

Daniel Defoe

(1660-1731)

The man

- 1664: a Dutch fleet sailed up the River Thames and attacked London (Dryden's *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, 1668)
- 1665: 70,000 people killed by the plague
- 1666: the Great Fire of London
- Presbyterian dissenting parents – educated in a Dissenting Academy

- He entered the world of business as a general merchant, dealing in hosiery, woolen goods, and wine
- Never free of debt -- arrested in 1692
- After his release, he travelled in Europe and Scotland to trade in wine
- 1695: back in England, responsible for collecting the tax on bottles
- 1703: new arrest, placement in a pillory and then at Newgate

- Main cause: a pamphlet, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702) – ruthless satire vs Tories pretending to argue for the extermination of dissenters (ironical writing)
- Released thanks to Robert Harley, Speaker of Parliament (Tory)
- Appointed as political spy and pamphleteer for all kinds of ministries, Tory and Whig alike

- Editor of *The Review*, the main mouthpiece of the English Government promoting the Act of Union of 1707
- Harley ordered Defoe to Edinburgh as a secret agent to do everything possible to help secure acquiescence of the Treaty
- 1719 – 1724: principal novels
- 1724–27: *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* – a panoramic survey of British trade

The writer

- A prolific, versatile and astute author
- ❖ over five hundred books, pamphlets, and journals
- ❖ on various topics – politics, crime, religion, marriage, psychology and the supernatural
- A pioneer of economic journalism

- Founder of the English novel (?) – bourgeois novel, about and for
 - Noble women devoted to reading
 - Partly literate lower classes in search of imaginary adventures and ambitions
 - Middle classes leaving the country to embark on city business
 - Middle classes participating in colonial enterprise and geographical exploration

- *Conditio sine qua non* of the new novel: identification hero/heroine-reader (mainly middle-class)
- Illusion and mimesis of reality: novel vs romance -- “*bugia perfetta*”
- “Fantastic” story yet realistic characters, actions and settings
- Readers experience a kind of suspension of disbelief – Gulliver and Robinson as *dramatis personae*

Major novels

- *Captain Singleton* (1720): a bipartite adventure story – journey through Africa and contemporary fascination with piracy
- *Colonel Jack* (1722): picaresque first-person novel on an orphan turning from a life of poverty and crime to colonial prosperity, military and deceptions, and religious conversion
- *Moll Flanders* (1722): picaresque first-person narration of the fall and redemption of a lonely woman in seventeenth-century England
- *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724): first-person narration of the moral and spiritual fall of a high-society courtesan

Robinson Crusoe (1719)



- *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner: who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an uninhabited Island on the coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoke; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pirates. Written by Himself*

Plot summary – main events

- 1651: Crusoe leaves England from Hull on a sea voyage
- The ship is taken over by pirates and Crusoe becomes the slave of a Moor
- He escapes and, helped by the Captain of a Portuguese ship, goes to Brazil, he becomes owner of a plantation
- 1659: He joins an expedition to bring slaves from Africa, but he is shipwrecked on an island near the mouth of the Orinoco river
- Here he hunts, grows corn, learns to make pottery, raises goats, and by reading the Bible, he becomes religious
- He discovers native cannibals kill and eat prisoners. He helps a prisoner to escape, calls him "Friday", teaches him English, and converts him to Christianity
- An English ship appears; mutineers have taken control of the ship. The captain and Crusoe manage to retake the ship. They leave for England in 1686

Genre and readings

- The “false document” and travel book: fictional autobiography of an English castaway who spends 28 years on a tropical island
- Inspired by the real-life events of Alexander Selkirk, a Scot who shipwrecked and lived over four years on a Pacific island in Chile (report 1718)
- An allegory for the development of civilisation
- Manifesto of economic individualism and entrepreneur spirit (Rousseau – *Emile*)
- Expression of European colonial desires

- It gave rise to a new genre, the *Robinsonnade* – spin-offs of the novel
- Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) in part a parody
- Johann Wyss's *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812)
- Michel Tournier's *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique* (1967)
- J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) – postcolonial allegory about racism and colonialism

Interpretations

- 1) Historical – colonial**
- 2) Religious**
- 3) Ethical**
- 4) Socio-economic**

