

# ROBINSON CRUSOE : LITERATURE AND RELIGION

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## SUMMARY

The essay discusses Daniel Defoe's novel **Robinson Crusoe**, in relationship to the way that it reflects some of the more important ideas of the eighteenth century English thoughts which provided the climate for the issues it raises. It will examine the historical context of the novel, and discuss the philosophical ideas which had gained so much appeal to men in this new "age of enlightenment" and its focus on the nature of man. In **Robinson Crusoe**, Defoe takes the opportunity to explore the relationship between "natural man" and man as he is shaped by civilization.

**KEYWORDS:** "natural man", "natural savage", the nature of Man, "man Friday", "natural savage", "natural law", "civilized reason", "rational man", eighteenth century Englishmen, eighteenth century thought, fallen man, God, right governance, the Providence, savage cannibals, the island, "the hand of God", isolated environment.

## RESUMEN

En **Robinson Crusoe**, de Daniel Defoe, se presenta algunas ideas básicas concernientes a la obra que son primordiales en el pensamiento inglés del siglo XVIII. Estas ideas son el pilar del clima de los temas tratados en la novela. Se examina el contexto histórico y las ideas filosóficas que adquirieron tanta importancia en el hombre de esta "edad del iluminismo". En **Robinson Crusoe**, Defoe se da la oportunidad de explorar la relación entre el "hombre natural" y el hombre, tal como lo moldeaba la civilización de aquella época.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** "Hombre natural", "el salvaje natural", la naturaleza del hombre, "Viernes", "el salvaje natural", "la ley natural", "razón civilizada", "hombre racional", los ingleses del siglo XVIII, el pensamiento del siglo XVIII, el hombre caído en el pecado, Dios, la correcta gobernabilidad, la Divina Providencia, los salvajes caníbales, la isla, "la mano de Dios", condición de aislamiento.

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The purpose of this essay is to discuss Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe*, especially in relationship to the way that the novel reflects some of the more important ideas of the eighteenth century English thoughts which provided the climate for the issues it raises. The essay will first examine the historical context of the novel, and will in particular discuss the philosophical ideas which had gained so much appeal to men in this new "age of enlightenments" and it focus on the nature of man. It will be shown that in *Robinson Crusoe*, Defoe takes the opportunity to explore the relationship between "natural man" and man as he is shaped by civilization. This, as will be discussed, was an ongoing concern of men of letters. Was "natural man" more likely to be good than evil? How and in what ways did the presence of government aid or distract men from acting well? And most importantly, how did God's presence fit into the scheme of things? The first part of the essay will discuss how some of the leading thinkers of the day thought about such questions. Then, the essay will turn its focus to the novel itself and examine passages from it that express a unique and yet very eighteenth-century orientated idea of the nature of man. How and in what ways Robinson Crusoe himself becomes a statement of man's issues and potentials will be investigated. Then, the nature of Crusoe's "man Friday," the "natural savage," will be examined in order to show how Defoe always sides with the idea that although there is a "natural man" written in man's heart, that law is only realized by men when they are under right government. Defoe's "natural man" versus "civilized reason" is the underlying issue of the adventures of Robinson Crusoe. This writing will attempt to place the novel in its historical context, and then examine passages from the novel which directly reflect the issues which concerned eighteenth century Englishmen.

According to critic M. E. Novak, the eighteenth century saw a shift in the way that men regarded the natural man. "In medieval Christian thought, the law of nature was regarded as a law of reason written in the hearts of men by God." (Novak, 1965, p. 3) This law of "reason" however, was increasingly distinguished for the "natural" desires of man, which were believed to be the close of the beasts, and therefore wild and in need of taming. Defoe was quite close to Puritan thinking of his day when he held that man was by nature "fallen" from God's grace, and it was therefore necessary that laws to govern corrupted man he established, and then became "natural law," a necessity for fallen man. "Natural law" was, according to this line of reason, born out of necessity because of man's fall from grace in the Garden of Eden. The religious basis of the natural law is thus given in eighteenth century thought.

In line with the presence of "natural law" which is necessary to enforce on man lest his instincts guide him wrong is the assumed presence of God, a guiding force throughout the novel Robinson Crusoe, as well as a felt presence in most of the philosophical thinking during Defoe's time. "The world in which Defoe's characters move is one which operates almost exclusively by second causes," (Novak, 1965).

