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DANIEL DEFOE'S *ROBINSON CRUSOE* AS A REALIST TEXT: A NEW-HISTORICISM AND READER-RESPONSE INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

Although New-Historicism and Reader-response literary theories suggest different attempts in the generation of meaning, in fact, they exist in separate domains. However, the connection between them is a matter of the existence of a text. Without doubt, on the most basic and cursory level, New Historicism is aimed at decoding the manner and culture prevalent in a particular time of history as encoded in the text while Reader-response firmly comes from the strength that a work of art cannot generate meaning for itself without the reader. From this measure of understanding, the clarity in the amalgamation possibility becomes clear. In *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) analysis here, the intention is to identify the meaning of realism construction the researcher gives to it but within the historical context of the 18th century English novel. On this significant scope the twin theories of New-Historicism and Reader-response become unavoidable tools in the research investigation.

Keywords: Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, Literary Theories, Reader-response, New-Historicism.

Introduction

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* has been considered to have an important place in English literary history; it is considered to be the first real English novel. The reason for such conclusion originates with an understanding that Daniel Defoe is able to identify with certain characterizing features that earn it such credit. Beyond this, through Defoe's intervention of *Robinson Crusoe*, he has been able to achieve the preservation of literary period by encoding within the textual-internal of his creation, manners and prevailing consciousness of the period not how the conventional historicist are wont to capturing history but through the domain of New-Historicism, he has been able to creatively identify with the 18th century aspects of life. Therefore, the intention here is to apply the theoretical tools of New-Historicism and Reader-response criticisms in the construction of the argument that *Robinson Crusoe* manifests the consciousness of the 18th century period and that, based on the Reader-response concept of Transactional Reader-response, it is a realist text.

Perhaps, it will be a crass mistake not to proceed the discussion from here with

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the submission of Hippolyte Taine on what a literary text has come to be. In the *History of English Literature*, Taine submits that, “literary work is no mere individual play of imagination, the isolated caprice of an excited brain but a transcript of contemporary manners, a manifestation of a certain kind of mind” (1). What Time has been able to Accord the reader with is the unmistakable identification of 'context'. For him, he is of the notion that no Literature can exist in isolation of the period it emerges from. He seems to situate that an attempt to study literature outside its intervening context is tantamount to an exploration at kenosis. To consolidate this point, the African literary patriarch, Chinua Achebe pontificates that “a literature which draws its sustenance from the life lived around it and develops imaginative identification with that life has a good chance of achieving the quality and the authority of prophetic utterance” (qtd in Onwuka 4). Through this affirmation, it appears that Achebe shares in the faith of Taine. His disposition confirms that he is equally of the standpoint that literature should be able to mirror the culture and era that births it and until this is the testimony of that Literature, it becomes far from the celebration that is, today, accorded with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Apart from its historical relevance, the aesthetics that secures its realist identification creates the distinguished niche for the text. To appreciate this text on the strength of its

historical context and realist essentials is to employ the explorative frameworks of New-Historicism and Reader-response criticisms.

A Summary of New-Historicism

The first recorded use of New-Historicism was in 1972 primarily through the work of the critic, Stephen Greenblatt, although this is contended by certain critics who believe that New-Historicism has been in existence for long only that it was not identified by the nomenclature. For example, John Brannigan in his 1998 publication entitled *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* argues that New-Historicism is not new as it appears to be because Herodotus, with his emphasis on the stories of Greek heroes and citizens alike, might have been the first new historicist. Ambulating away from the troubled contentions is to gravitate towards what New-Historicism actually is. Brannigan outlines that New-Historicism attempts to understand the stories of the past as society's way of constructing a narrative which unconsciously fits its own interest. For Matt Hickling in "New Historicism", he opines that “New Historicists typically make liberal use of historical anecdotes or material artifacts in order to inform, contextualize and illustrate historical concepts (55). Within the frameworks of Hickling and Brannigan's description is the construct of recreation of history. The recreation of history suggests the typical objective of New-Historicism; this, in fact, separates

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New Historicists from the traditional Historicists. The latter are construed to prioritize scholarly research and eschew any reorganization of history that might diminish their own power on the importance of their subject (Hickling 55). The disadvantage in this is what animates the body of New-Historicism. M. Balkaya in his essay titled "Basic Principles of New Historicism in the Light of Stephen Greenblatt" registers that Greenblatt as well as other scholars support a transition away from Historicism towards New-Historicism because, for them, there is an emotional void that exists when historical events are disconnected from the reality within which they actually happened. It can well be said that this understanding is what informs Paul Cantor's submission in his article titled, "Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist Vision" which delivers that New-Historicism "reconcieve[s] history on the model of literature" (40).

