

## Lecture 4: Early Novels and Novelists – Robinson Crusoe 1

### Daniel Defoe

Born in 1660 in London ❖

His mother and father, James and Mary Foe, were Presbyterian dissenters. James ❖  
Foe was a middle-class wax and candle merchant.

He witnessed two of the greatest disasters of the seventeenth century: a recurrence ❖  
of the plague and the Great Fire of London in 1666.

He was an excellent student, but as a Presbyterian, he was forbidden to attend ❖  
Oxford or Cambridge. He entered a dissenting institution called Morton's Academy

Defoe developed a taste for travel that lasted throughout his life ❖

His fiction reflects this interest; his characters Moll Flanders and  
Robinson Crusoe both change their lives by voyaging far from their  
native England.

He became a successful merchant and married into a rich family, ❖  
but his business failed later on and he had money troubles for the  
rest of his life.

He worked as a merchant, a poet, a journalist, a politician and even as a spy, and ❖  
wrote around 500 books and pamphlets.

### Defoe's Writing

Defoe published his first novel, *Robinson Crusoe*, in 1719, when he was around 60 ❖  
years old.

The novel attracted a large middle-class readership. He followed in 1722 with *Moll* ❖  
*Flanders*, the story of a tough, streetwise heroine whose fortunes rise and fall  
dramatically.

Both works straddle the border between journalism and fiction. ❖

### *Robinson Crusoe*

*Robinson Crusoe* was based on the true story of a shipwrecked seaman named ❖  
Alexander Selkirk and was passed off as history

Focus on the actual conditions of everyday life and avoidance of the courtly and the heroic made Defoe a revolutionary in English literature and helped define the new genre of the novel. ❖

Stylistically, Defoe was a great innovator. Dispensing with the ornate style associated with the upper classes, Defoe used the simple, direct, fact-based style of the middle classes, which became the new standard for the English novel. ❖

With Robinson Crusoe's theme of solitary human existence, Defoe paved the way for the central modern theme of alienation and isolation. ❖

Defoe died in London on April 24, 1731, of a fatal "lethargy"—an unclear diagnosis that may refer to a stroke. ❖

### **Plot Summary**

Crusoe sets on a sea voyage in August 1651, against the wishes of his parents, who want him to stay at home and pursue a career, possibly in law. ❖

After a tumultuous journey that sees his ship wrecked in a storm, his lust for the sea remains so strong that he sets out to sea again. This journey too ends in disaster and Crusoe becomes the slave of a Moor (Muslims in Northwest Africa) ❖

After two years of slavery, he manages to escape and is rescued and befriended by the Captain of a Portuguese ship off the west coast of Africa. The ship is en route to Brazil. There, with the help of the captain, Crusoe becomes owner of a plantation. ❖

Years later, he joins an expedition to bring slaves from Africa, but he is shipwrecked in a storm about forty miles out to sea on an island (which he calls the Island of Despair) on September 30, 1659. ❖

His companions all die, save himself, and three animals who survived the shipwreck, the captain's dog and two cats. Having overcome his despair, he fetches arms, tools and other supplies from the ship before it breaks apart and sinks. He proceeds to build a fenced-in habitation near a cave which he excavates himself. ❖

He keeps a calendar by making marks in a wooden cross which he has built. He hunts, grows corn and rice, dries grapes to make raisins for the winter months, learns to make pottery and raises goats, all using tools created from stone and wood which he harvests on the island. He also adopts a small parrot. He reads the Bible and becomes religious, thanking God for his fate in which nothing is missing but human society. ❖

Years later, he discovers native cannibals who occasionally visit the island to kill and eat prisoners. At first he plans to kill them but later realizes that he has no right to do so as the cannibals do not knowingly commit a crime. He dreams of obtaining one or two servants by freeing some prisoners; when a prisoner manages to escape, ❖

Crusoe helps him, naming his new companion “Friday” after the day of the week he appeared. Crusoe then teaches him English and converts him to Christianity.

After another party of natives arrives to partake in a cannibal feast, Crusoe and Friday manage to kill most of the natives and save two of the prisoners. One is Friday's father and the other is a Spaniard, who informs Crusoe that there are other Spaniards shipwrecked on the mainland. A plan is devised wherein the Spaniard would return with Friday's father to the mainland and bring back the others, build a ship and sail to a Spanish port.

Before the Spaniards return, an English ship appears; mutineers have taken control of the ship and intend to maroon their former captain on the island. Crusoe and the ship's captain strike a deal in which he helps the captain and the loyal sailors retake the ship from the mutineers, whereupon they intend to leave the worst of the mutineers on the island. Before they leave for England, Crusoe shows the former mutineers how he lived on the island and states that there will be more men coming.

Crusoe leaves the island December 19, 1686 and arrives in England on June 11, 1687. He learns that his family believed him dead and there was nothing in his father's will for him.

Crusoe departs for Lisbon to reclaim the profits of his estate in Brazil, which has granted him a large amount of wealth. In conclusion, he takes his wealth overland to England to avoid traveling at sea. Friday comes with him and along the way they endure one last adventure together as they fight off hundreds of famished wolves while crossing the Pyrenees.