"God," wrote Defoe, "has subjected even the ways of his Providence to Rational Methods, and Outward Means agree to it. The great Chain of Causes and Effects, is not interrupted, even by God himself; if it be, it is on Extraordinary Occasions, which we call Miracles. Whatever happens in the world is ultimately the act of God." (Novak, p. 6)

In Defoe, the presence of God is always felt, but His desires are expressed through "nature," through the circumstances in which Robinson Crusoe, the character, finds himself.

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He has, for example, no doubt that his enforced confinement on the island was itself a punishment for his willful neglect of his father's advice and his own "unnatural" desire to wander the seas rather than to accept his station of life. God works through nature and through the invisible net of the ongoing exchange of causes and effects, but He is nonetheless present in every occasion.

Defoe is, then, particularly concerned with two issues which were of interest to men of his century. The first was the nature of man himself, and whether that nature be "natural" in its goodness or if "natural man" was already fallen and thus in need of lawful governance. Defoe is believed to have been influenced by the great thinkers of his day, men like Hobbes and Locke, who were concerned with how to establish laws which would govern the instincts of man and got him into trouble. (Watt, Ian, 1957) Defoe also believes, with the Puritans of his time, that God or Providence is present in all things in the phenomenal world. God works through nature, as it were, allowing nature to give and to take to man according to his just deserts. Novak (p. 14) says that if any of Defoe's fictional characters fall into difficulties, they will be presented as the result of a variety of natural causes to explain the situation, but the final cause is God. The presence of God, which has its origin in the Puritan beliefs of the time, is an important part of the adventures of Robinson Crusoe, for it is through his acceptance of the Divine Will for him that he is allowed to tolerate this condition of isolation and, ultimately, to experience a spiritual awakening.

Before going on to examine the presence of these ideas in the novel itself, perhaps it would be well to place Defoe more directly in his appropriate place in eighteenth-century thought. Although he is often believed to be a direct adherent of John Locke's ideas, Novak points out that Robinson Crusoe was written before Locke's major treatises were even

published. This suggests that the two men agreed to some large degree upon the necessity of reason and the "fallen or unruly condition of man's passions which require governance, rather than that Defoe followed Locke in his thinking. (Novak, 1965) The "fall" of man has deprived him of his truly "natural" or intuitive reasoning. Hence, even primitive men, will be found to be wanting in the knowledgeable acting out of what God truly desires man to be because his instincts have overwhelmed his natural "intuition" which was lost when he fell out of Paradise. Hence all men are Fools, and men raised in savage conditions are no less Fools than men who are raised in civilization but corrupted by greed and desire for wealth. According to the rationalist stance of the eighteenth century, man's reason alone would be to no avail, but must be connected to God's will from man. The concept of "reason" in connection with "faith" thus becomes the ideal model for a man to follow.

Although Defoe believes that man is, by nature, somewhat depraved, he does not go so far as Hobbes and his followers, who suggested that man was at base savage, and that civilization was corrupt. Yet it is to Hobbes that most credit the idea that "nature" and the essence of "natural law" must be introduced back into politics before corruption and the spoils of civilization can be corrected. (Watt) Along with the upsurge of a re-examination of "nature" and "reason" and "natural law" came a new belief in the individualism of man. Ian Watt describes this new melting pot of ideas about the nature of man in the eighteenth century this way:

The great English empiricist of the seventeenth century were as vigorously individualist in their political and ethical thought as their epistemology. Bacon hoped to make a really new start in social theory by applying his inductive method to an

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accumulation of factual data about a great number of particular individuals Hobbes, also feeling that he was dealing with a subject that had not been properly approached before, based his political and ethical theory on the fundamentally egocentric psychological constitution of the individual; while in his *Two Treatises of Government* (1690), Locke constructed the class system of political thought based on the indefeasibility of individual rights, as against the more traditional ones of the Church, Family or King. That these thinkers should have been the political and psychological vanguard of nascent individualism as well as the pioneers of its theory of knowledge, suggests how closely linked their re-orientations were both in themselves and in relation to the innovations of the novel. For just as there is a basic congruity between, the non-realist nature of the literary forms of the Greeks their intensely social, or civic, moral outlook and their philosophical preference for the universal, so the modern novel is closely allied on the one hand to the realist epistemology of the modern period, and on the other hand to the individualism of its social structure. In the literary, the philosophical and the social spheres alike, the classical focus on the ideal, the universal and the corporate has shifted completely and the modern field of vision is mainly occupied by the discrete particular, the directly apprehended *sensum*, and the autonomous individual. Defoe, whose philosophical outlook has much in common with that of the English empiricist of seventeenth century, expressed the diverse elements of individualism more completely than any previous writer, and his work offers a unique demonstration of the connection between individualism and its many forms and the rise of the novel. (Watt, Ian, 1965 p. 62)

