

JOHN LOCKE'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL EMPIRICISM AND ITS IMPACT UPON THE REALISTIC VICTORIAN LITERATURE: DICKENS' *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

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Abstract

This paper suggests an exclusive study by investigating the impact of Locke's philosophies implemented in his work "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" on the field of literature and on the Victorian literature in particular. The study will concentrate on Locke's influence on the Victorian realistic literature by applying Lockean notions on Dickens' Great Expectations and its main characters. Dickens has recorded the voyage of the protagonist Pip from his innocent childhood to his experienced adulthood. He solved the enigma of Pip's character and portrayed his inner world by firmly inspiring the base concepts and theories of Locke. Locke's empirical thought has intervened in the work mentioned above highlighting its characters' cognitive development and realisting them. Thereupon, the writing form of Dickens and his contemporaries not only resulted from the tough circumstances of the century, yet from Locke's philosophical contributions as well.

Keywords: John Locke, Empiricism, Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, Realism

1. Introduction

The band between literature and philosophy has always been tightened over time, furthermore, both philosophy and literature demonstrate a parallel image that indicates hardship and struggle in individuals' life. On one hand, philosophy in its function always tackles theories rationally and provides them as a conclusion. On the other hand, literature resorts to this particular conclusion and transposes it into concrete imageries and real emotions. And by that, the personality of the age where these philosophies and literature took place will stand visible. Moreover, behind all the accumulations of philosophy and literature there are individuals who devoted their brilliant intellectuality to it. Just as political history is created by achievements of great men, philosophy and literature similarly formed by great

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men. Philosophers of importance both shape and crystallize the common thought of their age and pave the way for futuristic interpretations. Concerning English philosophy, this paper will feature one of the most remarkable scholars which is John Locke, together with his philosophical impact on the literary canon of the upcoming epochs. Locke did not only reflect the peculiarities of nowadays, but he revealed some quality characteristics about human nature. To project a brief biography, John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher, liberal, and realist, his ideas mainly revolved around the human mind. Locke has a vast influence on his age as he contributed in creating new philosophies. In other words, Locke "comports with and helps codify the movement of his times away from the authority of traditions of medieval, scholastic philosophy" (Greenblatt & Abram, 2006, p. 2151).

Locke is famous for his work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that accommodates influential empirical philosophies, as well as theories of knowledge and cognitive development. His philosophies of empiricism and cognitive development of knowledge had a huge impact on the literature of enlightenment. To be familiar with Locke's impact on the literature of his time, it is necessary to examine Varney's (1999) description of Locke's influence on the literary world. Varney elucidates that Locke made literature like "the real world, the world of common experience and cultural recuperation" (preface, vii). In this paper, Locke's philosophies of knowledge and cognitive development will be firstly discussed and elaborated, then highlighted within the realistic literary body of the Victorian age with reference to the protagonist Pip of the novel *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens.

2. Locke's Empirical Theories

Locke as a realist has a transparent attitude against the concept of innate ideas. The innate theory that the rationalist Descartes believed in, claiming that a big part of our knowledge is inspired by the ideas that were already set in our mind the moment we were born. This theory may occur to make sense for some since it investigates the emergence of knowledge. As an empiricist, John Locke aimed to demolish the theory and the doctrine of innatism. Descartes was aiming to provide a strong, elaborative and credible theory, however, Locke interpreted the scheme of innatism as insufficient and resting upon weak assumptions. Hence, Locke has debunked the scheme of innatism with his emphasis that the human mind is empty or similar to a blank paper at birth, Locke, by that, originated the concept of tabula rasa. "Let us suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters" (Locke, 1690, p.87), therefore, if it is supposed that the human obtained a blank mind that is void of all characteristics and ideas: how the human mind is filled and furnished then? Locke puts the answer to this question by promoting experience, assuring that our blank mind is filled and developed by what we experience in our life while growth. Thus, for Locke, experience plays a significant role in supplying the human mind with ideas and knowledge. Besides, the experience is processed through human sensations in which the ideas we perceive through experience are evaluated by our sensations that are linked to our mind, as Locke states in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