Historical – colonial

- Robinson Crusoe as symbol of the British conquest and prototype of the British merchant and colonist – independent, unconsciously cruel, persistent, intelligent but calculating
- At the very end of the novel the island is explicitly referred to as a 'colony'
- Economic man who tries to replicate his own society on the island based on European technology, agriculture, and political hierarchy
- Master-servant relationship read in terms of cultural imperialism: the 'enlightened' European imposing his culture on the 'savage'

Religious

- Robinson as everyman in search of the spiritual meaning of life – through initial, aimless wandering till he gets closer to God alone amidst nature with only a Bible to read
- Crusoe echoes “Cruso”, a classmate of Defoe's who wrote guide books on how to be a good Puritan Christian— he died just eight years before Defoe wrote *Robinson Crusoe*
- First part of the novel evoking the Biblical story of Jonah: like Jonah, Crusoe neglects his 'duty' and is punished at sea
- Belief in Providence: Crusoe is always optimistic despite the hopeless situation he is in – belief in a divinely ordained fate

Socio-economic

- Marx analyses Crusoe in *The Capital*
- Inherent economic value of labour over capital
- Class system: master-servant
- The money he saved is worthless on the island compared to his tools
- Money has no intrinsic value and is only important when used in trade
- Belief in the Protestant work ethic

Themes

- **The Ambivalence of Mastery**
 - Positive: man-master of his situation, *faber fortunae suae*, able to survive in the harshest environment
 - Negative: Prospero-Caliban relationship – “master” is the first word Robinson teaches Friday

- **The Necessity of Repentance**

- A fiery angel appears to him and says, “Seeing all these things have not brought thee to repentance, now thou shalt die”
- His “original sin” is his rebellion vs his father; hence his exile from civilization (like Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden)
- Repentance consists of acknowledging his wretchedness and his absolute dependence on the Lord
- YET: does this admittance justify sin?

- **The Importance of Self-Awareness**

- Crusoe never reverts to a brute existence controlled by animal instincts, he remains conscious of himself at all times
- His self-awareness deepens as he withdraws from the external social world and turns inward
- His calendar marking the days spent on the island: a sort of self-conscious or autobiographical calendar with him at its centre
- He teaches his parrot to say “Poor Robin Crusoe. . . Where have you been?”

Motifs

- **Counting and Measuring**

- Endless lists of well-known items: familiarisation effect (Defoe-reader)
- Crusoe's practical, businesslike character
- Hands-on approach to life
- Defoe sometimes poking fun at the urge to quantify – e.g. the carefully measured canoe cannot reach water

- **Eating – image of existence itself**

- His first urge – each new edible item marks a new stage in his mastery of the island
- E.g. discovery of grain viewed as a miracle, like manna from heaven
- Food supply = symbol of his survival
- But no sooner does Crusoe master the art of eating than he begins to fear being eaten himself
- Cannibals transform Crusoe from the consumer into a potential object to be consumed -- eat or be eaten philosophy

- **Ordeals at Sea**

- Encounters with water = symbolic ordeal or test of character
- First storm does not deter Crusoe
- In his second trading voyage he is able to survive enslavement
- He survives his shipwreck after a lengthy immersion in water
- The cannibals arrive in canoes from the sea
- Life-testing water imagery – sort of rite of baptism, to prove his faith and enter a new life saved by Christ

Symbols

- **The Footprint**

- Chapter XVIII: shocking discovery of a single footprint on the sand ⇒ conflicted feelings about human companionship
- Negative interpretation = the print of the devil or of an aggressor
- Doesn't he want to return to human society?
- Is the isolation he is experiencing his ideal state?

- **The Cross**

- Chapter VII: Crusoe marks the passing of days “*with [his] knife upon a large post, in capital letters, and making it into a great cross . . .*”
- Important timekeeping device and way of relating himself to the larger social world
- Symbol of his own new existence on the island, just as the Christian cross is a symbol of the Christian’s new life in Christ after baptism
- YET: no reference to Christ on it, it is a memorial to himself – he has become the centre of his own life (triumph of individualism)

- **Crusoe’s Bower**

- Chapter XII: on a tour around the island, Crusoe discovers a delightful valley in which he decides to build a country retreat or “bower”
- Bower vs Crusoe’s first residence: the practical purpose of shelter or storage vs pure pleasure
- Symbol of his development: from necessity of survival to “pleasantness”
- Island life is no longer a disaster to suffer through, but may be an opportunity for enjoyment—Presbyterian ethos: life may be enjoyed after hard work and repentance