Hence, along with the concern for the knowledgeable apprehension of God's will through reason, and the necessity of "right governance" of mankind with the "natural laws" apprehended by him in a civil and just

society, comes the concern for man as an individual being. Gone is the identification of a man with his community. Robinson Crusoe is a man who is isolated, cut-off from his fellow men as if it were only under these conditions that Defoe could really examine the true nature of man. Yet Defoe does not celebrate man in isolation. To the contrary, he seems to feel that man who is cut off from his society is a very sorry being. Crusoe's punishment for his willfulness is isolation; but it is severe punishment, not a desirable state of affairs. Hence we find the first truly modern investigation of man cut off from his society; man alone, the individual, the individual, is examined in all of his aspects.

Now let us turn to the novel to examine how and in what manner Defoe illustrates his doctrine of "natural man" versus "rational man," and how Providence plays a hand in guiding man to right reason. One of the most effective means by which Defoe illustrates his interest in the nature of man itself is by his long-winded presentation of Crusoe and how, in the final chapters, Crusoe takes for himself a cannibal, his "man Friday," who represents the "natural savage." It will be found that neither Crusoe nor Friday come to represent man as he might be, but that both are found in their depraved condition. It is only via the extremes of Providence that Crusoe is brought to investigate his "natural" desires and to understand that his punishment has been designed to bring him to a more fortunate end.

Crusoe's account of his life is told in chronological order. As narrator of a fictional account, Crusoe himself is the main character of the novel and its main concern as well. Interestingly, Crusoe himself does not seem fit to judge the nature of his decisions and actions as well as his readers might. Defoe uses a good deal of irony to get his various points about the nature of man across, and is not to be considered as identified with his narrator. Yet Crusoe is a self-conscious man, a

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man who is interested in exploring the whys of his feelings and his actions. It is through the means of his self-conscious narrator, who nonetheless seems to gain little pity from his readers, that the nature of fallen man is exposed and the remedy is suggested. On the question of Original Sin, Defoe has no question, and neither does his narrator. Throughout the fictional account, Crusoe is found to amuse upon his fate and the fate of all of his fellows:

I have been in all my Circumstances a Memento to those Who are touched with the general Plague of mankind, whence, for ought I know, one half of their Miseries flow; I mean, that of not being satisfy'd with the Station wherein God and nature has plac'd them; for not to look back upon my primitive Condition and the excellent Advice of m Father, the Opposition to which, was, as I may call it, my ORIGINAL SIN, my subsequent Mistakes of the same kin Had been the Means of the coming into this miserable Condition; for had that Providence, which happily had seated me at the Brasils, as a Planter, bless'd me with confined Desires, and I could have been contented to have gone on gradually, I might Have been by this Time ... one of the most considerable Planters in the Brasils. (Defoe, Daniel, 1975, p. 152)

This recollection comes at the time when Crusoe has already been on the island a number of years. It seems to be his fate to commiserate with himself, and to consider again and again the nature of his own "fallen" nature, which was to compell him to be unsatisfied with his natural lot. Here, Crusoe establishes the idea that he, like his man Friday will later be, was in a "primitive" condition when he set himself against the desires of his father and set off for a life of adventures.

That Providence had a hand in all that befell Crusoe goes without question in the man's mind. It is to Providence that he

ascribes both his terrible first voyages at sea and his ultimately arrival on the island. It is to Providence as well that Crusoe ascribes the "good fortune" of having access to the foundered ship, upon which he was able to find the tools and equipment which would enable him to live in his isolation. A sense of calm strikes Crusoe when he realizes that, of all the men on the ship, he was the one chosen by Providence to be saved. Yet Crusoe's major experiences on the island by the primary emotion of fear, and it is the presence of this fear that seems to motivate his self-concern and his thinking about his own base nature. It is thus that Defoe suggests that the nature of man in its fallen state is naturally related to the presence of fear. How and in what ways fear takes a large place in the narrative is the next point to be examined.