For I imagine anyone would easily grant, that it would be impertinent to suppose, the ideas of colors innate in a creature, to whom God had given sight, and a power to receive them by the eyes from external objects: and no less unreasonable would it be to attribute several truths, to the impressions of nature, and innate characters, when we may observe in ourselves faculties, fit to attain as easy and certain knowledge of them, as if they were originally imprinted on the mind. (p.28)

Locke's investigation of idea processing and cognitive development is another important empirical philosophy. For Locke, there is a relation between the real world and our ideas, in which ideas are a representation of what we perceive from the real world, and as consequence, our cognitive system develops. Rubaia asserts regarding Locke's theory of cognitive progress: "it can be said that cognitive process depends on both mind and the external world, and the connection between them is ideas." (Rubaia, 2017, p.135). Locke depends on ideas as a linkage between our knowledge and the real world, moreover, those ideas are the units that supply our minds with knowledge to achieve cognitive development. Rubaia further dwells upon Locke's employment of ideas as "ideas are the "representations" of certain objects we perceive and they prevail in our mind. Through the ideas mind acquires knowledge. Therefore, ideas are the "representatives" of external objects in mind." (p.136). We can inquire that ideas have significant intervention in stimulating the mind to comprehend its surroundings and as Locke puts it:

Since the things that the mind contemplates are none of them, besides the mind itself, present to the understanding, it is necessary that something else, as a sign or representation of the thing it considers, should be present to it; and these signs or representations are ideas. (p.718)

The Lockean viewpoint in which ideas serve as representatives of real-world objects and the mind analyzes these representatives to create knowledge is known as "representative realism." As a result, we can deduce that Lock has a strong tendency toward realism, which qualifies him as a religious realist.

Another important aspect to be considered of the philosophy of ideas by Locke is its effect on the process of cognitive development, as we are going to apply this philosophy on Pip's development in the novel *Great Expectations*. Locke thinks that the human mind has a great ability to compare, relate, compound, and make abstractions. All these processes allow the mind to be active in the long term and eventually obtaining genuine knowledge. The five senses are important for the human mind to gather several sensations then transfer them to knowledge. After the mind receives ideas carried by the senses, it starts processing operation that includes thinking, remembering, perceiving, doubting, comparing, reasoning, naming, and abstracting. Locke believes that our cognitive development does not consist of identical ideas of reality. Rather, the mind customizes the ideas we collect in accord with our persona

through the use of judgment “in perception our sensations are often colored by our judgments so that our perceptions to this extent are not strictly identical with our sensations.” (Rubaia,2017, p.140). Finally, Locke concludes that all the general ideas we preserve in our minds are merely abstractions of the various ideas we acquired previously in our lives.

3. The Impact of Locke’s Empirical Realism on the Victorian Realistic Literature

Locke’s empirical realistic theories have marked him as an outstanding realist, as realism is intensively implemented in his empirical theories. Similarly, realism is one of the main characteristics of the Victorian literature and the Victorian novel in particular. As a dominant feature of the Victorian period, the term “literary realism” first occurred in 1855, a term coined by George Henry to measure the artistic representation in accord with real life. The realism genre is employed to detect the real from the unreal. Ostensibly, realism has mainly gone well with the novel genre during the 19th century. That happened prior to vast developments on many scales from society to politics. Realism stems from real life, which means that to make a literary work realistic is to embody real life. Thus, realism in literature constantly seeks to answer the question of how nature and reality are depicted within the human mind and here where the Lockean impact resides. Realism first started as a literary movement that in its turn endeavored to depart away from the idealistic view of the romantic period, same as Locke’s realistic theory that its purpose was to depart from the concept of innatism. Realism as a Lockean notion focuses on the small details and the recreation of reality that mirrors real events as it is. The implication of Locke’s realistic theories in the Victorian novel resulted in the absence of fine plots, however, authors painstakingly sought to compensate that by adding extra depth to their realistic characters.

