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A Study of Generic Mixture in Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*[*]

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Samuel Johnson is a giant figure for his literary production and wise conversation in British and world literature and *Rasselas* as his only narrative story book has largely demonstrated Johnson's literary achievement and worldly wisdom. For centuries, although *Rasselas* is often classified as fiction, the debate over its genre as fiction, travel account, allegory, romance, moral discourse, and *Bildungsroman*, etc. never stops. However, the detailed textual and critical analysis suggests that generic mixture rather than a single genre is the actual practice in Samuel Johnson's writing of *Rasselas*, which accounts for the successful representation of the author's moral concern, the book's philosophical theme, the readers' wide acceptance and the book's world popularity. This paper is an attempt to look into the generic features of *Rasselas* and to reveal the necessary generic mixture in *Rasselas* on the basis of textual interpretation.

Keywords: Johnson, *Rasselas*, fiction, generic mixture

Introduction

Samuel Johnson (1709-84) has been a giant figure since the eighteenth century in British literature and gained the monumental recognition in the world literature. To many, thanks to James Boswell's famous *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1952), Samuel Johnson is the somewhat eccentric man like the bear and a great conversationalist, while to other people, he is a great lexicographer and a versatile writer with the publication of virtually the first English dictionary and works of different genres—poetry, essays, fiction, and literary criticism, etc. Among his works, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia* (1903) (Hereafter abbreviated as *Rasselas*) is the only fiction Johnson wrote during his literary career and the occasional work written in the evenings of one week due to the sudden death of his mother and the urgent need of income to pay for his mother funeral. However, "[d]espite the circumstances and speed in writing, the result is one of the short classics of world literature" (Bate, 1975, p. 205). New editions and translations of different languages have appeared one after another since the publication of *Rasselas*, together with a long history of literary criticism.

Among the criticism of *Rasselas*, James Boswell praises that *Rasselas* "would have rendered his [Johnson's] name immortal in the world literature" (Pahl, 2012, p. 241). Similarly, Joseph Krutch (1944) thinks highly of the book and F. R. Leavis (1952) states that "*Rasselas* has more right to a place in the history of the English novel

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than Defoe and Sterne together" (p. 115) as it has exerted great influence on later novelists such as Jane Austen. However, despite its popularity, some critics hold negative opinion about *Rasselas*, as Michael Joyce (1955) says, "[T]he fable has no human interest, the irony lacks bite, and the thought has little of that athletic quality that marks Johnson at his greatest" (p. 89). Clearly Leavis and Joyce have classified *Rasselas* as a novel or a fable respectively, embodying the continuous debate over the genre of the book. Indeed, many critics disagree in their views of the genre of the book. Boswell quotes "the observation of a 'very accomplished lady' that *Rasselas* was 'a more enlarged and more deeply philosophical discourse in prose'" (Jones, 1967, p. 387), and Johnson's biographer Sir John Hawkins even takes it as "a sermon." Robert DeMaria Jr. (1993) notes, "All the discrete discourses, all the answers to life contained in *Rasselas* are as fictional as the Astronomer's imaginary control over the weather" (p. 211); John Wain (1974) insists that "*Rasselas* is a blend of the 'oriental tale' and the moral essay" (p. 209); T. F. Wharton (1984) regards *Rasselas* as "an Eastern romance" (p. 94), and Thomas M. Curley (1976) associates it with travel writing (p. 147). There is no consensus about *Rasselas*'s genre, may it be a special prose, a fictional or philosophical creation, a romance or a travel account. In this paper, I propose to read *Rasselas* as a book of generic mixture. The detailed analysis of textual features indicates that to represent the general truth obtained through philosophical searching for happiness, Johnson establishes *Rasselas* as a generic mixture of fiction, travel account, allegory, and *Bildungsroman*.

Fiction as an Inadequate Genre

Mere fiction cannot fulfil Johnson's thematic and educational purpose in *Rasselas*. What genre may it belong to, *Rasselas* displays a serious theme concerning the choices of life with the innocent youth searching for happiness, on which most readers and critics agree. However, this theme carries more philosophical undertone and is more often embodied in such genres as allegory, moral tale, or philosophical discourse, as above critics have suggested. Hence, typical fiction with oriental setting should have depicted the handsome prince's successful search for happiness, which is not compatible with the philosophical reflection on what is happiness and the search for happiness turning into the search for eternity, the Christian resolution to the unsatisfactory reality. Different from popular fiction, "[t]he book is little more than a set of essays upon life, with just story enough to hold it together" (Stephen, 1909, p. 178).