From the moment that Crusoe sets foot on the island, he is terrible afraid, but not before he takes note of his gratitude to his maker for his being alive:

After I had solac'd my Mind with the comfortable Part of my Condition. Crusoe says, I began to look round me to see what what kind of Place I was in, and what was next to be done, and I soon found my Comforts abate, and that in a word I had a dreadful Deliverance: For I was wet, had no clothes to hift me, nor anything either to eat or drink to comfort me, neither did I see any Prospect before me, but that of perishing with Hunger, or being devour'd by wild Beasts. (Defoe, Daniel, 1975, p. 39)

The point is that unless Crusoe is for the moment in direct conscious contact with his sense of a God which is watching out for him, he is in a state of terrible fear and dread. This fear accompanies almost everything that Crusoe does. He builds a shelter for himself against large beasts which he has absolutely no sign of. In fact, he is aware of the fact that the largest Beast on

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the island is a herd of goats. Yet Crusoe continues in his fearful condition, and when he finds a man's footprint in the sand, he is entirely beside himself with terror:

O what ridiculous Resolution Men take, when possess'd with Fear! It deprives them of the Use of those Means which Reason offers for their Relief. The first thing I proposed to myself was, to throw down my enclosures, and turn at my tame cattle wild into the woods, that the Enemy might not find them. (Defoe, Daniel, 1975. p. 125)

Man, as represented by the ill-fated Robinson Crusoe, is thus riddled with fear without the company of his society. He feels alone and desolated in a world which is assumed to be set against him. He feels alienated and alone, and helpless to protect himself against the evils that seemingly lurk in the world. He is, in a word, paranoid. He is frightened beyond hope, and is only able by the barest means to continue to subsist, and this only because he has, from time to time, the refreshing thought that God must be there for him, and that therefore God wants him to realize that this terrifying condition holds a lesson for man.

Crusoe is himself a "primitive" man, then, one who is isolated from the rest of his fellows and shown to be irrationally fearful. When Friday is captured and tamed, something more of the nature of man is revealed. This gives Crusoe the opportunity to explore his "natural" right to own property and his "natural" desire to civilize and tame the primitive instincts in his fellow men. Prior to this taking place, however, the reader follows along with Crusoe's attempts to allow "primitive" man to be judged, not by himself. But by God alone. While Crusoe is in his fearful state, his first thought upon seeing savage cannibals land on the island and conduct a ritual is that he must lay on a trap for them all and kill them. Yet, he reconsiders this thought and determines that the conduct of

these barbarians is no less uncivilized, really, than, say the conduct "of the Spaniards in all their Barbarities practiced in America, where they destroy'd millions of these people, who, however they were isolators and barbarians...were yet, as to the Spaniards, very innocent people." (Defoe, p. 134) This ironic twist in Crusoe's perception of the savages allows him to determine to leave them to the Justice of God where they will be dealt with according to what they deserve. With this move, Crusoe himself begins to use his "reason" in connection with his faith in Divine Providence, and thus begins to deserve the right to establish laws and conduct himself as the "king" of the island on which he finds himself.

The "hand of God" is again felt as Crusoe finds and begins to "civilize" the primitive cannibal Friday. This turn of events operates as if to signal that Crusoe has begun to allow his "reason" to rule and that he therefore deserves to once again have the society of his fellow men. More than company, however, Crusoe is ironically offered an innocent primitive whom he will instruct on the ways of true law and right reason, as if he were allowing himself an opportunity to make up for his wrongful desires and past mistakes. Thus Friday represents the "innocent" or "primitive" condition of man which is nonetheless subject to cannibalism and barbarities of all kinds unless it be properly tamed by "natural law" and right reason. It is through realizing that the savages on his island cannot be judged by himself that Crusoe acquires the morality necessary to begin to instruct Friday in the ways of civilization.

The move from "primitive" or willful man to "civilized" man who allows his reason in connection with his faith in God to rule his is signaled by Crusoe's new thinking about the presence of seemingly hostile forces on the island. When he is able to forgo his primitive response of fear, he is able to recognize that fear and

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his own foolishness has itself been his worst problem:

However, after some Pause, I recover'd myself, and began to call myself a thousand Fools, and tell myself, that he that was afraid to see the Devil, was not fit to live twenty Years in an Island all alone; and that I durst to believe there was nothing in this cave that was more frightful than myself; upon this, pluckin up my Courage, I took up a great Firebrand, and in I rush'd... (Defoe, Daniel, p.139) rush'd...

