KEY QUESTIONS – BOSWELL’s The Life of Samuel Johnson

1. Who is Mrs. Porter? What is their age difference? Who does she describe Johnson’s physical looks?

2. Describe their unusual trip to get married on their “nuptial morn.”

3. What was Johnson’s original reaction to composing a dictionary of the English Language?

4. Describe his reasoning as to why he could accomplish in three years what it took an academy of Frenchmen 40 years.

5. What is the Rambler and how did it get its name?

6. How is Mrs. Anna Williams an illustration of his generosity and empathy for others?

7. Who is Mr. Francis Barber and at what sad point in Johnson’s life did he get to know him?

8. His dictionary won him great fame when it was published, but “had not set him above the necessity of making provision for the day that was passing over him.” What does this phrase mean?

9. Johnson’s famous work Rasselas was written because of what financial need? According to Boswell, what was its purpose?

10. One of the most famous passages in Boswell’s work is the description of his first meeting with Johnson. What prejudice of Johnson was Boswell particularly concerned about?

11. What does Johnson mean when he says that Hume and other “innovators” are trying to “milk the Bull”?

12. What does Johnson particularly like about Methodist preachers?

13. What is Johnson’s opinion of female Quaker preachers?

Johnson’s A Dictionary of the English Language is one of the most influential dictionaries in English history. It first appeared in print in two folio volumes in 1755. The dictionary responded to a widely felt need for stability in the language. Calls for a new dictionary had been made for decades before Johnson began his work in June, 1746. He was to be paid £1575. He planned to finish in three years; however, it took nearly nine years. He completed the work single-handedly, with only clerical assistance to copy the illustrative quotations that he had marked in books. Johnson prepared several revised editions during his life. The dictionary listed over 40,000 words. One important innovation was illustrating the meanings by including literary quotations. Most frequently, Johnson quoted Shakespeare, Milton and Dryden. The dictionary contained over 100,000 quotations. Unlike lexicographers today, Johnson’s definitions include both his humor and his biased opinions. His dictionary is prescriptivist. Despite its weaknesses, his dictionary was clearly the best of its day and a milestone in. Johnson’s dictionary was still considered authoritative until the appearance of the Oxford English Dictionary at the end of the 19th century.