As Lockean realism was employed to veer away from the natural idealistic world portrayed by Romanticism, it placed significant emphasis on embodying physical and material characteristics. In addition, this realism provides accurate descriptions of costumes, settings, and characters to picture the harshness of reality. George Elliot asserts that realism is "the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality." (Elliot,1856, p.12). We can observe closely from Elliot's definition that the focus on the imagination is an important element in creating a substantial reality supporting Locke’s theory. Substantial reality is achieved in the Victorian period’s writings thanks to the reframing historical events that took place back then. Realism is an investigation into the real, and adjustment for the real-life, it mirrors the human suffering in particular and transfers it in clear interpretation through language as Rosalind Coward and John Ellis claim that realism treats language “as though it stands in for, is identical with, the real world” (qtd. in Levine, 2008, p.189).

The concept of Victorian realism first came to existence during the first half of the nineteenth century after it was adjusted and garnished by Locke's ideas. During this era, a collection of prominent realist writers appeared together with long historical chronologies that adjusted the realistic tendency of the era's literature. From reform bills through the chartist movement to the rise of the middle class and their gain of literacy, all were initiators to the realistic Victorian novel. The harshness of life at the industrial times perhaps was the main motive that pushed writers of the 19th century to confine their works within the frame of reality adopting Locke's concepts. The rise of the middle class has paved the way for authors to gain more fame. Authors also exploited the rise of the middle class and their dreams of upward social mobility through authoring stories of middle-class characters achieving wealth. Thereupon, the social atmosphere in the Victorian era has functioned as an ideal ground to apply Locke's ideas in the literary production of the era.

Some of the nineteenth-century writers were devoted to the implication of Locke's philosophies in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in their literature. Dussinger (1974) detects the impact of Locke's theories on literature, he argues that one of the most endearing and prominent aspects of the century's literature is the "genuine humility to doubt the individual's self-serving fiction in the judgment of daily phenomena" (p.11). He also describes the literature after the intervention of Locke as "fiction that represents the paradox of self as the object caught in the momentary flux of consciousness and as the subject, freed from time, viewing discriminately past experience." (p.21). Watt touches upon the influence of Locke on the realism of literature by confirming that Locke's style is "opposed to that of common usage, to the view held by the scholastic Realists of the Middle Ages that it is universals, classes, or abstractions, and not the particular, concrete objects of sense perception, which are the true realities" (p.12). Watt ensures that Locke's concepts had occupied crucial space in his age, and it will stay distinctive for ages to come.

To better understand how realist writers utilized Locke's theories in literature, we may resort once again to Dussinger. He contends that Locke's influenced the realist writers through enabling them borrow images and materials from local sources, regardless of their source whether from the writers' peculiar imagination or from the surrounding cultural norms. Once more Dussinger seeks to elaborate on the Lockean impact on realist literature by stating that Locke's theories are put "to examine how narrative fiction sets forth the problem of knowledge for narrator, character, and the reader alike" (p.13). Moreover, it is likely that Locke's philosophies not only revealed the mind's way of interpreting the flow of ideas of characters in the narratives, yet, it also exceeded to examine the readers' mind in understanding these narratives. As a result, according to Dussinger Locke by his modern philosophies puts forward the "new species of writing, represents the mind in the act of perceiving and ordering the signs of reality" (p.14).

4. Locke's Realistic Empirical Theories Examined in Dickens' *Great Expectations*

Charles Dickens is regarded as one of the pioneer Victorian writers, he was successful in including realistic characteristics in his novels. In his works, Dickens has professionally utilized the feature of realism, as John Romano argues that the rise of the realism genre and Dickens' fame are quietly related to each other in which Dickens' fame was a triumph of his fine use of realism (Romano, 1978, p.34). Not only in Dickens' realism yet his contemporaries as well, they all also resorted to feature the Victorian capitalism coupled with London setting as the main locus. And this gives a very aesthetical and realistic relish to their writings whenever they intend to present material terms. For Smith, Dickens and other Victorian authors who were influenced by Locke functioned as a camera and supplied their works with reality that gave their work a quality of heightened realism:

Their writing has seemed to many critics to have precisely this dreamlike quality, a heightening and exaggeration of reality which has the effect of making books appear to be more real than reality itself. In other words, the vividness and detail of Dickens' writing can create a response akin to that of leaving the cinema only to find the outside world as flat and colorless. (Smith, 2003, p.63).

