

DANIEL DEFOE • ROBINSON CRUSOE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DANIEL DEFOE (1660-1731)

He was born in London, where his father James Foe was a **Dissenting** tradesman. He was brought up in an atmosphere of religion and moderate prosperity open to the values of a Protestant ethic – practical knowledge of the Bible, hard work and self-help – which was never to lose its influence upon him. He changed his name to Defoe, in order to **conceal** his low origins and to impress others. Giving up the idea of becoming a Dissenting preacher, he started working as a merchant and travelled around Europe. After experiencing journalism, he turned to literature, publishing *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, which was followed by other fictional works, essays on social themes and travel books. His fiction, which reflects tastes, interests and values of the middle class, is characterised by realism, presence of **picaresque** elements, moral attitude and references to God and the Bible as well as the Protestant belief in work as a virtue.

A man of many talents and author of an extraordinary range and number of works, Defoe remains in many ways an enigmatic figure. A man who made many enemies, he was accused of **double-dealing**, of dishonest or equivocal conduct and of **venality**. Certainly, in politics he served in turn both Tory and Whig; he acted as a secret agent for the Tories and later served the Whigs by “infiltrating” extremist Tory journals and toning them down. But Defoe always claimed that the end justified the means, and a more sympathetic view may see him as what he always professed to be, an **unswerving** champion of moderation. At the age of 59 Defoe embarked on what was virtually a new career, producing in *Robinson Crusoe* the first of a remarkable series of novels and other fictional writings that resulted in his being called the father of the English novel.



D. Defoe

ABOUT THE NOVEL

Robinson Crusoe

The book is about the real adventures of a sailor who lived alone on an island after being **shipwrecked** in the Pacific Ocean in 1704. He is the only survivor from his ship and, at first, is in great despair. Gradually, however, he dominates his despair and, with the things he saves from the ship, builds a life for himself on the island. He constructs a home, grows grain to make bread and keeps goats. After several years some savages come to the island with a prisoner whom they are going to kill. Robinson saves him and calls him Friday. He then teaches him to speak English and to live in a more civilised way. Eventually the two are saved by sailors who visit the island. Friday dies on the way home but Robinson, with what he has kept from the ship, becomes rich when he gets back.

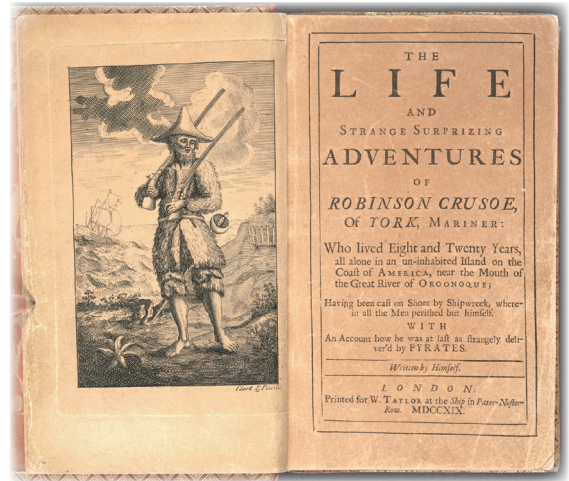
The novel is divided into 3 sections: the first one is about Crusoe’s early life, his first adventures until he becomes a plantation owner in Brazil; the second one, which represents the main body of the story, is about Crusoe’s 28 years on the island, how he tries to overcome difficulties, progressively becoming the master of the island; the third one is about Crusoe’s rescue and return to England with his servant Friday, a savage he had rescued from cannibals.

Robinson Crusoe is, perhaps, the first capitalist hero in English literature: by common sense and hard work he produces a surplus (that is, he produces more than he needs himself) and later he sells the surplus and becomes rich. His greatest satisfaction is economic activity and the control this gives him over his own life helps him to overcome his original despair and to become almost happy.

THE TEXT

Chapter VII

The following is an extract from Chapter seven, where Crusoe, searching the island, finds freshwater, tobacco plants, cocoa trees, wild sugarcane and a valley with citrus fruits and grapes. Now Robinson Crusoe is transitioning from a hunting gathering way of life toward agriculture: **fortuitously** he discovers grain growing near his shelter. He carefully **nurtures** it, frugally saving the seed for the next year. After planting his first rice and barley crops in the dry season when they cannot sprout, Crusoe learns from his mistake: he plants and replants the grain and, after four years of careful husbandry, is able to make bread. **Foresight** and persistence work in his favour and he continues to develop new skills.



