaths\]](#)
regret
From Age to Age in everlasting Debt;
Wreaths which at last the dear-bought Right convey
To rust on Medals, or on Stones decay. [190]
On what Foundation stands the Warrior's Pride?
How just his Hopes let [\[infopopup:SwedishCharles\]](#) decide;

A Frame of [\[infopopup:adamant\]](#), a Soul of Fire,
No Dangers fright him, and no Labours tire;
O'er Love, o'er Force, extends his wide Domain, [195]
Unconquer'd Lord [\[infopopup:pleasureandpain\]](#);
No Joys to him [\[infopopup:pacificScepters\]](#) yield,
War sounds the [\[infopopup:trump\]](#), he rushes to the Field;
Behold surrounding Kings their Pow'r combine,
And One [\[infopopup:capitulate\]](#), and One resign; [200]
Peace [\[infopopup:courts\]](#) his Hand, but spread her Charms in

vain;

“Think Nothing gain’d, he cries, till nought remain,
“On Moscow’s Walls till [\[infopopup:GothicStandards\]](#) fly,
“And all is Mine beneath the Polar Sky.”

The March begins in Military State, [205]
And Nations on his Eye suspended wait;
Stern Famine guards the solitary Coast,
And Winter barricades the Realms of Frost;

He comes, nor Want nor Cold his Course delay;—
Hide, blushing Glory, hide [\[infopopup:pultowas\]](#) Day: [210]
The vanquish’d Hero leaves his broken Bands,
And shews his Miseries in distant Lands;
Condemn’d a needy [\[infopopup:supplicant\]](#) to wait,
While Ladies interpose, and Slaves debate.
But did not Chance at length her Error mend? [215]
Did no subverted Empire mark his End?
Did rival Monarchs give the fatal Wound?
Or hostile Millions press him to the Ground?
His Fall was destin’d to a [\[infopopup:barrenStrand\]](#),
A petty Fortress, and a [\[infopopup:dubiousHand\]](#); [220]
He left the Name, at which the World grew pale,
To point a Moral; or [\[infopopup:adorn\]](#) a Tale.
All Times their Scenes of pompous Woes afford,
From Persia’s Tyrant to Bavaria’s Lord.

In gay Hostility, and barb’rous Pride, [225]
With half Mankind embattled at his Side,
[\[infopopup:GreatXerxes\]](#) comes to seize the certain Prey,
And starves exhausted Regions in his Way;
Attendant Flatt’ry counts his [\[infopopup:myriads\]](#) o’er,
Till counted Myriads sooth his Pride no more; [230]
Fresh Praise is try’d till Madness fires his Mind,
The Waves he lashes, and enchains the Wind;
New Pow’rs are claim’d, new Pow’rs are still bestow’d,
Till rude Resistance [\[infopopup:lops\]](#) the spreading God;
The daring [\[infopopup:Greeks\]](#) deride the Martial Shew, [235]

And heap their Vallies with the gaudy Foe;
Th' insulted Sea with humbler Thoughts he gains,
A single Skiff to speed his Flight remains;
Th' incumber'd Oar scarce leaves the dreaded Coast
Through purple Billows and a floating Host. [240]

The [\[infopopup:boldBavarian\]](#), in a luckless Hour,
Tries the dread Summits of Cesarean Pow'r,
With unexpected Legions bursts away,
And sees defenceless Realms receive his Sway;
Short Sway! fair Austria spreads her mournful Charms, [245]
[\[infopopup:theQueen\]](#), the Beauty, sets the World in Arms;
From Hill to Hill the Beacons rousing Blaze
Spreads wide the Hope of Plunder and of Praise;
The fierce Croatian, and the [\[infopopup:wildHussar\]](#),
And all the Sons of Ravage crowd the War; [250]
The baffled Prince in Honour's flatt'ring Bloom
Of hasty Greatness finds the fatal Doom,
His Foes Derision, and his Subjects Blame,
And steals to Death from Anguish and from Shame.

Enlarge my Life with Multitude of Days, [255]
In Health, in Sickness, thus the [\[infopopup:suppliant\]](#) prays;
Hides from himself his State, and shuns to know,
That Life protracted is protracted Woe.
Time hovers o'er, impatient to destroy,
And shuts up all the Passages of Joy: [260]
In vain their Gifts the bounteous Seasons pour,
The Fruit Autumnal, and the [\[infopopup:vernal\]](#) Flow'r,
With [\[infopopup:listless\]](#) Eyes the [\[infopopup:dotard\]](#) views
the Store,
He views, and wonders that they please no more;
Now [\[infopopup:pall\]](#) the tastless Meats, and joyless Wines,
[265]
And Luxury with Sighs her Slave resigns.
Approach, ye Minstrels, try the soothing Strain,
And yield the tuneful [\[infopopup:lenitives\]](#) of Pain:

No Sounds alas would touch th' impervious Ear,
Though dancing Mountains witness'd [\[infopopup:Orpheus\]](#) near;
[270]

