

Question 2

(Suggested time—40 minutes. This question counts as one-third of the total essay section score.)

Read the following account carefully. Then, in a well-organized essay, analyze the author's attitude toward great men and the rhetorical techniques he uses to convey it. In your essay you may wish to consider such things as diction, syntax, choice of detail, and tone.

In reading the newspapers here, I have reckoned up not less than twenty-five great men, seventeen very great men, and nine very extraordinary men in less than the compass of half a year. These, say the gazettes, are the men that posterity are to gaze at with admiration; these the names that fame will be employed in holding up for the astonishment of succeeding ages. Let me see—forty-six great men in half a year, amounts to just ninety-two in a year—I wonder how posterity will be able to remember them all, or whether the people, in future times, will have any other business to mind, but that of getting the catalogue by heart.

Does the mayor of a corporation make a speech? he is instantly set down for a great man. Does a pedant digest his common place book into a folio? he quickly becomes great. Does a poet string up trite sentiments in rhyme? he also becomes the great man of the hour. How diminutive soever the object of admiration, each is followed by a crowd of still more diminutive admirers. The shout begins in his train, onward he marches towards immortality, looks back at the pursuing crowd with self-satisfaction; catching all the oddities, the whimsies, the absurdities, and the littleness of conscious greatness, by the way.

I was yesterday invited by a gentleman to dinner, who promised that our entertainment should consist of a haunch of venison, a turtle, and a great man. I came, according to appointment. The venison was fine, the turtle good, but the great man insupportable. The moment I ventured to speak, I was at once contradicted with a snap. I attempted, by a second and a third assault, to retrieve my lost reputation, but was still beat back with confusion. I was resolved to attack him once more from entrenchment, and turned the conversation upon the government of China: but even here he asserted, snapped, and contradicted as before. Heavens, thought I, this man pretends to know China even better than myself! I looked round to see who was on my side, but every eye was fixed in admiration on the great man; I therefore, at last thought proper to sit silent, and act the pretty gentleman during the ensuing conversation.

When a man has once secured a circle of admirers, he may be as ridiculous here as he thinks proper; and it all passes for elevation of sentiment, or learned absence. If he transgresses the common forms of breeding, mistakes even a teapot for a tobacco box, it is said, that his thoughts are fixed on more important objects: to speak and act like the rest of mankind is to be no greater than they. There is something of oddity in the very idea of greatness; for we are seldom astonished at a thing very much resembling ourselves....

I have visited many countries, and have been in cities without number, yet never did I enter a town which could not produce ten or twelve of those little great men; all fancying themselves known to the rest of the world.