Indeed, *Rasselas* is lacking in fictional features to a certain extent, challenging the classification of *Rasselas* as fiction. Indeed, although *Rasselas*'s oriental setting and the so-called tale secure its fictional basis, the characterization and thematic concern indicate its affinity with moral writings, and the journey process necessitates a travel narrative. After reading, readers have no clear idea what the major characters—the prince, the princess, the maid and Imlac—look like or what their personalities are. The characters are rather flat, type characters, and even prototypes of the youth and the old, the innocent and the experienced, male and female, master and servant, etc. During their journey, the major characters have met hermit, metropolitan people, the learned (astronomer) and the ignorant (peasants), various people from all walks of life. The major events are the circular searching process of beginning with hope for happiness and ending with disappointment. "The vague characterization and main characters' activities convey the sense of generality" (Xia, 2013, p. 142). The lack of fictional attraction just testifies Johnson's unconscious innovation in turning fiction into a generic mixture to deliver commonsensical and universal truth.

Moreover, Johnson stresses that fiction represents true life, implying the possibility of mixing different generic features. In the *Dictionary* Johnson defines the word "fiction" as "the act of feigning or inventing, a falsehood, a lye" (Hagstrum, 1952, p. 58), which corresponds with the basic and traditional understanding of fiction as a genre. However, later he writes in "Rambler No. 4" (1993),

> The works of fiction with which the present generation seems more particularly delighted are such as exhibit life in its true state, diversified only by accidents that daily happen in the world, and influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind. (Johnson, 1993, p. 2382)

This statement states that in reality, especially during the "present" time, fiction actually represents "true state" of life rather than merely the "falsehood." Considering the actual practice of the author of fiction and readers' acceptance, Johnson broadens the definition of fiction, inadvertently supporting the inclusion of other generic elements in fiction. Lawrence Lipking (1998) further analyzes that "it reasserts the traditional role of fiction as the first nurse or minister of education, reclaim the world of fantasy" (p. 185). Hence fiction is a proper genre to depict true life and to convey moral teaching while displaying the generic mixture. In this sense, in *Rasselas*, the "right choice of life" might be diversified but real, so is the searching journey, and the combination of fictional, moral, and itinerary elements produces a new generic mixture with which the reader is "particularly delighted".

Factual Travel Writing, Fictional Journey and Philosophical Reflection

Travel writing, offering the comparison between the familiar and the unknown and thus inspiring reflection, the genre which *Rasselas* shares the common feature with, are conducive to the transmission of moral or philosophical truth Johnson demonstrates. As the major characters begin their journey to search for happiness, readers are enticed to follow their step and participate in their finding. For one thing, the oriental context suggested by the title invites the reader to anticipate exotic scenery, fantastic events, and delightful reading process. For another thing, while *Rasselas* leads the reader to look into different states of human life, the reader is so enveloped in sympathy as to follow their journey to see more, or compare one's own experience with the characters'. Thereby, the reader is deeply involved and obtains his own cognizance, whether in agreement with the inconclusive conclusion or not. Then the uniform of human nature Johnson suggests in his Shakespearean criticism helps the reader aware of the truth behind such a fictional journey. When Joseph Krutch (1944) comments that part of the story "would seem to be no more than a device for introducing a survey of some of the various conditions of life…" (p. 176), he reveals Johnson's intention of offering various kinds of experiences in *Rasselas*, which is similar to his search "from China to Peru" in *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. The features of travel writing serve Johnson's purpose in writing *Rasselas* as a book of characters' gaining experience through fictional journey.

