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Robinson Crusoe: Defoe's Spiritual Crusade through the Empire

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Much has been written and published about Robinson Crusoe as the pioneer novel—the energizing literary myth—that helped to inspire British imperialism. Martin Green, in his book Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire, emphasizes the relationship between Defoe’s novel and the British Empire by calling Defoe’s work “the prototype of literary imperialism” (5). While many critics have identified the colonial elements of Robinson Crusoe and commented on the novel’s influence on British expansion, little has been said about the complexity and importance of the religious elements in Robinson Crusoe as it pertains to empire. A comprehensive examination of Crusoe’s spiritual experience on the deserted island is necessary in order to fully distinguish the place Robinson Crusoe holds in colonial literature, as well as the novel’s effect on British expansionism.

It is important to first consider the nature of Crusoe’s religious conversion. Before arriving on the island, Robinson Crusoe is described as a curious but naïve youth. Crusoe appreciates his “duty to God and [his] father” but still harbors the irresistible desire to leave his home in England and go to sea (28–31). To prevent this, his father’s “prophetick” counsel is to stay at home and avoid the reckless example of Crusoe’s older brother (29). Years after Crusoe leaves England—after disaster strikes and he finds himself alone on the island—Crusoe sees the comfort that his life once held at home with his parents. He knows he has made a mistake in “abandoning [his] duty” and “all the good counsel of [his] parents” (31). Only after reaching this lowest point—feeling cut off from God and man—can Crusoe bring himself to call on God: “This was the first time […] in the true sense of the words, that I prayed in all my life” (111). Crusoe is the sole survivor from his ship, a lone man in a dark and dreary world. Clearly, such a spiritual conversion is more
complex than the simple tale of the prodigal son; Crusoe is depicted by Defoe as the mythical Adam persona. Just like Adam, Crusoe begins in a place without miseries and hardships. He is disobedient to his father, even after explicit instruction; then, he is cast out. Crusoe is no longer in Eden.

After Crusoe arrives on the deserted island, Defoe’s description of Crusoe continues to parallel the biblical account of Adam. Crusoe must struggle in order to live, just as Adam struggled after his expulsion from Eden. The biblical allusions between Adam and Crusoe are unmistakable and numerous—far too frequent to be merely coincidental. Left in exile and completely alone, Crusoe has “not clothes to cover [himself]” nor “hope of recovery” (83). He must “make coats of skins” (Gen. 4:21) for clothing on the island. He is “singled out and separated” (83–84) with a newfound knowledge of “good and evil” (Gen. 3:5), just as Adam, who partook of the fruit of the tree. Now Crusoe’s only means of survival is to “apply [him]self to accommodate [his] way of living” (84), as Adam lived by “the sweat of [his] face” (Gen. 3:19) in order to eat. The burdens of self-sufficiency and spiritual awareness are now thrust upon Crusoe. He is awakened to a new physical and spiritual state.

Ironically, Defoe presents a drastic dichotomy when describing Crusoe’s island. The island is described as a place of “deliverance” when Crusoe first escapes the storm (66). But, later, after discovering his own solitary “banish[ment] from humane society” and God, Crusoe calls the island “horrible” and “desolate” (83). These words used to describe Crusoe’s punishment are reminiscent of the first lines of John Milton’s poem *Paradise Lost*:

> Of Man’s first disobedience, and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
> With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
> Restore us, and regain the blissful seat.

Crusoe’s own disobedience has caused his banishment. The fruit from the “forbidden tree”—the lure of adventure at sea—was too tempting, too desirable for Crusoe. He has been saved from utter destruction, only to be exiled. Paradoxically, he has found both heaven and hell contained in the island that he must call home for what seems to him eternity. Both extremes are married to form a whole. The only person that can free Crusoe from this lonely world is the “one greater Man,” God himself. Crusoe, after acknowledging that God has placed him on the island, also recognizes that God has given him responsibility.

After Crusoe proves competent in providing for his own needs on the island, God gives him an even greater responsibility—the stewardship of a companion, Friday. Friday becomes Crusoe’s “helpmeet” on the island (Gen. 2:18). In the biblical story of the creation, it is Eve who is taken from Adam’s rib, acting, in a sense, as progeny to her companion. Similarly, in *Robinson Crusoe*, Friday becomes a product of Crusoe. In his article “Friday’s Religion,” Timothy Blackburn identifies
the patriarchal relationship between Crusoe and Friday. Friday is “tall and well
shaped, and as I reckon, about twenty-six years of age” when he arrives on the island
(208). Twenty-six is the exact age of Crusoe when he begins his life on the deserted
isle. What is more, Crusoe has already been on the island for a total of twenty-six
years, or, as he says before describing Friday, that his words “were pleasant to hear,
for they were the first sound of a man’s voice that I had heard, my own excepted, for
above twenty-five years” (207). Therefore, Blackburn declares, “Defoe has Friday
being born just at the arrival of Crusoe on the island; in the providential world
represented in the book, this can mean Friday is born because of Crusoe, at the
point when God has first punished Crusoe, in order to be the later, final test of
Crusoe’s repentance and faith” (367). By Crusoe’s receiving this additional steward­
ship over another human being, Defoe essentially presents Crusoe as receiving from
God the power to be Godlike himself. Crusoe makes the transition from one who is
saved to one having the power to save others. Such power to save would also vali­
date British expansionism in the eighteenth-century empire.