According to *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), New Historicism is defined as "a form of cultural analysis which examines the ways in which a cultural product (especially a literary text) interacts with and participates in its historical context, especially with reference to the power relations operating within the society of its time". It also defines that it as a criticism in which "any of the various beliefs that social and cultural phenomenon cannot be considered independently of their historical context". Coming from another description,

Kramer and Maza in *A Companion to Western Historical Thought* presents that New-Historicism seeks to "breathe new life into canonical text" (1). The life a text seeks to secure from this breath is predicated on the recreation of historical events that the OED details. It is to this, Hickling emphasizes that:

Good literature conveys emotion to the reader, and if history is framed through this model, it too looks for a similar emotional response [...] What New Historicism does is engage in the emphasis on power relations operating within the society of its time. That is, New Historicism consciously engages the idea that we inevitably read the past from the present [...] It] focus[es] more on a history that is nuanced, imbued with emotion [...] Ultimately, the shift from historicism to New Historicism emphasizes the relation between events and emotional response and informs the notion that such events are never to be considered neutral [...] New Historici[sm] also focus on the impact of emotion in relation to events [...]

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Fundamentally, New Historicist emphasize the notion that historical value change over time, whereas Historicists prioritize the immutable and unchangeable notion of historical facts (54 - 6).

What the foregoing births seems to capture the tee-total of what has come to be of New-Historicism and New Historicists. Unarguably, Hickling situates that New Historicism offers one an opportunity to be guided into the emotional repository of a particular period in order to understand history itself. It suggests that New-Historicism is not actual history per se but a redefinition, an attempt at a preservation of historical recital. Equally important is the multidisciplinary nature of New-Historicism. Because it appears to be interested in aspects of realistic/existential history which has been creatively documented, it then makes itself fluid in the sense that it is able to appeal to other disciplines for rigidity. For example, a Marxist-New Historicist will be interested in the transcript of power and class distinction within a particular period of time; Feminist-New Historicist will also attempt to view the subjugation of women.

A Summary of Reader-Response Theory

To begin the rendition here is to draw from the knowledge of Cagri Mart. In

his paper titled, "Reader-Response Theory and Literature Discussions: A Springboard for Exploring Literary Text", he avers that "Reader-reponse theory is based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in the mutual relationship between the reader and the text" (78). The transaction of mutuality is what Louise Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration* captures in her appreciation of the theory. For her, she notes that "reading literature in an exploration, in which readers avail themselves of emotion and *histories* with the intention of meaning construction (3; emphasis, mine). Rosenblatt's point does not only capture the essence of Reader-response criticism but also levels up with New-Historicism as she identifies with 'emotion' and 'history'; it becomes clear that there is a point of meeting between the two. However to stay on course, is to engage a spectacle of the interaction between the reader and text in the generation of meaning as compared to organism and environment. Elsewhere in *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of Literary Work*, Rosenblatt the reader is "not seen as a separate entity, acting upon the environment, nor the environment acting on the organism, but both parts acting as a total event" (98). What this presupposes is that, if meaning in the context of history or any other context must be generated from a text, then the role of the reader is most crucial.

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To properly situate the argument of Mart when he identifies with the incontestable position of the reader in the realization of meaning to a text is to offer his critical opinion. Mart opines that:

The reader response approach is based on the assumption that a literary work takes place in a mutual relationship between the reader and the text when the reader demystifies literature and links it to his/her individual experience [...] transactional view affirms that readers are experience builders and the text is an activating stimulus and serve as a grade, a regulator, a blueprint, and an avenue for interpretation. Put another way, the text activates the reader's early experiences concerning his/her experiences with literature and with his/her life; guides for selection, rejection and order of what comes forth; and regulates what should be brought to the reader's attention (81).

