INTRODUCTION

The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe, first published in 1719, is almost a universal title. Its reach extends so far and wide that even those who are not English native speakers and have not read the novel have some knowledge of the titular character and his desolate island ordeal. The figure of the man with the goat skin clothes strolling at the beach, heavily armed with guns and with a naked sword at his side make an impression on the imagination of all those who came into contact with it in one form or another. Its reach and status is such that it was widely considered during Victorian times to be the best book one could give a child for its imaginative power and ‘good’ morals, being canonised by many as a timeless masterpiece with no boundaries. Yet, Robinson Crusoe is the product of a very specific time in British history; better yet, it was a product of a particular individual in a very specific historical context.

This paper will briefly describe the historical context at the time of the book’s publication. It will then analyse the different aspects of Defoe’s view of religion, politics, and economics in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, and examine how they surface in the novel. Concluding upon the contradictions and enduring nature of this text.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Stable would hardly be the word used to describe the England of Defoe’s time. He was born to a Presbyterian dissenting family in London, around the time of the restoration of Charles II to the throne after a decade of power in the hands of Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans (Novak, 2003:11-2). Being barred from having a classical education, he was sent to Charles Morton’s dissenting academy. The ideas imparted by his tutor would later influence
his writings. There he received a more progressive education, which focused mainly on English, discourse and science, at the expense of the more orthodox Greek and Latin education. Defoe during his youth also received education in order to become a dissenting minister, which he turned away from, becoming a merchant like his father instead. His faith, however, was central to his life and would continue to be so to the very end. This fact led him to join the failed Monmouth Rebellion against the Catholic King James II, from which he barely escaped alive. He also staunchly supported the Glorious Revolution of 1688, which installed the good, in Defoe’s eyes, Protestant King William III.

Being a simple merchant was not enough for the brilliant and self-assured dissenter of strong opinions. Much like his character that would try to rise ‘faster than the nature of the thing admitted’ (Defoe, 1995:28) and infected with the ‘plague of mankind’ ‘of not being satisfied with the station wherein God and Nature has placed them’ (1995:149) Defoe involved himself with several different investments and ended up acquiring an enormous amount of debt, being once imprisoned due to it in 1692. It is no surprise then that one of his first publications of notice An Essay upon Projects (1697) was a treatise on different plans and projects for the economic improvement of the nation. Economics would be ever present in his mode of thought, as can be seen in the evil versus good ‘book keeping’ that he has Crusoe use to explain his thought of being stranded in the island (1995:50).

That, however, would not be the only time Defoe would enjoy the comforts of prison, the second time being of a much more serious nature. As religion and politics were hardly separate at the time, Defoe’s interest on the former, coupled with his economic interest, made it nigh to impossible for him not to have been also interested on the latter. Being present at the time of the political division in parliament between the High Church Tories, who supported monarchical absolutism and the Stuarts, and the Low Church Whigs, with their constitutional monarchical ideas backing the Hanoverians, Defoe was right in the middle of the political storm. Producing political pamphlets siding mostly with the side of the Dissenter friendly Whigs, he landed himself in big trouble with the anonymously published The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters (1703). In it Defoe alleged ironically parodied the Tory rhetoric against the Dissenters. The final product, however, was so good a mimicry that some thought it to be genuine, and those that did see the irony were so disturbed by the content (Novak, 2008: 28) that a hunt for the author was ordered by Queen Anne. Made to stand on the pillory and imprisoned, Defoe was short on allies, being considered ‘a traitor’ by the Whigs and ‘a seditious writer’ by the Tories. He was freed by ex-Whig-turned-Tory Robert
Harley and put to work as a propaganda agent (Novak, 2003: 205-6) and later even become a spy.

Politics would then dominate most of his life, although trade would never stop being a driving issue in his writing (Schonhorn, 1991:141). His allegiances were fluid at best with him writing both for and against the government in power. He constantly found writing outlets for his own views. That is not to say that these views were the same throughout his life (Novak, 2003:5). Becoming deeply connected with the centre of power would show him the dark underbelly of its own workings, generating no small amount of despair in the more optimistic minded Defoe (Novak, 2003:513). His views on his own society started to morph. Such was his situation upon his writing of *Robinson Crusoe*. Having gone through many a different profession, from merchant to journalist to spy, he was a man of progressive ideas. He had very progressive views on slavery (Novak, 2003: 527) and the education of women, and this would show in the very narrative style of his most famous novel.

