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[**Realism in “Robinson Crusoe”**](http://site.iugaza.edu.ps/rareer/mycourse1631/realism-in-robinson-crusoe)

**Realism in the novel Robinson Crusoe.** Defoe in his preface to the novel Robinson Crusoe described the book as **“a just history of fact”,** . However, one thing can’t be denied: Robinson Crusoe was based upon the actual experiences of a real man called **Alexander Selkirk** who had spent four years alone, on the uninhabited island of Juan Fernandez. But, we shall keep in mind that Defoe’s story of Crusoe’s experiences and doings is largely factious and fantastic; yet, **while we are going through it we never pause to question the narrator’s credentials.** Defoe’s technique of telling the story is such that we fall completely under its spell and go on reading it eagerly, and even breathlessly**, without doubting its veracity.** In short, Defoe **is a realistic novelist**. In Robison Crusoe, he gave his readers all kinds of minute details. Such details to be seen in Crusoe’s digging the cave, building the fence, collecting his crops of barely and wheat, hunting the animals , fighting the cannibals and the like. Defoe, on the other hand, has used different techniques to bring realism into the novel. In the first place, he has used the **circumstantial method**: One of Crusoe’s most successful projects is the raising of the crops of barely and rice on the island. Another circumstantial method is that **the presence of the wrecked ship** near the sea shore which enabled Crusoe to bring the equipment and the material he needed to survive.

*On the other hand , there is realism in character –portrayal*. **Friday’s gratitude to Crusoe is perfectly natural.** Friday becomes a devoted servant of Crusoe who has saved his life from the clutches of cannibals and many other characters in the novel seem to be real such as the English captain , the Portuguese Captain and the black boy Xury who has helped Crusoe to escape from the Turkish pirates.

**Yet, another device which adds to the realistic effect of the novel is a liberal of dates and geographical place- names.** Crusoe was born in the year 1632, in the city of York. He got stranded on the desolate island on the 30th September 1659. He left the island on the 19th December 1686, after a stay of 28 years, two months, and nineteen days and the like.

Finally, the psychological truth of the story helps in bringing realism into the novel. Crusoe’s feelings after he has been swept ashore on an uninhabited island have been described so minutely and convincingly that we get the feeling of it. During his illness he draws comfort from prayer. However, Defoe claimed the novel was historical in a deeper sense than was generally understood by the term “historical”, and said that the book was an allegory of his own life.
**Robison Crusoe has been regarded as a parable of the economic man.** Robinson Crusoe has been described by Karl Marx **as a potential capitalist**. But it is the critic Ian Watt who offers a most stimulating and illuminating interpretation of the novel from the economic point of view. This critic relates Crusoe’s predicament on the *desolate island to the rise of bourgeois individualism.* According to this critic **all the characters of Defoe pursue money, according to the profit and loss and it runs in their blood**. *Crusoe in the novel does have his parents with whom he lives; he leaves them for an economic motive, showing himself to be the economics, wanting to improve his economics condition.* Something in his nature calls him to the sea and to adventure; and in any case he is not content with the middle station of life in which God and nature have placed him. Late, Crusoe regards his dissatisfaction with the middle station as his “original sin “. At the same time the argument between his parents and himself at the beginning is a debate not about religion or about filial duty, but about his economic circumstances. Hr regarded the economic argument as the most important.

And, of course, Crusoe actually gains by his original sin, and becomes richer than his father was. Crusoe’s original sin is really the dynamic tendency of capitalism itself. It is the fundamental tendency of economic individualism that prevents Crusoe from paying much heed to the ties of family, nor does Crusoe at any time show any particular attachment as a sentimental kind to his country. Of all the sea voyages he has made, we can see Crusoe as a commercial traveler with profit as his motive/. However, there are other important things in the novel which present Crusoe as an economic man. It seems that the dominance of economic individualism has not only diminished the importance of personal and group relationships but also undermined the sex- relationship. **Romantic love is , for instance, almost absent from the novels of Defoe. Crusoe hardly never mentions , or thinks of women or sex desire**. Only when his financial position has become fully secure, does he get married; **In fact , Crusoe treats all relationships in terms of their commodity value. The clearest case is that of Xury , the Moorish boy**, who helped him to escape from slavery band who had even offered to sacrifice his life for Crusoe’s sake. He resolves to love Xury always and to make a great man of him . But eventually he sells the boy to the Portuguese sea- caption for a small amount of money.