Mart opinion railroads us not just into deeper dimension of Reader-response theory but also confirms the Transactional Reader-

response concept that this paper adopts in the New Historic reading of Defoe's magnum opus. This concept that is a product of Louise Rosenblatt understanding of Reader-response theory. Within the milieu of this concept, she argues that a transaction between the text's inferred meaning and the individual interpretation by the reader is influenced by their personal emotion and knowledge. In the case of the critical exploration of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* what is to influence the analysis is an agreement with the pre-knowledge on literary and existential history. With such alignment, the structure of Robinson Crusoe can be adequately based on the primal objective here.

The Transaction Of Reader-Response Criticism And New-Historicism In Validating The Realism Structure Of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

Literature, in a creative way, captures the manifestations of what is present in every society at any particular time. The 18th century history is distinguished by some events; these characteristics have, in no small way, rubbed off on literature. Conversely, the 18th century Literature was largely influenced by the historical realities of the era. The period is loosely referred to as the Age of Reason, this could have been so, perhaps, because people rejected the idea of emotion over reason during the period. The principles, ideas, features, and

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consciousness of the age can be, arguably, placed between 1700-1800.

It is almost impossible to attempt an appreciation of a literary text on the strength of New-Historicism without appealing to other texts whether literal or non-literal. New Historicists assert the interconnectedness of literary text with the non-literary ones signifying that a literary work is not a product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts which are extra-literal. Since literature cannot be 'timeless', that is, it is located within a historical period, the systems of power present during the period in which the text emerges are reflected and reinforced in both literary and cultural texts. The structure of analysis of a literary text as far as New Historicism is concerned lays equal importance to both literary and non-literary text of the same period of which both are 'allowed to work as sources of information and interrogation with each other' (Ukkan 22-33). It is through this practice of parallel reading that the notion of inter textuality is brought into practice. Certain historical texts have documented some of the historical landmarks that defined the 18th century age.

A Historical Overview

One of the foremost historical encounters that is worth giving primal preference is the political revolution of 1668. This revolution caused an acute distortion in the sanctity of England's

politics. The revolution led to the banishment of the Stuarts and subsequently, there became a shift of supremacy of power to the parliament. The parliament became laden with such power that was, hitherto, a monarchical affair. In the cause of governance, Members of Parliament (MPs) soon became interest driven and sought to place their interest high and above their legislative duties. As a consequence, the house became sharply divided into two parties - The conservative Tories and the liberal Whigs. With this distribution, the competition and political tension became more heated. J. Long in *Outlines of England and American Literature* remarks that, "the two main parties were so well balanced that power shifted easily from one to the other" (50). This invariably meant that the government of the day could be toppled because the status of majority was just a matter of few members.

Given this, it became the primary concern of party leaders to come up with ideas that could accord them privileged status of majority. One of this means is the recruitment of creative writers. Long admits that, "to overturn a Tory or a Whig cabinet, only a few votes were necessary, and to influence such votes, London was flooded with pamphlets (50). These pamphlets captured the creativity of writers who were engaged to either persuade the populace to align with a party or satirize the other party through writing. This political scheming

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inadvertently raised the interest in writing, reading and learning. So much interest was then placed on literacy. Even the government of the day leveraged on this to fulfil their political objective by giving legal backings to free print and easy access to publications. Baktir in "Representation of the Ottoman Orient in Eighteen Century English Literature" recounts that "as a result of freeprints and comparatively inexpensive access to periodicals and novels, ideas where circulated very fast [...] the expansion of reading public's created a sense of social and political knowledge, and people began to see and judge the world in the light of a new and a more liberal perspective" (23; emphasis, mine). To consolidate the point, Long acknowledges that, "the press had become a mighty power in England, and any writer with a talent for argument or satire was almost certain to be hired by party leaders. Addison, Steele, Defoe, Swift - most of the great writer's of the age [...were] the willing servants of the Whigs or Tories" (50).