Nor Lute nor Lyre his feeble Pow'rs attend,
Nor sweeter Musick of a virtuous Friend,
But everlasting Dictates croud his Tongue,
Perversely grave, or positively wrong.
The still returning Tale, and ling'ring Jest, [275]
Perplex the fawning Niece and pamper'd Guest,
While growing Hopes scarce awe the gath'ring Sneer,
And scarce a Legacy can bribe to hear;
The watchful Guests still hint the last Offence,
The Daughter's [\[infopopup:Petulance\]](#), the Son's Expence, [280]
Improve his heady Rage with treach'rous Skill,
And mould his Passions till they make his Will.
Unnumber'd Maladies each Joint invade,
Lay Siege to Life and press the dire Blockade;

But unextinguish'd Av'rice still remains, [285]
And dreaded Losses aggravate his Pains;
He turns, with anxious Heart and crippled Hands,
His Bonds of Debt, and Mortgages of Lands;
Or views his [\[infopopup:coffer\]](#) with suspicious Eyes,
Unlocks his Gold, and counts it till he dies. [290]
But grant, the Virtues of a temp'rate [\[infopopup:prime\]](#)
Bless with an Age exempt from Scorn or Crime;
An Age that melts in unperceiv'd Decay,
And glides in modest Innocence away;
Whose peaceful Day Benevolence endears, [295]
Whose Night congratulating Conscience cheers;
The gen'ral Fav'rite as the gen'ral Friend:
Such Age there is, and who could wish its End?

Yet ev'n on this her Load Misfortune flings,
To press the weary Minutes [\[infopopup:flagging\]](#) Wings: [300]
New Sorrow rises as the Day returns,
A Sister sickens, or a Daughter mourns.

Now Kindred Merit fills the
[infopopup:sable] [infopopup:bier],
Now [infopopup:lacerated] Friendship claims a Tear.
Year chases Year, Decay pursues Decay, [305]
Still drops some Joy from with'ring Life away;
New Forms arise, and diff'rent Views engage,
Superfluous lags the Vet'ran on the Stage,
Till pitying Nature signs the last Release,
And bids afflicted Worth retire to Peace. [310]
But few there are whom Hours like these await,
Who [infopopup:set] unclouded in the Gulphs of Fate.

From [infopopup:Croesus] should the Search descend,
By [infopopup:Solon] caution'd to regard his End,
In Life's last Scene what Prodigies surprise, [315]
Fears of the Brave, and Follies of the Wise?
From [infopopup:Marlborough] Eyes the Streams of
[infopopup:dotage] flow,
And [infopopup:Swift] expires a [infopopup:driveler] and a
Show.

The teeming Mother, anxious for her Race,
Begs for each Birth the Fortune of a Face: [320]
Yet Vane could tell what Ills from Beauty spring;
And [infopopup:SedleyandVane] curs'd the Form that pleas'd a
King.

Ye [infopopup:nymphs] of rosy Lips and radiant Eyes,
Whom Pleasure keeps too busy to be wise,
Whom Joys with soft Varieties invite [325]
By Day the Frolick, and the Dance by Night,

Who frown with Vanity, who smile with Art,
And ask the latest Fashion of the Heart,
What Care, what Rules your heedless Charms shall save,
Each Nymph your Rival, and each Youth your Slave? [330]
An envious Breast with certain Mischief glows,
And Slaves, the Maxim tells, are always Foes.
Against your Fame with Fondness Hate combines,

The Rival [\[infopopup:batters\]](#), and the Lover mines.
With distant Voice neglected Virtue calls, [335]
Less heard, and less the faint Remonstrance fails;
Tir'd with Contempt, she quits the slipp'ry Reign,
And Pride and Prudence take her Seat in vain.
In croud at once, where none the Pass defend,
The harmless Freedom, and the private Friend. [340]
The Guardians yield, by Force superior ply'd;
By Int'rest, Prudence; and by Flatt'ry, Pride.

Here Beauty falls betray'd, despis'd, distress'd,
And hissing Infamy proclaims the rest.

[\[infopopup:HopeFear\]](#) [345]
Must dull Suspence corrupt the stagnant Mind?
Must helpless Man, in Ignorance sedate,
Swim [\[infopopup:darkling\]](#) down the Current of his Fate?
Must no Dislike alarm, no Wishes rise,
No Cries attempt the Mercies of the Skies? [350]
Enquirer, cease, Petitions yet remain,
Which Heav'n may hear, nor deem Religion vain.
Still raise for Good the supplicating Voice,
But leave to Heav'n the Measure and the Choice.
Safe in his Pow'r, whose Eyes discern afar [355]
The secret Ambush of a [\[infopopup:specious\]](#) Pray'r.
Implore his Aid, in his Decisions rest,
Secure whate'er he gives, he gives the best.

Yet with the Sense of sacred Presence prest,
When strong Devotion fills thy glowing Breast, [360]
Pour forth thy Fervours for a healthful Mind,
Obedient Passions, and a Will resign'd;
For Love, which scarce collective Man can fill;
For Patience sov'reign o'er [\[infopopup:transmuted\]](#) Ill;
For Faith, that panting for a happier Seat, [365]
Thinks Death kind Nature's Signal of Retreat:
These Goods for Man the Laws of Heav'n ordain,
These Goods he grants, who grants the Pow'r to gain;

With these [infopopup:Wisdom] calms the Mind,
And makes the Happiness [infopopup:celestialwisdom] does not
find. [370]

FINIS.