

# **A CRITICAL STUDY OF CRUSOE'S MIND AND CHARACTER**

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Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is considered as the most important precursor of the English Novel or even as the first English Novel. Literary critics have discussed the character of *Robinson Crusoe* from different literary perspectives. The purpose of this paper is to examine *Crusoe's* attitude towards business, religion and non-Europeans in its historical context. These three elements of *Crusoe's* character are inseparably linked to each other and are therefore essential to an appreciation of *Crusoe's* mind and character. His attitude towards business and religion is motivated by practical considerations. He exploits non-Europeans for his own advantage and in his discriminating treatment he is supported by religious beliefs. The following discussion of three principal traits of *Crusoe's* character will help us to understand *Crusoe's* mind and character and enlighten us about the prevailing trends of the Eighteenth-Century.

*Crusoe's* character has been interpreted differently by various critics. To Ian Watt, *Crusoe* is an embodiment of economic motive, a reverence for book keeping and the laws of contract are the marks of *Crusoe's* personality.<sup>(1)</sup> Maximillian E. Novak goes a little farther and considers *Robinson Crusoe* as an illustration of Defoe's own economic concepts.<sup>(2)</sup> *Crusoe*, to Novak, is not only an economic man. If economics be taken as the only trait and pursuit of *Crusoe's* character, then the account of his adventure will become dull, localized and uninteresting to his readers. Besides being an economic man, *Crusoe*, says Novak, has a romantic temperament. I think Novak is right, because it is the romanticism in *Crusoe's* temperament which keeps him going in his adventures and also maintains the interest of a reader from beginning to end.

*Crusoe's* adventurous life begins with the dissatisfaction of his routine. His father wanted him to be a lawyer and stay in the "middle station" of life to which they belonged. *Crusoe's* restlessness was partly due to his longing to go to sea and partly due to his dissatisfaction with his "middle station" of life.<sup>(3)</sup> In his thinking *Crusoe* is not an isolated Englishman; on the contrary, he represents

the ideals of British society of that time. It was a time when the Bank of England and the South Sea Company were founded. The Royal Africa Company and the East India Company were moving out into the remote areas of the world. Naturally Crusoe's desire to make his fortune through sailing and trading was quite representative of the spirit of his age. Michael Shinagel remarks:

*"... Defoe employed the colonial theme as a means of showing his middle - and lower - class readers how they could better their fortunes, regardless of their ancestry or birth, through industry in the already established colonies in America, specifically Virginia and Maryland." (4)*

Crusoe, in the beginning, turns out to be an unfortunate sailor and tradesman, but shipwrecks and slavery do not keep him from his ambitions. He is not the type of man who could be easily persuaded to give up his plan by misfortune; on the contrary, these hardships and his helplessness become a driving force in his case. He has the temperament of a well disciplined merchant whom loss or set-back does not crush but whose endurance and patience are thereby augmented. These setbacks contribute to his wisdom and prepare him for future challenges.

Crusoe never neglects any opportunity for investment and trade. In Brasil, in addition to exploring other possibilities for making money, he carefully examines the plantations, land, and the laws of the country :

*"I lived with him some time, and acquainted myself by that means with the manner of their planting and making of sugar; and seeing how well the planters lived, and how they grew rich suddenly, I resolved, if I could get license to settle there, I would turn planter among them, resolving in the meantime to find out some way to get my money which I had left in London remitted to me. To this purpose, getting a kind of letter of naturalization, I purchased as much land that was uncured as my money would reach and formed a plan for my plantation and settlement..."*

(RC, P. 55)

Crusoe, no doubt, inherited his business-like and practical attitude towards life from his family. To settle down as a planter in Brasil, it is necessary to acquire property and obtain a legal license. He exploits the situation to his full advantage and begins to think of his future prospects as a successful planter.

Cruose is the sole survivor of the unfortunate shipwreck. Though the vessel is filled with water, he finds the food stuffs dry and brings all the salvageable items to the island. He lives on this deserted island by means of his practical ingenuity. His living, management of the resources on the island, and his insight into even the most mundane details of day to day life are clear expression of his business instincts. Though he calls money a "drug" and "nasty, sorry, useless stuff" (RC, p. 75) he does not throw the money away but rather wraps it in a piece of canvas and saves it for the future.

Robinson Crusoe's life as an active business man begins when he arrives in Lisbon after having lived on the island for more than twenty-eight years. He begins his life over again, from scratch, inquiring about the state of his plantation in Brasil and attempting to renew his old business contacts. He learns that his plantation is still flourishing and receives from its profits over five thousand pounds in sterling silver. Thereafter, he sells his share of the plantation and settles down in England.