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# The Role of Realism and Spirituality in Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders

The Role of Realism and Spirituality as Main Features in Daniel Defoe’s  Robinson Crusoe  and  Moll Flanders

 By Julian Hatzig

**I. Introduction**

Daniel Defoe is without a doubt one of the most famous representatives of 18th  century British literature. Today, his works are still the basis for discussions, criticisms and interpretations in various kinds of disciplines, just as they were 200 years ago. Of course, that is not only the case for his publications as an author of novels, but also for his works as a political journalist, satirist and non-fiction writer. This paper, however, will deal with Daniel Defoe the novelist, who is responsible for very popular writings such as Captain Singleton, Colonel Jack , Roxana, The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, and of course not forgetting the world famous story of The Life and Adventures of  Robinson Crusoe (RC VIII)

 During the course of this paper the latter two will be discussed and analysed in a manner which shall now be explained further. The novel Robinson Crusoe is not only Defoe’s first, but also his most famous one.  In addition to that Robinson Crusoe is probably the novel which has been discussed in the most diverse ways and with various different approaches. One of those would be an economic interpretation linking the content of the book to Defoe’s views on economy and to contemporary economic theories. Another way to deal with the material would be to see Defoe as a pioneer of modern fiction due to his almost revolutionary usage of realism. This approach was for example taken by Ian Watt in his book The Rise of the Novel (1957) about Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding, who, according to Watt, can be seen as the inventors of the novel as a genre of fiction-writing. In the initial chapter of the book he claims that “Defoe’s novels are landmarks in the history of fiction largely because they are the first considerable narratives which embody all the elements of formal realism (Watt 104).” Watt’s definition of formal realism will be discussed later on. The first two approaches that have been presented may be quite different, yet they do not necessarily contradict each other, as it is indeed possible to include economic elements in a novel in a realistic manner, which certainly is the case in Robinson Crusoe and other novels by Daniel Defoe. A third major way to read the book is one that has at least been popular since the publication of G.A. Starr’s Defoe & Spiritual Autobiography in 1965. The approach to see the novel as a work that mainly reflects Defoe’s religious beliefs was not new in 1965, but to treat it as a spiritual autobiography did support this view significantly (Spielman76). This approach in contrast to the other two, however, raises the question whether Defoe is more concerned with realism, respectively economic realism, or spirituality and religion. The fact that world-famous authoress Virginia Woolf addresses that issue in an essay about Robinson Crusoe indicates that this is indeed a relevant question for literary critics. In her essay it becomes quite clear that Woolf considers the novel to be a work of realism, where spirituality and religion are only of minor importance: “Reality, fact, substance is going to dominate all that follows. (…) God does not exist.”(Woolf, Second Series 55). By taking this into consideration, the purpose of this paper will be to look for evidence of spirituality and religion and forms of realism and thus to examine whether Daniel Defoe’s heart lies with religion, realism of the ordinary and economic realism or potentially both in even proportion. To be able to answer this question as accurately as possible I will not only have a closer look at Robinson Crusoe, but also at Moll Flanders. First I will give a short summary of Starr’s main statements about the genre of spiritual autobiography and then try to find examples of these in the novels. In addition to that I will look for some traces of Defoe’s religious views. After that I will give examples of economic realism and realism of the ordinary in Robinson Crusoe and afterwards deal with the value of money in connection with economic realism Moll Flanders. Conclusively, all findings will be summed up and evaluated in a conclusion. Considering the scope of this paper it will be important to concentrate only on the most convincing examples from the texts.

**II. Religion and Spirituality**

**II. 1 The Genre of Spiritual Autobiography**

The core elements of spiritual autobiographies as a genre of literature are relatively clear. According to Starr a spiritual autobiography starts with a misdemeanor (bad action) of the respective protagonist, which could also be referred to as “original sin” 4 (Starr 53). The second step in the development of the autobiography is an event within the story, which can be interpreted from as a message God or some sort of providence. Such an event may function to get the protagonist to think about his actions, to be grateful towards God or simply to “warn or encourage” him (Starr 54). Subsequently, this message is followed by a “climax of physical or mental agony and an overpowering sense of helplessness or abandonment immediately before conversion” (Starr 44). In other words, by getting through some sort of serious crisis a sinner becomes repentant and is eventually converted into a settled member of a Christian denomination. In the following chapter I will try to apply the above mentioned features of the genre of spiritual autobiography at the two discussed novels.