Very gradually, Crusoe has come to understand that his own fear is the most debilitating of his "natural" responses to his isolated condition.

It is in the process of educating Friday that Crusoe begins to sense the real nature of man and his need for Divine Guidance which will show him the greater reason by which he must learn to govern his own primitive emotion:

My Grief set lighter on me, my Habitation grew comfortable to me beyond Measure, and when I reflected that in this solitary Life which I had been confin'd to, I had not only been moved myself to look up to Heaven, and to seek to the Hand that brought me there; but was now to be made an Instrument under Providence to save the life, and for ought I knew, the Soul of a poor Savage, and bring him to the true knowledge of Religion, and of the Christian Doctrine, that he might know Christ Jesus, to know who is life eternal. I say, when I reflected these things, a secret joy run through every Part of my Soul, and I frequently joyc'd that ever I was brought to this Place, which I had so often thought the most dreadful of all Afflictions that could possibly have befallen me. (Defoe, p. 139)

This is Crusoe's thinking after he has been allowed to "tame" the primitive man whose nature, being unsullied by civilization and its discontents, is more readily and rapidly molded in the image of "right reasoned" behaviours and attitudes.

Of Friday's nature as the true condition of "Primitive" or un-governed man, Crusoe is not naïve as to its potential for returning once again to its "baser" or instinctual beliefs. This seems to be Defoe's comment on the difficulties which present themselves even to the most willing and open of men, Friday, being in a purer condition as a "primitive" man than was Crusoe, as an uncontained "primitive" of civilization, is yet prone to revert to type. As Crusoe witnesses Friday looking toward his homeland he says:

I observed an extraordinary Sense of Pleasure appeared in his Face, and his Eyes sparkled, and his Countenance discover'd a strange Eagerness, as if he had a Mind to be in his own Country again; and this Observation of mine, put a great many Thoughts into me, which made me at first not so easy about my new Man Friday as I was made no doubt, but that if Friday could get back to his own Nation again, he would not only forget all his religion, but all his Obligation to me; and would be forward enough to give his Countrymen an Account of me, and come back perhaps with a hundred or two of them, and make a Feast upon me; at which he might be as merry as he us'd to be with those of his Enemies, when they were taken in War. (Defoe, p 174)

Crusoe is mindful of the ever present danger of the power of the "natural" condition of man in his primitive state which, because it is fallen, may well allow even the willing primitive to forget his reason and allow his base instinct to once again rule supreme.

Ironically, however, Crusoe's fears seem to be unfounded. Defoe seems to be pointing to the more ready ease with which the "primitive man" who has not yet been tainted by so-called civilization might be educated to truly experience the governance of right reason. It is Crusoe and his own fears, fears seemingly born of the need for the society of



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his fellows and the lack of security in his isolated environment, that plague Crusoe from the beginning until the end of his stay on the island. Defoe is painting a picture of the more difficult conditions which the "civilized" man who has no true understanding of "natural law" must face.

Throughout this novel, Defoe illustrates the concerns of eighteenth century England. Robinson Crusoe represents the man who must learn that civilization is only possible when his own instincts are curbed and he follows the "reason" which his faith in Providence teaches him through his life experience. Friday represents the "primitive" man in his raw condition, a condition which is also depraved, but which is more readily brought to reason because it has no conception of being "reasonable" to begin with. And throughout the novel, the striking note of individual growth marks the rise of a new kind of concern in man's history, the concern for growth as an individual. Crusoe's isolation makes him the first psychologically modern man, one who must re-learn the lessons he holds in his heart that will allow him to accept his fate and his position as a man among his fellows. The Hand of Providence, like God in John Milton's Paradise Lost, has used what appears to be dire circumstances to lovingly redirect the misguided, instinctual, primitive man back to his "natural" condition as a true, reasonable and loving man. Crusoe says:

How frequently in the Course of our Lives,  
the Evil which in itself we seek most to shun,

and which when we are fallen into it, is the most dreadful to us, is oftentimes the very Means or Door of our Deliverance, by which alone we can be rais'd again from the again from the Affliction we are fallen into. (Defoe, p. 147)

Robinson Crusoe, the novel, combines Providence, Reason, and Individual Will to depict the nature of man.

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