Crusoe's attitude towards nature is also businesslike. He exploits the island only for his sustenance and comfort and experiences no aesthetic delight from its scenic beauty. He is only concerned with the improvement of his land and has no leisure to observe that the island offers a beautiful landscape. Crusoe's sole delight comes from surveying his goods : "I had everything so ready at my hand" and "that it was a great pleasure to me to see all my goods in such order and especially to find my stock of all necessaries so great" (RC, p. 86).

When he was in the "Island of Despair" he always prayed for his deliverance. But after his deliverance, and on coming back to his home, he is not prepared to forget the investment he has made in the island. Besides its nostalgic association for him, the island is connected with his business motives. He writes :

*"Besides this I shared the island into parts with 'em, reserved to myself the property of the whole, but gave them such parts respectively as they agreed on; and having settled all things with them, and engaged them not to leave the place, I left them there".*

(RC, pp. 298-90).

Crusoe, in his attitude towards trade, is amazingly practical and farsighted; his frugal investments have brought him a substantial return. He is a successful businessman and his adventures, to use the words of Ian Watt, symbolize the virtues of "individualism" and

"absolute economic, social and intellectual freedom for the individual." (5)

Despite the frequent religious meditations in Defoe's novel, one senses that it would be false to take the purpose of the novel or even its principal interest as being religious in nature. Intuitively judged, the novel seems secular, more immediately and more constantly concerned with man's worldly satisfactions than with his duty toward God under the guidance of religion. The religious aspect of the work does not so much strike us as false or hypocritical as it does matter-of-fact and close to irrelevant. William Halewood considers that religion in Robinson Crusoe "gives the book its structure, justifies its length and method, contributes to its air of authenticity, provides emotional complexity and depth, and enlivens its language". (6)

Defoe was not only a puritan, but an active and public one who suffered for his beliefs. He wrote a defense of his fellow-believers called the Shortest Way with Dissenters, that so offended the defenders of the state religion that he was condemned to public punishment in the stocks and then to imprisonment. Thus Defoe proved the sincerity of his beliefs. At the same time, Defoe's career in politics, business and journalism strikes us today as self-seeking and opportunistic. His very novels seem to have little purpose but to make money by serving the tastes of middle-class readers with stories of adventure and of success. So Defoe himself seems to embody the paradox of Puritanism.

So too does his first novel, Robinson Crusoe. Midway through the novel, Crusoe, after a long examination on whether religion permitted him to kill without warning or provocation the cannibals who came to the island, ends by observing that, should he try to kill them and fail, they might kill him. His comment is, "Religion joyned in with this prudential... me" (RC, p. 179). Religion through the book has a way of agreeing with the safety and the comfort of Crusoe. It is true, that Crusoe's initial imprudence in going off to sea without his father's permission is viewed by him and is meant to be so viewed by us, as willful disobedience to the will of God, that these misadventures are meant to lead him into repentance of his sin and into the mercy and loving-kindness of God, and that his final prosperity is evidence of God's care for him; all this is true, but it is also true that despite this spiritual drama, Crusoe's character as such does not seem to change at all from one part of the novel to the other, whether he be in a state of sin, of repentance, or of grace.

It would be unfair, however, to Defoe to leave the matter at this point. There is one more point to make. A main part of the action of the novel depends on Crusoe's being shipwrecked on the island as God's way of bringing him to repentance and salvation. In several passages in the novel, Defoe achieved a kind of grandeur of vision; in which the absolute power and majesty of God are celebrated. It is difficult, because of their length, to quote any one of them, but the careful reader would do well to read, say, the passage beginning at the bottom of page 140 "... I had now brought my state of life... next to miraculous" (RC, pp. 140-44). Here the Puritan sense of the marvellous care and grace of God for an unworthy man, a sinner like all men, the care of God extending from the greatest displays of power (like the great storms at sea) to the most intimate of kindnesses, is well-expressed. It is unlikely that a hypocrite would pen these lines. If the intensity of religious feeling seems less in Defoe and the concern with material success greater than in the works of his puritan predecessors, that intensity of feeling is yet far from absent. This may seem the mark of a hypocritical religious belief, despising riches yet labouring to achieve them, but to the Puritan, there is nothing hypocritical or contradictory in this.