Furthermore, Crusoe is given certain privileges as the first man on the island.
In Genesis 2:19 it reads that the “Lord God formed every beast of the field, and
every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to see what he would call
them; and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name
thereof.” Similarly, since Crusoe is the first man to inhabit the island, it is his right
to name the island and those things that are part of it. Where the Spanish cast­
aways adopted the native tongue when occupying the land of Friday’s people,
Friday is expected to adopt the tongue of Crusoe when he comes to Crusoe’s
island. Crusoe has the right to name “every beast of the field” and “every fowl of
the air” and uses his native tongue, English, as the naming tool. The right to name
is Crusoe’s religious right, given by God, just as it was Adam’s right. His is also the
right to name the new inhabitant, Friday. Conversely, it is Friday’s obligation to
adopt this new name and language. Crusoe’s spiritual crusade for religion and
empire is not just to save, but also to name.

In describing the naming of Friday, Defoe makes no mention of any deliberation
between Crusoe and Friday as to Friday’s real name before coming to the island.
Crusoe knows his God-given role as “Master” of the island, and, for this reason,
tells the native that “his name should be Friday” (209). In much the same way, it
is Adam’s responsibility to name his wife, Eve, in the Genesis account (Gen. 3:20).
Supposedly, the reason for Friday’s name is that this was the day on which the
native’s life was saved. Ironically, Crusoe remembers the exact day of the event,
when, at other times, he loses track of time entirely.

There exists another possibility for the name “Friday”—a reason which seems
much more probable, especially with regard to the parallel story of the Creation.
Man was created by God on the sixth day. Blackburn openly states that “Defoe
chose the name Friday to point to how exactly representative of human nature
Friday was to be: Man was created on the sixth day, that is, a Friday” (366).
Such a line of reasoning—that Friday's character represents human nature—clearly lends itself as a more persuasive argument. The argument is especially compelling when compared with the unsophisticated explanation that Friday's name choice was based on the random time when he was found—a coincidence anchored to a crude calendar kept from etchings that were made on a tree by a man who had not had contact with civilization for twenty-five years. Hence, if Defoe so expressly intended Friday's character to represent human nature, the following questions emerge: What did Defoe intend for the reader to learn about human nature from the text? And more importantly, how does Friday's own religious conversion relate to the empire?

Both answers to these two questions lie in Jean Jacques Rousseau's interpretation of Defoe. In Rousseau's book entitled *Emile*, the eighteenth-century philosopher outlines the ideal education for a young boy from birth to adulthood. A contemporary of Daniel Defoe, Rousseau discusses the book that will “provide the most felicitous treatise on natural education [. . .]. [This book] will be the text for which all our discussions on the natural sciences will serve only as a commentary. It will serve as a test of the condition of our judgment during our progress” (184). The book Rousseau describes is none other than *Robinson Crusoe*. He continues: “The surest means of raising oneself above prejudices and ordering one's judgments about the true relations of things is to put oneself in the place of an isolated man and to judge everything as this man himself ought to judge of it with respect to his own utility” (184–85). It is clear from Rousseau's further comments that education is not the imparting of knowledge, but the “drawing out” of what is already in human nature (185). Thus, argues Rousseau, Defoe's description of the isolated man is an ideal representation of human nature as it applies to society and self.

In understanding the relationship between the spiritual crusade and the empire, it is critical to recognize that religion and national identity are inherently interconnected at this time in history. As England is considered by many to be the birthplace of Protestantism with the formation of the Anglican Church, it is only natural that the momentum associated with the British Empire be linked with the growth of Protestantism. Indeed, Christianity as a religion and England as an empire are clearly presented as being inseparably linked, and Crusoe's island colony is informed by his Protestant faith.

Having determined the invisible connection between religion and empire, it is also critical to note Defoe's representation of Crusoe's religious conversion in the heart of a foreign empire. To begin, Crusoe's island is nowhere near English territory. The island is completely surrounded by ocean and terra firma that are part of the Spanish Empire. In the novel, the Spanish Empire comes to represent the domineering ecclesiastical authority of the Catholic Church surrounding the newly born Protestant movement. Crusoe's conversion to Protestantism is therefore a symbol of enlightenment that spans more than just political boundaries. Crusoe is “drawing out” light and knowledge (in the language of Rousseau) that already
exists within himself. Crusoe’s conversion is representative of ultimate enlightenment, bestowed on the most undefiled human intelligence—the intelligence of the solitary man. Defoe not only rejects the Spanish political empire, but he also rejects the religion that goes along with the empire, which is clearly evident in the many references to the brutality of the Spaniards in the Americas and several anti-Catholic allusions throughout the novel. As Rousseau’s theory implies, such conversion is the ideal representation of human nature.

In order to further emphasize his point, Defoe describes the conversion of the native Friday. The truth and enlightenment that Crusoe receives in spiritual self-conversion is mirrored by Friday’s conversion. Like his master, Friday comes to recognize his relationship to God and makes Bible study and application a part of his daily routine. Defoe thus establishes that not only is religious illumination possible by an Englishman on foreign soil, but that divine truth is also possible for a native, regardless of location. Ultimate truth has no boundaries and no limitations, especially when it concerns truth’s influence on human nature.

In conclusion, Defoe’s representation of religion on the island plays a unique and critical role in the novel Robinson Crusoe, as well as in the colonial context for which it was written. Throughout the novel, Defoe depicts a spiritual crusade—a spiritual crusade represented through Crusoe himself as the mythic Adam persona and a spiritual crusade that Crusoe must make as a recipient of divine truth. Crusoe’s divine appointment functions for the purpose of saving, of naming, and of spiritually converting others—all validated in the name of God and the empire. Also, Crusoe’s self-conversion as well as the conversion of the native Friday underscores the power of Protestantism in a new and changing colonial world. In the end, it is clear that Defoe is painting a picture for religion that is comparable to that of a journey—a journey not only in the name of God, but also in the name of the empire on which God has imparted such grand blessings.

Works Cited