**TEXTUAL ANALYSIS**

Told as a first person narrative by the supposed author Robinson Crusoe of York, Defoe pronounced himself as only editor. The work was groundbreaking in its use of realism in fiction, to the point that many believed it to be of non-fictional nature. The production of didactic biographies being in vogue at the time most probably added greatly to that effect. Defoe himself most probably drew inspiration from Puritan spiritual autobiographies (Schonhorn, 1991:142). He defends the publication of his fantastical story in his editorial preface,

> The story is told with modesty, with seriousness and with a religious application of events to the uses to which wise men always apply them (viz.) to the instruction of others by this example, and to justify and honour the wisdom of Providence in all the variety of our circumstances, let the happen how they will. The editor believes the thing to be a just history of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it. And however thinks, because all such things are dispatched, that the improvement of it, as well to the diversion as to the instruction of the reader, will be the same; and as such he thinks, without farther compliment to the world, he does them a great service in the publication.

From this we can gather that, firstly, as other Puritans of his time, Defoe was a pragmatist (Rees, 1996: 73) who really believed he had a message to pass on for the general
advancement of humankind. Secondly, that Defoe had no qualms in using deceit in order to please the crowds. Fiction at the time was considered to be a lesser form of literature and even regarded by Puritans as glorified lies, confronting their strict religious morals. His experience as a journalist gave him insights into what would draw in the crowds, hence the sensationalist title *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, of York, Mariner: Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque; 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 Pyrates.* An even more scandalous title would appear in his other novel, *Moll Flanders* published in 1722.

It could be concluded, by examining his life, that Defoe was a man who, like his character, lived a very varied life and who had very prominent views as well as a desire to make humanity see things as he did. It is no wonder then that *Robinson Crusoe* is shot through with religious, moral, political and economical ‘lessons’. His views are ever present in his work, whether he was conscious of it or not, which I believe he mostly was. First we should analyse how Defoe weaves and leads the reader to associate with the eponymous character. Being the narrator Crusoe completely dominates the narrative, all is filtered through him and indeed almost everything in the novel carries his comments. It is also important to notice that these comments come not from the subject at the moment of the action, but from the reminiscing Crusoe that gives us the narrative from a hindsight perspective. Actually, we are presented with two Crusoes, one who is subject of the action and the other who is its teller.

**Religion**

Crusoe the narrator presents himself as a pious and repenting man, who commentates upon the mistakes of his youth and it is him who gives many of the more obvious moral messages of the book, such as the trust in the Divine Providence. He also endeavours to tint our understanding of Crusoe the subject. One of the ways he does this is by largely insinuating that that which he calls his ‘original sin’, his design to ramble the world, is largely due to predestination,
(...) but I would be satisfied with nothing but going to sea; and my inclination to this led me so strongly against the will, nay, the commands, of my father, and against all the entreaties and persuasions of my mother and other friends, that there seemed to be something fatal in that propension of nature tending directly to the life of misery which was to befall me. (Defoe, 1995:1) (My italics)

The narrator continues to influence the reader’s perception of young Crusoe throughout the novel. This is illustrated by every episode in which Crusoe could have supposedly turned back and avoided his fate of being stranded on the desert island, such as when he continued his travels after the second storm (Defoe, 1995: 9). This influence is exerted to such an extent that the reader is left in doubt whether Crusoe is ever truly rebellious against God’s will or only following his allotted part in God’s divine plan (Hammond and Regan, 2006: 65). The passage above also depicts another narrative device which leads us to sympathise with young Crusoe; he is often associated with biblical figures such as, in this case, the Prodigal Son and Jonah (Carroll and Prickett, 1998). These biblical references can be seen as Crusoe’s attempt to compensate for his flawed life (Baines, 2007: 57) or just as a simple manifestation of Defoe’s spirituality and the nature of the times (Novak, 2003: 541). While both hypotheses may be true, it could be suggested that these references are also a tool for Defoe to familiarise his readership with his character, by using a common background that they would already share, and thus making Crusoe a more easily embraceable character.