**II. 2 Religion & Spirituality in Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders**

Due to Daniel Defoe’s biography his novels are very often referred to as works with religious connotation. He was brought up as a dissenting Presbyterian and received his education at Charles Morton’s Dissenting Academy in Newington Green (Backscheider 13). In addition to that he is also known for his pamphlet The shortest Way with the Dissenters  (1702), a drastically written satire which, eventually, earned Defoe three days in the pillory (public criticism) and six months at Newgate Prison after his authorship was discovered just a few days after the pamphlet’s  publication (Backscheider 117f.). It is therefore not at all surprising that his novels indeed feature signs of Defoe’s dissenting, respectively Presbyterian or Protestant attitude. Examples of that claim will be presented later on in this chapter. First, I will try to apply the above mentioned elements of spiritual autobiographies at Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders. One certainly does not have to look very long for a misdemeanour by Robinson Crusoe. Just a few pages into the novel we learn that Robinson’s father, who is described as retired tradesman who made a good fortune during his business career, wants his son to follow his steps and become a lawyer himself (RC 5). Robinson Crusoe, however, ignores his father’s advice, as he is obsessed with the thought of “seeing the world” (RC 7). His ignorance towards his own father and the fact that he eventually runs away from home is what he later referrers to as his original sin: “(…) the excellent advice of my father, the opposition to which, was, as I may call it, my ORIGINAL SIN; (…) (RC 154).”

The fact that this wrongdoing of young Robinson Crusoe can be seen as a starting point of his spiritual autobiography is supported by several successive events in the novel that can be interpreted as messages from God or providences, which would qualify them to be the second step of development of spiritual autobiographies. Before the shipwreck, which leads to his stranding at the deserted island, Crusoe has to overcome not only another shipwreck during his very first time at sea (RC 11ff.), but also a capture and enslavement by North-African pirates, an episode during which he remembers his father’s warning words (RC 16ff.). If these two adventures Crusoe survives only by a narrow margin are not drastically enough to be taken to account as a warning from God, his fateful shipwreck during his journey from Brazil to West-Africa most certainly is. During his stay on the island Robinson Crusoe has to overcome numerous challenging and in some cases dangerous situations, but there is one particular episode in the novel that really meets the criteria for counting as a mental as well as a physical crisis, which seems to be the turning point in Robinson’s spiritual autobiography. What is meant here is the serious illness that befalls the protagonist a rather short time after he stranded on the island. How important that incident is for the interpretation of the story as a spiritual autobiography is shown in the following quotation:

*“But now when I began to be sick, and a leisurely view of the miseries of death came to place itself before me; when my spirits began to sink under the burden of a strong distemper, and Nature was exhausted with the violence of the fever; conscience that had slept so long, began to awake, and I began to reproach myself with my past life, in which I had so evidently, by uncommon wickedness, provok’d the justice of God to lay me under uncommon strokes, and to deal with me in so vindictive a manner. (…) Then the tears burst out of my eyes, and I could say no more for a good while. (…) I cry’d out, Lord be my help, for I am in great distress. This was the first prayer, if I may call it so, that I had made for many years (RC 72f.)”*

This passage undoubtedly indicates that the illness gets Crusoe into a desperate mood which leads to his reflections on his past deeds and how those may have incur God’s wrath on him. The act of the prayer at the end of the quotation then points to a conversion into a more serious Christian. This conversion is reflected in numerous passages after Crusoe’s illness, two of which will be joined together in the following quotation:

*“(…) and this was the first bit of meat I had ever ask’d God’s blessing to, even as  I cou’d remember, in my whole life. (…) In the morning I took the Bible, and beginning at the New Testament, I began seriously to read it, and impos’d upon myself to read awhile every morning and every night, (…). It was not lon g after I  set seriously to this work, but I found my heart more deeply and sincerely affected with the wickedness of my past life (RC 74, 77)*