Moreover, since Rasselas travels to find out empirical and philosophical truth, we may call the process a philosophical journey of revelation. On the road, Rasselas sees various ways of human life and experiences various stages of recognition. His view of life changes with the deepening of experience. At first in Cairo, "[f]or some time he thought choice needless, because all appeared to him equally happy" (Johnson, 1903, p. 57). Later Rasselas says, "I have been taking from the princess the dismal history of private life, and am almost discouraged from further search" (Johnson, 1903, p. 94). Finally, after admitting the impossible realization of wishes, "[t]hey deliberated awhile what was to be done, and resolved, when the inundation should cease, to return to Abyssinia"

(Johnson, 1903, p. 157). Not believing Imlac's experience, Rasselas seeks to have a taste of outside life personally, but gradually learns to believe in other's experience as he applauds her suggestion that "[w]e will divide the task between us: you shall try what is to be found in the splendor of courts, and I will range the shades of humbler life" (Johnson, 1903, p. 75). At last, Rasselas compares "different forms of life" and shares with the other the "various schemes of happiness" (Johnson, 1903, p. 156). The tension between one's experience and the other's, between the particular and the general is lessened, as the characters get to know the uniformity of human nature during the journey. This changing process further directs the reader to turn his eyes from the particular to the final general conclusion. The combination of travel writing and philosophical reflection under the cover of fiction enable *Rasselas* to demonstrate moral truth through fictional journey.

Specific Features of Generic Mixture

In addition to features of fiction and travel writing, *Rasselas* displays the characteristics of other genres and Johnson enables a generic mixture in the book. First, *Rassleas* displays features of moral discourses. As is noted above, Rasselas and his companions are not round but flat characters, representing certain types of human beings rather than particular individual. In the book, successive paragraphs of conversation inform the reader of their thoughts rather than characteristics distinguishing one from another. For instance, when the princess remarks on private life, except one short paragraph, the whole Chapter XXVI is composed of ten paragraphs of her words and the paragraphs open with generalized statements: "In families, where there is, or is not, poverty, there is commonly discord…;" "Parents and children seldom act in concert…;" "The opinions of children and parents, of the young and the old, are naturally opposite, …" (Johnson, 1903, pp. 80-81). In this way, Johnson puts much effort in describing the characters' opinions, which conveniences the reader's reflection and then possibly the realization of moral truth, after the reader contemplates over the fictional experience. Even the fictional geographical locale helps the delivery of moral discourse, as Ellen Douglass Leyburn (1971) asserts,

> Without presenting much of the charm of oriental imagery which Boswell claims for the work, Johnson uses the geographical placing of the narrative to establish the degree of remoteness from daily life which will enforce the impression that it is human beings, not just Englishmen, whom he is discussing. (p. 1067)

In this way, Johnson effortlessly makes the familiar new and transcends ordinary people's neglect of morality existing in daily events, as is stated in *Rasselas* that "how often the mind, hurried by her own ardor to distant views, neglects the truths that lie open before her" (Johnson, 1903, p. 20). The contradiction is between that truth exists in daily life and that the strangeness of the truth enables it to be accepted more easily. Hence, to resolve the contradiction, the fictional travel account with philosophical undertone is located in an oriental place, and the fictional characters' travel experiences serve to illustrate Johnson's moral concern, which finally brings about a generic mixture in *Rasselas*.

Besides, *Rasselas* depicts a truth-revealing process as the allegory manifests the underlying meaning behind the words, while Rasselas and his companions carry out the searching journey. DeMaria (1993) describes the searching process as follows, "Like so many other Christian allegories, *Rasselas* sets its readers the task of sifting carefully through the various arguments, and it tests their ability to distinguish falsehood from truth" (p. 209). Indeed, following the steps of Rasselas and his companions, the reader gradually recognizes the importance of experiencing rather than ascertaining the definite choice of life. The more the searchers observe different ways of

life, the more necessary they feel to extract the true essence from those superficial justifications of happiness. Hence, Rasselas recognizes that the sage is "whom he should understand less, as he heard him longer" (Johnson, 1903, p. 74), as he has to make clear what the sage's words mean. *Rasselas* calls the reader to notice the underlying meaning as the allegory often embodies.