Religion is one of the major themes of the novel without a doubt. The constant emphasis of the narrator upon young Crusoe’s lack of religion (e.g. Defoe, 1995: 59), and his disregard for the Providence as the cause for his ‘fall’, might be considered as one of the main points of the novel. Yet, Robinson Crusoe is much more complex than that. The stress is, however, upon the nature of a true believer and of worship. For Defoe it is not enough to follow the teachings of the Bible, it is necessary to truly commune with God upon reflection of his Word and everyday Providence in deference to his Divine Will in one’s life. In Crusoe’s world social interaction, especially with the wrong kind of people, is a strongly corrupting force, as can be seen by the description of his failure to heed Providence after both storms. After the first storm, a punch bowl with the sailors makes him forget all sober thoughts of returning to his father (Defoe, 1995: 6). After the second one shame of being socially ridiculed keeps him from going back to his community (Defoe, 1995: 11). Crusoe even comments on the corrupting factor of company himself,
I had, alas! No divine knowledge; what I had received by the good instruction of my father was then worn out, by an uninterrupted series, for eight years of seafaring wickedness, and a constant conversation with nothing but such as were, like myself, wicked and profane to the last degree. (Defoe, 1995: 67)

Here the idea that man is affected by his environment, professed by Defoe’s early teacher Charles Morton (Novak, 2003: 48), can be seen. Also present are the Calvinist ideas of predestination and election (Calvin, 2008: 606-613). Why is Crusoe the only of such degenerate and wicked sailors to survive his shipwreck? The simple answer would be that he is chosen by God. His struggle to reach shore is much like that of a newborn to come into life; its rises and falls, pushes and shoves of the waves (Defoe, 1995: 33-4) represent Crusoe’s rebirth into a state where he has no choice but to contemplate and repent in his solitude. This solitude accords to the Puritan notion of the individuality of faith and of being isolated in a corrupting world (Egan, 1973: 453). Present also are the notions of High and Low Church of the Whig and Tory factions respectively. Crusoe and, in this case also Defoe, clearly side with the Low Church, which states that there is no need of a medium between the believer and God. This can be seen on his attempt to teach the Scripture to Friday in order to deepen his understanding of the Word,

I believe that all that act upon the same will find, that in laying things open to him, I really informed and instructed myself in many things that either I did not know, or had not fully considered before, (Defoe 1995: 169)

His religion becomes his link with sanity and salvation, and yet it just leads to his rescue from the Island and only truly reaches its potential for good in the midst of society (Rees, 1996: 87). However, Crusoe is first led into his redemption and future piety through a series of further Providential occurrences, for so he deems to call them, such as the appearance of the stalks of barley and wheat, the earthquake and his dream with the fiery angel of retribution (Defoe, 1995: 60-8). Defoe, nonetheless, is also careful to leave perfectly reasonable explanations for them, such as the shaking of the bag of poultry feed, a simple geological occurrence and a feverish dream fuelled by a guilty conscience. The hand of the Providence, Crusoe argues, is in the sequence of the events, as can be seen in his marking of the days and the matching dates (Defoe, 1995: 102). Ironically, however, he misses count of a couple of days (Defoe 1995: 79), therefore misnaming Friday.
Another Calvinist theory that is up for contest in Defoe’s work is that of Total Depravity. Although it is not as extreme as rendering all humans as naturally depraved, Defoe recognizes that the main force that drives humans, especially in politics and economics, is self-interest (Novak, 2003: 513-5), which he sees as being a natural characteristic of humankind (Rees, 1996: 95). And yet Crusoe, meets with both utmost kindness and extreme fealty in many parts of his journey, such as the Moor boy Xury, the Portuguese captain, the English widow, and, not least of all, ‘his man’ Friday. Interesting to notice is that they all come from different backgrounds, a Muslim, a Catholic, a Protestant woman, and finally a savage and man eater. Defoe’s optimism in mankind shines through, even if only a little, as Crusoe finds good people and human charity in the most unlikely of places. Crusoe goes on to expose on the equality between races and the fairness of God’s providence,

He has bestowed upon them the same powers, the same reason, the same affections, the same sentiments of kindness and obligation, the same passions and resentments of wrongs, the same sense of gratitude, sincerity, fidelity, and all the capacities of doing good, and receiving good, that He has given us;(...) And this made me very melancholy sometimes, in reflecting, (...) why it has pleased God to hide the like saving knowledge from so many million of souls, who if I might judge by this poor savage, would make a better use of it than we did. (Defoe, 1995: 160-1)