We see Smith puts in the new emphasis on Dickens' use of visuals in his writing, he made his writing appeal to have more vividness and detail to become more real than reality itself. Reed (2010) refers that Dickens has an outstanding ability to magically convey the sense of daily life as it is in his novels (p.4). With Locke, we can observe that Dickens in his writing has added several theories that were inspired by Locke, from realism itself to the concept of tabula rasa and cognitive development.

Dickens' *Great Expectations*² can be regarded as the best example of the Victorian realism and that due to its employment of events in a real-like way. The structure of this novel is basic and follows linear and chronological development of events. Locke's empirical theory of void mind at birth is reflected in this novel as it describes the life of Pip from his childhood innocence to his adult disappointing expectations, and finally his abandonment of wealthy life and the succession that takes us back to the beginning. The chronological order that is followed in *G.E* closely portrays Pip's journey in life and his mental development, it reflects his impressions and the emotional turmoil related to the realistic setting pictured around him. Then, we can approve that Locke's theory applies to Pip for that he shows cognitive progress as he obtains his perceptions through experience just as Locke stated in his theory. To elaborate more, examples from the novel are to be examined to put more emphasis on the application of Locke's theory.

The perspective of Dickens in *G.E* grants it more realistic atmosphere, the first-person narration makes Pip's character more credible to the readers. It allows the readers to dive deep into the character of Pip and his desires, as it provides transparency to the readers to closely observe Pip's mind in perceiving and analyzing ideas from the Lockean point of

² The novel will be abbreviated as G.E

view. What is more, the novel provides Pip's evaluations of himself, his development and matured sense, for instance, his experience at Christmas dinner where he had a strong desire to twist Wopsle's nose by "pulling it until he howled." (Dickens, 1861, p.38). The old Pip narrates this incident sympathetically and comically to convey his innocence when he was younger to show his cognitive development. And this conveys Dickens' realistic touches on his characters that are influenced by Locke's concepts. To continue with Pip, in the novel Pip had a quiet, simple, and peaceful childhood, he was simple-minded and regarded as lower class. During his childhood, Pip lived with his sister and her husband Joe. Pip was fond of Joe and he treated him intimately as Pip says "when I sat looking at Joe and thinking about him, I had a new sensation of feeling conscious that I was looking up to Joe in my heart" (p.68). However, after Pip's growth and development to be an upper-classman, just as Locke showed how the experience may change our perceptions and judgment, Pip after being gentlemen changed his perspective completely about Joe in which he treats him with arrogance:

With his hat put down on the floor between us, he caught both my hands and worked them straight up and down, as if I had been the last-patented Pump"... Joe, taking it carefully with both hands, like a bird's-nest with eggs in it, wouldn't hear of parting with that piece of property. (p.309)

In the previous extract, the transmutation and distortion in Pip's character appear to be clear. According to Locke, our perceptions are damaged by our judgments, and this exactly how Pip's relation and perception with Joe got damaged due to Pip's judgments. In another scene, we can see Pip's change when he first came to meet Miss Havisham where his values underwent a significant turn. Pip the innocent and kind suffered a tremendous change in his values after staying with upper-class people, he became vain and a hypocrite. Here we can again refer to Locke's argument about the experience, in which experience forms knowledge and ideas, and that what Pip went through, the experience he had with the upper class changed his ideas.

Locke's theory of objects and their reflection as ideas in the human mind that was discussed before also can be detected in Pip's description of London as "a most dismal place; the skylight eccentrically patched like a broken head, and the distorted adjoining houses looking as if they had twisted themselves to peep down at me through it," (p.229). The previous lines create a strong sensation of reality and realistic description of London as it is foreshadowing of the development of Pip's expectations. Pip in *G.E* transparently reveals the outcome of his experience and his cognitive development sponsored by Locke's concepts, Pip says "within a single year, all this was changed. Now, it was all coarse and common" (p.93). In the extract Pip demonstrates his cognitive development through one year, after gaining enough knowledge from his experience, Pip regrets on some matters he has done previously:

For now, my repugnance to him had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. (p.395)