Robinson Crusoe: An Analysis

In *Robinson Crusoe*, we the reader is faced with a situation that projects this consciousness of writing/reading. We see a situation in which Crusoe keeps a journal for writing his daily itinerary and goes on to say that he is willing to share the recordings captured in this journal to people, Crusoe narrates:

After I had been there about ten or twelve days, it came into my thoughts that I should loose my reckoning of time for want of books and pen and ink, and should even forget Sabbath days from working days; but to prevent this I cut it with my knife upon a large post, in capital letters, making it into a great cross I set it up on the shore where I first landed [...] I kept my kalendar, or weekly, monthly and yearly reckoning of time [...] I began to keep my journal, of which I shall here give you the copy (though in it will be told all these particulars over again) as long as it lasted [...] (52).

The foregoing rendition explains the premium that is placed on the craft of writing during the 18th century. The level of documentation was captured in the literature of the period. It witnesses how information is treasured and the need for learning/reading is valued. Through the inner thoughts of the eponym, one can notice how he carefully seek to document his travails in his marooned life. The excitement that wells up in Crusoe upon the discovery of a pen suggests the temperament

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of the period. He said “as I observed before, I found pen, ink and paper, and I husbanded them to the utmost; and I shall show that while my ink lasted, I kept things very exact” (49). This reveals, with a corollary from the historical background, that the proliferation in the writing in the 18th century is very valid. The ability to write, keep journals and even promises that a copy shall be given out confirms the reader's transactional of realism. There is a mirroring of life in this presentation. It is believed that reading during the receding era was an activity of the upper-class and in fact, literature was written for the upper-class but with the emergence of the 18th century and following the political tension and the banishment of the Stuarts, this was defined out of existence. There immediately became an expansion of reading public. Arguably, this reading populace motivated Crusoe to promise us a copy of his journal. It becomes not just of historical essence but the intricate inclusion of this aspect already evokes the realist ideal.

Another observable standpoint in the 18th century literature that finds convenient bearing with history is the feature of individualism. With the emergence of realism, people were no longer given preference under the web of family background. Relevance was ultimately shifted from family legacy to the individual. Also, following the banishment of the Stuarts, importance was no longer attached

to one's affiliation to the throne. Clearly, there became a motivation for the ordinary individual man to want to rise above his family and secure a name for himself. The individual man wanted to achieve his personal aspirations even at the expense of losing his family. In Robinson Crusoe, this realist tendency is fore grounded. Crusoe and his brothers go out of their way to fulfil the ambition and promptings of their heart without consulting family interest. It is obvious that they want to create some sort of success and self-actualization for themselves. The very attempt to exemplify this suggests that the writer is very much aware of this spirit that is prevalent during the time. To concretize this, Crusoe speaks of the conversation between him and his father:

My father, a wise and grace man, gave me serious and excellent counsel against what he foresaw was my design. He called me one morning into his chamber, where he was confined by the got and expostulated very warmly with me upon this subject. He asked me what reasons more than a mere wandering inclination I had for leaving my father's house and my native country [...] he told me I had my elder brother for an example, to whom he had

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used the same earnest persuasions to keep him [...] his young desires prompting him to run into the army, where he was killed; and though he said he would not cease to pray for me, yet he would venture to say to me, that if I did take the foolish step, God would not bless me [...] Without any consideration of circumstances or consequences, and in an ill hour, God knows, on the first of September 1651, I went on board a ship [...] (1-4).

From the quoted, one can infer that despite the advise and seeming curse, the young man still goes ahead to fulfill his heart desires just like his elder brother who against the entreaties of his parent runs to the army and died. It is seen that Defoe shows the differentiation in the ideologies of the generation of the father and his children. While the former is a product of the past generaty that considers it foolish for a young man to live his family, the latter generation views the conquest in creating a name out of the anonymity that originates with a family glory. By representing this conversation, the stage for a critical New-Historicism inquiry cannot be denied. In the same spirit in which politicians, having ousted the sitting throne, wanted a name for itself so also do we see

Robinson and his brother full of such adventure to seek after their individual achievement without relying of their parents successes and wealth. The reader-response here comes from the established understanding that this very aspect marks a realist feature. Before the emergence of the realist era, it is impossible and in fact, inconceivable for a man of lowly background to undertake such adventure; to chase after such fear. In the case of Crusoe, however, we witness such realist tendency. Here, the character is an ordinary person, living an ordinary life without affiliation to the throne yet is so important to gain a critical role and point of focus in the infrastructure of the text. This drops the pervading notion that the text identifies with its realist age where the individual is supreme just as Robinson Crusoe is considered outside the covering of his family.