He even allows himself to admit Friday as the better Christian between the two of them upon the ‘good’ savage’s conversion (Defoe, 1995: 169). Progressive as such views may be at the time, the concept of the superiority of the European society is still present through the mentioned ‘saving knowledge’ and the ‘powers enlightened by the great lamp of instruction’ (Defoe, 1995: 161). These refer not only to the knowledge of God but also cultural and technological advancement. Of the latter it is interesting to point out its appearance of godlike power to the still ignorant Friday that ‘would have worshipped me and my gun’ (Defoe, 1995: 162). It is also the tools of his own civilisation that Crusoe salvages from his ship (Defoe, 1995: 36), which keep him from degenerating into a savage state and having to gnaw at the skin and meat of his prey with his teeth and bare hands. It is his cultural heritage that leads him to be capable of transforming the island from a desolate place of nature into a place of possible comfort.

Another item Crusoe takes from his wrecked ship is money, which he remarks as useless and as a drug, and considers leaving it where it stands for it not being worth saving.
Ironically, though, he still decides to take it with him (Defoe, 1995: 43). While Defoe might have meant for that to be an exposition of Lockean ideas of value theory (Tully, 1994: 616-652), it does not change the fact that Crusoe brings with him the capitalism mode of thinking to his newfound colony. Defoe uses the desert island situation to explore how the complexity of production of something as basic as bread (Defoe, 1995: 90) is overlooked in a capitalist society, such as 18th century England. Crusoe is an exemplary worker never keeping to idleness (Defoe, 1995:88), and constantly labouring for his survival and for the little comfort he is to have. He frequently explains in great detail the great pains which he has to go through, which not only adds to the realism of the fiction but also works as a moral lesson for the readers who should better appreciate the little comforts of their lives and the fruits of hard work.

**Politics and Economics**

The concept of property is also explored and through it the right of kings over their territory. This is illustrated by Crusoe’s right of possession of his Edenic Island (Defoe 1995: 76), his proclamation that he had no competitors (Defoe 1995: 98), and his belief that he had absolute power over his animal servants, with not ‘a rebel among them’ (Defoe 1995: 113). Defoe also uses the metaphor of animals as subjects in order to expound on the nature of a good government, as can be seen in Crusoe’s kind treatment of the she goat which is repaid with loyalty (Defoe 1995: 86). Further examples are his protection of his crop from enemies by using his dog; the punishment and example making of the fowls, ‘as we serve notorious thieves in England’ (Defoe 1995: 89). His keeping of the tame goats from the wild by enclosing them in order to stop them from breaking in and breaking out (Defoe 1995:112), could also be seen as an approval of prisons or clearly defined borders. Upon acquiring human subjects he then comments that he allows freedom of worship in his domains (Defoe 1995: 185). While highly unusual, this can be explained by the fact that Defoe was originally a merchant and to exclude other religions is counter-productive, as it limits your target market, making it, in the long term, irrational (Hill, 1980: 11).

Reason and long term thinking are key words of wisdom for Defoe. In stark contrast to these principles is Crusoe’s lack of foresight, evident in his creation of his first canoe, which took him nearly 5 months to complete and which he was unable to move (Defoe 1995:
Defoe sees reason as a tool to ascertain truth and keep one’s mind in perspective, as can be seen in Crusoe’s reasoning upon his miraculous survival of the ship wreck (Defoe 1995: 47). From this point of view, it is true that self-interest and kindness and religious faith can be reconciled with each other. It is in the name of self interest that Crusoe saves Friday from his pursuers,

It came now very warmly upon my thoughts, and indeed irresistibly, that now was the time to get me a servant, and perhaps a companion or assistant, and that I was called plainly by providence to save the poor creature’s life. (Defoe 1995: 155)

This reconciliation extends to Crusoe’s treatment of Friday, as it is in the Englishman’s interest not to have a subjugated slave who might kill and eat him in his sleep, even though subjugation might be easier and faster to achieve. Thus he endeavours to educate and convert Friday into a servant who is grateful and obedient to him (Defoe 1995: 166-170), transforming the savage into ‘his man Friday’ who would gladly lay down his life for his master. This could represent Defoe’s views not only of slavery, but also of the treatment of England’s colonies. Other acts of kindness repaid are those of the English widow and the captain, who are eventually paid by Crusoe for their good treatment of him. The boy Xury, however has as his reward being sold to slavery by young Crusoe, a fitting example of the kind of thinking that would inform Defoe’s later novel Moll Flanders (Novak, 1964: 198-204). The opposition between man’s natural instincts of self-preservation and the divine law, as well as how upon starvation and need any kindness and faith are soon forgotten, are quite explicit in the speech of the Spaniard Crusoe rescues (Defoe 1995: 189).