Moreover, the naming of this book as "History of Rasselas" partially illustrates the belittled position of fiction as the word "history" connotes more truthful recording of facts. In his *ADictionary of the English Language: An Anthology* (2005), Johnson defines the primary meaning of the word "history" as "a narration of events and facts delivered with dignity" (p. 298). Being a history, the narration is supposed to convey relatively factual events instead of imaginative or fictitious contents, and the implied reader is thus directed to anticipate such truthful recording. With the intention to deliver the truth, Johnson discloses his awareness of the connotation that the word "history" conveys: the highlight of facts. Factual narrative is mixed with fictional context. However, Johnson is aware of the mixture of these generic features, as to enable the combination of factual history with imaginative fiction, one might find that in *Rasselas*, the word "history" also refers to "life story". When Rasselas meets Imlac, he "commanded Imlac to relate his history," which points to "the story of his life," and Imlac answers that "my history will not be long" (Johnson, 1903, p. 28). Similarly, there is "the hermit's history" (Johnson, 1903, p. 68) and "history of her [Pekuah] adventures" (Johnson, 1903, p. 114). It is possible that the word "history" has one common usage as "life story" in Johnson's age. However, the replacement of "history" for "life story" still illustrates the serious attitude of Johnson, the speaker, and the listener. In the above usage, the speakers are required to tell the listener what actually happened directly and face-to-face. Such close distance and serious attitude further require the narrator to respect reality in his narration. In addition, while Rasselas aims to see the true state of human life, those narratives are very significant for him to approach general truth. Therefore, Johnson's choice of the word "history" resonates with his thematic concern with the truth-seeking process in *Rasselas* and makes the generic mixture possible.

In addition, *Rasselas* can be read as *Bildungsroman* novel. The characters are not particular individuals, but representative of the innocent youth and all human beings, who feel the necessity to start the empirical search for the truth about life. The characters repeatedly experience hope and disappointment: "a rise to illusion or hope or grandiosity or self-sufficiency followed by a drop or a deflation or an exposure" (Fussell, 1971, p. 232). Their journey can be regarded as the process of education and the growth from innocence to experience, and from naivety to maturity, while at times "new light darted into [the innocent prince's] soul" (Johnson, 1903, p. 19). Chance David Pahl (1994) asserts that the "emergence from youthful idealism to mature sobriety is most apparent in Samuel Johnson's Rasselas, a work which anticipates the formal Bildungsroman tradition" (p. 223). Together with Rasselas choosing to drift along "the stream of life" (Johnson, 1903, p. 157) after recognizing the inability of obtaining happiness in this world, Johnson also invites the reader to perceive the general truth and gain the knowledge from the fictional journey and the empirical reading process. Both the major characters and the reader grow up as depicted in a *Bildungsroman*. Actually, "this kind of educational quest can be located within the tradition of eighteenth-century fiction" (Tomarken, 1994, p. 285). Thereby, Johnson employs mixed generic features to highlight his moral and educational theme.

Conclusion

Rasselas is the only story book and the occasional work that Johnson wrote very quickly "in the evenings of one week" (Boswell, 1952, p. 94), but this book is not an emotional or casual work, as David Pahl (2012) confirms that Boswell states after Johnson re-read *Rasselas* in 1781, Johnson's opinion did not change significantly after its publication in 1759 (p. 221). The book's popularity among readers and critics partially testifies its importance in the world literature, although there are always baffling problems or arguments related to different aspects of the book, whether those are thematic concern, oriental imagery, contradictive views about happiness, or generic classification. Focusing on *Rasselas*'s genre and reviewing the continuous dispute over so many years, Edward Tomarken (1994) observes that "critics are still unable to decide whether *Rasselas* is a novel, oriental tale, or apologue" (p. 5). The argument over its genre is ever-lasting with different interpretations of the text.

However, through above analysis, I confirm that *Rasselas*is a book of generic mixture as the distinction among different generic features cannot completely support its classification into one genre, especially fiction. The representation of fictional experience and oriental settings serve more for the revelation of truth about happiness. The journey as in the travel writing provides the characters and the reader with the taste of and reflection after more fictional but familiar life experiences and they mature from the innocent to the experienced as in *Bildungsroman*. Moreover, the type characters, the circular searching process, and the philosophical undertone illustrate the allegorical truth. The characters and the reader harvest the enlightenment about life, while Johnson may as well take writing as "a device for projecting the maximum quantity of Johnsonian wisdom" (Wain, 1974, p. 212). Fictional experience together with generic mixture works to bring about realistic effects.

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