To understand why Daniel Defoe must have picked his main character from the middle class rather than the upper-class or members of the court who believed to be the only ones to experience tragedy as everyone else is incapable of experiencing such, one would need to take a review at the historical evaluation of the period. Indeed, Defoe created the character of Crusoe with the middle-class fabric to first identify with the expectations of the age which ultimately preserves history in the text and, secondly, to gravitate towards a realist rendering. In

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noting the historical landmark of the period is the recorded economic expansion of the period which also has its reverberating effect in literature. During the 18th century, the economy rose in geometric progression. It is rendered that, “in the first half of the eighteenth century some three thousand public coffee houses and a large number of private clubs appeared in London alone” (<http://www.djmcadam.com>). This growth saw to the immeasurable change in the society. Jobs were many and quite a number of people rose to a higher status, financially. As a result, the society no longer functioned on the strength of just two classes - the upper-class (the nobles) and the lower-class. There emerged the middle-class; this class could afford to also engage in the leisure of the upper-class. This middle-class took an aversion to the type of elevated literature that only served the purposes of the court. They wanted a literature that will identify with their struggles, that will be in concert with their aspirations, their pains and successes. Thus, writers started yielding to this demand, welcoming the realism writings which identifies with the members of the middle-class.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, one notices the vulnerability which projects his common identity and his ordinariness. At an instance, Crusoe laments:

September 30, 1659 - I, poor
miserable Robinson Crusoe,
being shipwrecked, during a

dreadful storm, in the offing,
came on shore on this dismal
unfortunate island which I
called the Island of despair,
all the rest of the ship's
company being drowned and
myself almost dead (53).

Through this, one notices how Crusoe seems to be presented as one that does not belong to the class of the courts. Through his own words, it is noticed that he does not have to acquire the privileges that conform with the affluent. He hints on his background as being poor. Apart from establishing this ordinariness of Crusoe, Defoe also ensures he experiences what can be passed off as tragedy. The tragedy he finds himself is one that, hitherto, would have been only said of the nobles. This establishment of this simply mirrors the unprecedented curve that the society is taking. The society, through this, has aligned its sympathy with the middle-class and proffered for them what was once enjoyed only by the privileged class.

Realism as an element of the 18th century period is also noticed in the projection of the inner fears and regrets of Crusoe. This familiar feeling in a situation that suggests dilemma subjects the play to a realist domain. Unlike the way in which the typical Elizabethan hero is valorized, here the reader is able to trace the worries, the fears, the tears and disappointments of a real

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person. This feature of a real person, a person of the middle-class, is what Defoe imports into the novel. To mark this, Crusoe introspects:

I began now seriously to reflect upon what I had done, and how justly I was overtaken by the judgement of heaven for my wicked leaving my father's house, and my duty; all the good counsel of my parents, my father's fears and my mother's entreaties, came now fresh into my mind, and my conscience, which was not yet come to the pitch of hardness which it has been since, reproached me with the contempt of advice, and the breach of my duty to God and my father (4-5).

The way in which he berates himself for taking a seeming wrong decision is indicative of a real experience of an ordinary person and not one decorated under the robes of the Romantic spirit. Here he uses a language that is accessible and that which members of his class can easily understand so that the weight of his emotional can be felt.

Conclusion

Throughout the entire gamut of the text, Defoe is able to illuminate our understanding on the fact that he has been able to preserve the ideals and prevalent manners of the 18th century. On the other hand, it becomes less difficult to appreciate the text from the transactional inquiry of a realist novel through the undeniable characteristic elements that secures that identity for it. The objective here has been to generate meaning from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* through analytical tools such as New-Historicism and Reader-response criticisms. Upon the frameworks here, it has been proved that not only has the text been able to mirror the transcript of 18th century manners but that it is a realist text.

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