The idea of self-preservation is present throughout Robinson Crusoe, evident in the main character’s fear of wild beasts upon his arrival on the island, which leads to his utmost effort to create a secure habitation or his ‘castle’ (Defoe 1995: 118). It is also manifest in his unwillingness to take kindness for granted, demanding contracts and oaths of those he saves but would do him no harm, (Defoe 1995:188, 196). Fear is a powerful force. Crusoe’s finding of a single footprint in the sand, (Defoe 1995: 117-8) has him ‘thunderstruck’ and exercises a terrible strain on his very imagination, so much so that he even considers it being Satan’s.

The narrator, however, tells us that the confrontation of fear is also the key to deliverance,

The evil in which itself we seek most shun, and which, when we are fallen into it, is the most dreadful to us, is oftentimes the very means or door to our deliverance, by
which alone we can be raised again from the affliction we are fallen into. (Defoe, 1995: 139)

The safeguarding of his life is aided as well by special providences that manifest themselves upon the mind of Crusoe, aiding him in times of need (Defoe 1995: 134, 192). Those not particularly religious might also call it ‘gut feeling’. Defoe having been a spy and having been forced to write propaganda for those that were once his enemies, must have been all too aware of the importance of the survival instinct.

CONCLUSION

On the one hand, we have the image of both Crusoe as the everyman, a simple young man of York subject to the works of the Providence and the whims of nature, possessed of a desire to see the world. He is not proficient in any form of skill, instead he is a person anybody could easily substitute themselves for (Coleridge, 1936: 300). On the other hand we have the image of the pious repenting and wiser narrator who guides our reading of the story. That is not to say that the Crusoe narrator is the embodiment of Defoe’s ideals and thus a simple extension of himself under a different name, no matter how many biographical and ideological similarities they may share. Defoe, as can be seen both in his journalistic writings, such as The Shortest-way with The Dissenters, as in his other novels, such as Moll Flanders, was a master at imitating and creating different voices quite different from each other as well as from his own, although arguably still carrying his morals.

Therefore Crusoe is not without his ironies. He abandons his colony and exercises almost no function in its keeping. He exercises almost no responsibilities towards his territory, but keeps the title of Governor and continually refers to it as his island. He treats women as commodities of trade sending them to the island upon his return visit (Defoe 1995: 235). Despite constantly mentioning his ‘original sin’ of having a wandering spirit and claiming repenting, he once more endeavours to travel the world by the end of the book. Furthermore, despite professing melancholy at the thought that the savages did not receive the ‘light of God’ when the opportunity presents itself to him of being the agent of its propagation alongside Friday, he proclaims that the thought had never crossed his mind and
that he had no desire to do spread the Word of God among the pagans (Defoe 1995:174). He mostly deals with people in a gain versus loss mentality instead of actively engaging with them emotionally. A grim example of his cold capitalist thinking is his book keeping of death, where he calculates the murders of the Caribbs carried out by himself and his people much like one would do their grocery list (Defoe 1995: 182). That Defoe did not mean this ironies consciously is possible, however unlikely, as no man is without contradictions within himself.

On *Robinson Crusoe* Defoe gives us a time capsule of his ideals and criticisms of his time conflicting and complimenting each other on a wide variety of subjects such as politics, religion, economics and even psychology. His account is complete yet incomplete, leaving us with a ‘perhaps’ more to come; it is congruent yet incongruent, topical of its time and timeless in its treatment of its topics; it is realist yet allegorical; divine and mundane by treating in its span both the salvation of the soul and the details of creating a flat board with minimal tools. It is pure fiction and yet reeks of truth and, most of all, while constantly appealing to the reason of the reader, incites and excites his imagination generating a power and life of its own.
REFERENCES


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