The harshest, most disagreeable note in Defoe's novel is the attitude of Crusoe towards non-Europeans. It is just because this attitude is so unpleasant that it is interesting to us, for it promises to help us understand the foundations of British Imperialism that were being laid at the time the novel was written. There is no question but that the attitudes expressed by Crusoe are those of the author as well. We know enough of Defoe's own political career as an agent of the Prime Minister who made the treaty giving Great Britain its slaving rights, Sir Robert Harely, to be sure he was in agreement with British policy, It is, furthermore, clear that Defoe in showing his casual sense of superiority, to non-Europeans counted on his readers' sympathy, even to the point of making "native" humor one of the interests of the novel.

Let us look at four aspects of the novel before trying to come to some conclusion : the humorous use of language to characterize non-Europeans; the discrimination practiced by Crusoe; Crusoe's expectation that other peoples should serve him; and his reflections on "nationality".

The first of these seems harmless, but it is not. the problem lies in the fact that both Xury and Friday speak very bad English indeed. In

Xury's case, perhaps the surprising thing is that he speaks English, for we are told that Crusoe had no fellow-Europeans to talk to while he was at Sallee. One should expect that he and his fellow slaves would speak Turkish or Arabic or Berber, some language, that is, used in the Maghreb. Yet Xury speaks bad English in talking with Crusoe. Friday, of course, spoke no English when he first met Crusoe. Yet, after some three or four years of constant conversation in English, his English is no better than Xury's. Yet other foreigners, Europeans like the Portuguese sea-captain, speak perfectly good English.

Now language is one mark, a most important mark, of the equality of human relations. That Defoe presents Xury and Friday thus, making humorous use of their bad English, has the insidious effect of making us see them as somehow inferior to Crusoe and to Englishmen generally.

The second thing to note, if only briefly, is another instance of Crusoe's discrimination. In the episode beginning on page 233, where Crusoe, after having determined not to interfere in the cannibalistic rituals of the Indians who come to the island, changes his mind suddenly and does interfere, the cause of his interference is that one of the victims is a European. There is some abstract justification that might be made out for this, on the basis of Crusoe's theory of nationalities, but this would be too weak to explain the strength of Crusoe's reaction. Friday's announcement that one of the victims is a European "fired all the very soul within" him. He "was filled with horror at the very naming the white bearded man," who he saw plainly was "an European, and had clothes on." This sort of thing shows sharply Crusoe's real sympathy for Europeans, whatever he might say in calmer moments.

The third thing we have mentioned is difficult to elaborate. All one can do is to point out that it never occurs to Crusoe to accept a relation of equality with non-Europeans. He works deliberately to inspire them with awe and expects, as a matter of course, that they should be willing to sacrifice their lives in his service.

Finally, the fourth thing to observe is that Crusoe's theory of nationalities, though not racist, seems to see the bulk of "native" peoples as evil and deserving of God's punishment. It is true that he leaves it to God to punish them, but the expression of the theory is designed sharply to limit our sympathy with them. In the following passage Crusoe goes on to observe :

*"... we did not know by what light and law these should be condemned; but that as God was necessarily, and by the nature of His being, infinitely holy and just, so it could not be, but that if these creatures were all sentenced to absence from himself, it was on account of sinning against the light ..."*

(RC, p. 212)

Thus whereas Crusoe himself is in the special care of Providence, these people are seen by him as being literally God-forsaken.

To conclude, Crusoe is a shrewd businessman and his attitude towards religion appears to be a paradoxical relationship between a serious religious life and great worldly success. One wants to say that in Crusoe one has a look at the last stage of the Puritan mind before it degenerates completely, as it was about to do, into the godless, empty and self-satisfied mentality of the materially successful, middle-class westerners that followed.

Besides disagreeable traces of national intolerance and colonialism, what disturbs us more is the unselfconscious and even pious feeling that Crusoe expresses that he and his fellows are somehow chosen by God to dominate others and that they somehow show themselves worthy of this election by their benevolence and good nature. Defoe's attitude is less refined and high-handed than that of later Englishmen up to the time of Rudyard Kipling (and after), but the difference is not one in kind. The nakedness of the attitude shown in the novel helps us to see clearly what British imperialism was from its beginning.

## **NOTES**

1. Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe Richardson and Fielding (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), p. 67.
2. Maximillian E. Novak, Economics and the Fiction of Daniel Defoe (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962), p. 49.
3. Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1981), p. 28. This book has been cited internally and appears as RC
4. Michael Shinagel, Daniel Defoe and Middle-Class Gentility (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 132.
5. Ian Watt, "Robinson Crusoe" in Daniel Defoe: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. Max Byrd (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 52.
6. William H. Halewood, "Religion and Invention in Robinson Crusoe" in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Robinson Crusoe ed. Frank H. Ellis (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 86.

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