I have mentioned that I had saved the few **ears** of barley and rice, which I had so surprisingly found spring up, as I thought, of themselves, and believe there were about thirty **stalks** of rice, and about twenty of barley; and now I thought it a proper time to sow it after the rains, the sun being in its southern position, going from me. Accordingly I dug up a piece of ground as well as I could with my wooden spade, and dividing it into two parts, I sowed my grain; but as I was sowing it, it casually occurred to my thoughts that I would not sow it all at first, because I did not know when was the proper time for it, so I sowed about two-thirds of the seed, leaving about a handful of each. It was a great comfort to me afterwards that I did so, for not one grain of that I sowed this time came to anything, for the dry months following, the earth having had no rain after the seed was sown, it had no moisture to assist its growth, and never came up at all till the wet season had come again, and then it grew as if it had been but newly sown. Finding my first seed did not grow, which I easily imagined was by the drought, I sought for a moister piece of ground to make another trial in, and I dug up a piece of ground near my new **bower**, and sowed the rest of my seed in February, a little before the vernal equinox. And this having the rainy months of March and April to water it, sprung up very pleasantly, and yielded a very good crop; but having part of the seed left only, and not daring to sow all that I had, I had but a small quantity at last, my whole crop not amounting to above half a **peck** of each kind. But by this experiment I was made master of my business, and knew exactly when the proper season was to sow, and that I might expect two seed-times and two harvests every year [.....]

I could not tell what tree to call it that these stakes were cut from. I was surprised, and yet very well pleased to see the young trees grow, and I pruned them, and led them up to grow as much alike as I could [.....]

However, this was a great encouragement to me, and I **foresaw** that, in time, it would please God to supply me with bread. And yet here I was perplexed again, for I neither knew how to grind or make meal of my corn, or indeed how to clean it and part it; nor, if made into meal, how to make bread of it, and if how to make it, yet I knew not how to bake it. These things being added to my desire of having a good quantity for store, and to secure a constant supply, I resolved not to taste any of this crop, but to preserve it all for seed against the next season, and, in the meantime, to employ all my study and hours of working to accomplish this great work of providing myself with corn and bread.



bower: pergolato
to conceal: celare
Dissenting: Dissenziente
(rispetto alla Chiesa ufficiale)
double-dealing: doppio gioco
ear: spiga
fortuitously: in modo fortuito
foresight: lungimiranza
to foresee (foresaw, foreseen): prevedere
to nurture: coltivare
peck: sacco (unità di misura statutintense)
picaresque: picaresco
to shipwreck: far naufragare
stalk: gambo
unswerving: incrollabile
venality: venalità

COMPREHENSION

1 Match the words to their definitions/synonyms.

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| 1. To mention | a. Confused |
| 2. Handful | b. To refer to |
| 3. Skill | c. Ability |
| 4. To overcome | d. To start to grow |
| 5. Perplexed | e. A small quantity |
| 6. To spring up | f. To germinate |
| 7. To sprout | g. Relating to the spring |
| 8. Vernal | h. To surmount |

2 Match these expressions to their meaning. There are two extra sentences.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. I had saved... | a. To dedicate all my reflexions and efforts. |
| 2. ...it casually occurred to my thoughts... | b. To support the grain growing. |
| 3. ...to assist its growth... | c. To make one more attempt. |
| 4. ...make another trial in... | d. I had, by chance, an intuitive leap. |
| 5. ...to employ all my study and hours of working... | e. I became skilled enough to manage my chores. |
| 6. I was made master of my business... | f. It happened by hazard. |
| | g. I had put aside. |
| | h. To be present when it is growing. |

ANALYSIS

3 Read the text again and answer the questions.

- What is the most frequent personal pronoun in the passage? Who does it stand for?
- Define:
 - the protagonist of the episode
 - the narrator
 - the time when the episode takes place
 - the probable time when the narrator wrote about it.
- The story is narrated through a diary: why?
- Which words would you not use to describe Crusoe? Choose from these options: self-reliant, practical, enterprising, shy, depressed, refined, wealthy, idle, rational.
- In Robinson's narration you can find mainly concrete nouns; adjectives of size, form, measure; verbs of action and motion. What do these features of the lexis reveal about the narrator's personality and interests?
- What is Crusoe's attitude?
- What is the main theme of the novel?

DISCUSSION

- 4 Imagine you are in an uncomfortable, difficult or dangerous situation (isolated, with a group of companions in a mountain hut, for example) and draw up your "balance sheet" with the positive and negative aspects. Think about possible solutions.**