The Conclusion in Which Nothingness is Concluded

Marissa Rimes
Chapman University

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The Conclusion in Which Nothingness is Concluded
Marissa Rimes
Dr. Myron Yeager, Faculty Advisor
Department of English, Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia
By Samuel Johnson

How does a nearly 300-year-old novella have modern relevance?
- The motives behind Rasselas’s escape from the Happy Valley in pursuit of happiness are as relevant to a modern audience as they were to an eighteenth-century one.
- Rasselas is often classified as an “oriental philosophic tale,” but ironically it is rarely analyzed from the point of view of oriental philosophy.
- Buddhism’s ambiguities, inwardness, and nothingness, provoke anxiety in Western critique, but Johnson’s The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia does something unique from eighteenth-century British thought in that it disavows this “Buddaphobia” by actively employing a similar line of thought.

Buddhism and Timothy Morton’s “Buddaphobia”

Why use Buddhism to examine an eighteenth-century British text?
- Through the lens of a Buddhist framework, and specifically Timothy Morton’s essay “Buddaphobia,” many of the text’s renownedly gloomy implications in regard to its circular structure and inconclusiveness are freed from the great sludge of nihilism that has built up on its didactic purpose.
- Furthermore, the fantasy of being a certain kind of person becomes insightful for how consumerism plays an active role in self-actualization.
- A Buddhist perspective of Rasselas begins to reveal how contrary to enlightenment ideals, a lack of absolute truth allows for greater meaning and provides the philosophic tools with which to reconcile the uncertainty in its conclusion.

Methodology

Grounding the Buddhist framework around specific moments in the text, and examining each of them from both a Johnsonian and Buddhist perspective aids in bridging the philosophical gaps between Western and Eastern philosophy as well as understanding the circular tendencies of the text.
- First examined is the number of ways that previous commentators of Rasselas have classified its genre and it is argued that its classification is crucial in interpretation.
- Next is how the contradictions in Buddhism challenge Western logic and where Rasselas demonstrates this.
- This is followed closely by an identification of Rasselas’s desire and its relation to consumerism.
- Next, The Middle Way philosophy and the Buddhist concept of nothingness are explained in conversation with happiness and the characters’ conceptualization of the self.
- Drawing on this is an examination of Rasselas’s meditation habits which later directs attention to each of his following encounters with the sages.
- Finally there is the argument for viewing Rasselas’s journey as a pilgrimage not unlike the Grand Tour, and subsequently the capture of Pekuah as a reversal of it, leading to a closer analysis of Rasselas’ conclusion and its supposed “takeaway.”

Buddhism, Rasselas & Consumerism

In the first few chapters of Rasselas, Johnson acquaints us with the disturbing paradox that is the underlying premise of the entire novel: “‘That I want nothing,’ said the prince, ‘or that I know not what I want, is the cause of my complaint’” (Johnson 15).
- Wanting something when one wants nothing is amusing in its deliberate irony, yet alarming in its contradiction, partly because it is easily translated to the unsettling problems of consumerism.
- Consumerism in this context refers to how a person becomes constituted in relation to the object they desire, or as Morton highlights, “[They] find [themselves] in a loop. [They are] not self-contained, but rather [they are] what [they desire: [they are] a circulation around some object” (221).
- Rasselas’s mode of sampling lifestyles wherever he goes is shot through with the idea of not being “self-contained.”
  - His desire is to “judge with [his] own eyes of the various conditions of men” before making his choice of life: the emphasis on personal estimation correlating with how he must individually try on each man’s condition, testing new selves in a recurring loop around his professed object of desire— happiness (Johnson 56).

Works Cited

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