To sum up, one of the crucial characteristics that defines realism in *G.E* is the insight that Dickens provides into the inner mind of the characters respectively inspired by Locke. We see Pip's internal struggles reflected, he feels guilt, he feels the need for a better life than what he has. All of his thoughts and expectations are reflected so we can interpret his character through his inner thoughts and notice the application of the empirical theories. The inner thoughts and expectations of Pip do not only define his character, yet they affect his development in the novel and show his life's development "As I had grown accustomed to my expectations, I had insensibly begun to notice their effect upon myself and those around me" (p.15). All that representation and reflexivity of their characters' inner thought enriches the novel with more qualified characteristics of realism and realistic representation of the Lockean doctrine.

Another character to be taken for interpretation in the novel, Miss Havisham the gothic character that unlike Pip, her surroundings reflect her mental state rather than her inner thoughts. And to match with Locke's belief, Miss Havisham's character is interpreted by the readers themselves rather than other characters. In this way, Dickens is permitting the readers themselves to experience the theory of ideas. In which readers will interpret Miss Havisham's decaying house, her old wedding dress, and her clock that stopped at twenty to nine. Moreover, the readers can infer ideas, perceptions and they can activate their minds through interpreting these materialistic elements such as the dress, the clock, and the mental state of Miss Havisham. Miss Havisham's life is done or she is dead the moment her clock stopped yet she is only alive with the help of her memories. Dickens' embodiment of Miss Havisham is unique because he realistically presented gothic characteristics using different ways including Locke's approaches.

Character-wise, *G.E* is an internal novel due to Pip's inner stream of thoughts and the commentary of his surroundings, but also an external novel because of the reflection of other characters' mind state. That through interpreting their surroundings such as Miss Havisham and all that consists an illusion of reality in the readers' mind. Furthermore, on the scale of individual importance, Locke's empirical realism highlights the commonplace and regular daily lives within the lower classes. Through the characterization, employment of Pip coupled with the simplest subjects of Victorian life Dickens views the ideologies of society to reach the social reality in his writing.

Language-wise, Locke in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* touches upon very modern thinking of his time regarding utterance. He states that Language is the "sign of ideas" or "internal conceptions" (p.387). In *G.E* Dickens uses this concept of Locke to imply realistic aestheticism, for instance, Magwitch's use of language and how it is conveyed in the book referring to his simple character in reality "Who do you live with – supposing you're kindly let to live, which I haven't made up my mind about?" (p.25). Taking into consideration Locke's concept that language is a sign of ideas, and through Dickens' realistic embodiment of Magwitch's utterance, readers can have an idea that Magwitch is a simple-minded and even lower class character.

5. Conclusion

Locke has a tremendous impact on the literature as a whole through his prominent theories and philosophies. He appealed with his remarkable work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that accommodates various empirical philosophies. Locke is specifically famous for his theories of knowledge and cognitive development. The impact of Locke's theories is clearly apparent in the Victorian realistic novels such as Dickens's *G.E.* In *G.E.* the main character Pip resembles a projection of the mechanism by which Locke's theories functions. He narrates the novel from his perspective so we can interpret and observe his flow of ideas and his experience as well as his perceiving of ideas. Shortly, *G.E.* as bildungsroman allows readers to experience the Lockean concepts closely through its realistic atmosphere and its characters' mind. Dickens not only reflects Locke's theories in his novel, yet, he gives a chance to the audience to experience those theories themselves through presenting objects in the novel that defines other characters where readers have to activate their minds and analyze those objects. Dickens has inspired a great sum of Locke's ideas in his writings, and that proves the Lockean vast effect on literature.

Just as Locke, Dickens as a realist has always rejected the ideal. He went far with realism to project the attitudes of the upper class with malice, corruption, and greed such as Miss Havisham. Dickens has recorded the voyage of Pip from his innocent childhood to his experienced adulthood. He solved the enigma of Pip's character and portrayed his inner world by firmly inspiring the base concepts and theories of Locke. Additionally, Dickens presented the social class and emphasized a real-like setting, all in the projection of the life of Pip who is seeking upward mobility, and this what makes *G.E.*, a great realistic novel that has been vastly influenced by John Locke's philosophies.

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