Robinson’s saying of benediction (Christian prayer for blessing) before his meal after his survival of the illness and the beginning of his regular Bible reading are clearly signs of a conversion, if one wants to interpret Robinson Crusoe as a spiritual autobiography, which would therefore be completed. Furthermore it could be argued that Daniel Defoe wrote the novel for his conscience’s sake, especially since there are more passages to be found which may not fit into the general definition of a spiritual autobiography, but Defoe’s dissenting attitude. The first out of two examples would be Robinson’s saying of benediction before his meal after his survival of the illness and the beginning of his regular Bible reading are clearly signs of a conversion, if one wants to interpret Robinson Crusoe as a spiritual autobiography, which would therefore be completed. Furthermore it could be argued that Daniel Defoe wrote the novel for his conscience’s sake, especially since there are more passages to be found which may not fit into the general definition of a spiritual autobiography, but Defoe’s dissenting attitude. The first out of two examples would be Robinson’s critical look on the pagan “priestcraft” and the priests’ “policy of making a secret religion, in order to preserve the veneration of the people to the clergy” (RC 171). The second example is the protagonist’s feeling of becoming a better Christian by “the bare reading of the Scripture” (RC 174).

 However, it is also noticeable that Crusoe has his most emotional religious experiences in times of present or possible danger and distress. That is for example during the earthquake (RC 65), his abovementioned illness or before his fight against the Spanish sailors (RC 202). In addition to that he very often returns to his usual business right after his religious “outbursts”, which weakens the effect of those to a great extent. It may be normal for people to turn to God during this kind of situations, but that does not make the novel a piece of religious writing. That impression is strengthened by the fact that Robinson is actually in a state of intoxication during his first major spiritual experience caused by the bible.

**III. Realism and Economy**

Before I begin discussing the role of realism in Robinson Crusoe it needs to be said, that the dealing with economics in this paper is restricted to its connection to realism in Defoe’s novels. Economic theories which have commonly been applied to his works will not be taken into consideration. It is important however to point out that Defoe had already been involved in business world before he started his career as a novelist. He worked as a tradesman and manufacturer and experienced the advantages as well as the disadvantages of living the life of a businessman, which is why it is not surprising that his novels focus on middle-class rather than higher-class characters (Novak, Economics 3). All these are reasons why it is valid to have a closer look on realism as a main motivation for Defoe’s works.

That is because the abovementioned facts, according to Novak, are characteristic of a realistic writer: “(…) Defoe fulfils almost all proclaimed ends of the realist movement. (…)  Economic realities are never far away from his fictions. He preferred to treat characters among the middle and lower ranks of society. His descriptions were minute. He depicted common events such as picnics or outings (Novak, Realism 8).”

 What we have here is a quotation which not only connects economics to the term of realism, but also hints towards Defoe’s interest in common things. That would also match the definition of formal realism of Ian Watt, who calls a realistic novel a full and authentic report of human experience” (Watt 32). In this chapter I will therefore have a look on the description of economic realism and ordinary things in Robinson Crusoe. I will then evaluate my findings in comparison to the results of the previous chapter on religion and spirituality.

**III. Realism of Economics and the Ordinary in Robinson Crusoe**

For obvious reasons those parts of Robinson Crusoe that are concerned with economics are at the beginning and the end of the novel. On the first pages we already learn that the protagonist seems to be quite a clever businessman, since he does not invest all of his 300£ 7 he earned during his first adventure, but lodges 200£ with a friend’s widow, which one may call good risk management (RC 16). The greatest display of economic realism, however, is to be found towards the end of the novel when Crusoe is informed very accurately about the profit he has made during his stay on the island:

“First, there was the account current of the produce of my farm, (…) the balance appear’d to be 1174 Moidores in my favour. Secondly, there was the account of four years more while they kept the effects in their hands, (…) the value of the plantation increasing, amounted to 38892 Cruisadoes, which made 3241 Moidores (RC 223) .”

It takes Defoe several pages to give detailed descriptions of Crusoe’s financial gain, while the emotional aspect of his long awaited return to the civilized world is almost completely neglected. The emphasis clearly lies on an accurate and realistic portrayal of economic and financial facets. Even during Crusoe’s stay on the island it becomes clear how important money is for him, which can be seen at the end of the following quotation:

“O drug! said I aloud, what art thou good for? Thou art not worth to me, no not the taking off of the ground (…). However, upon second thoughts, I took it away (…) (RC 47).”

 After an emotional outburst caused by the sight of the money Crusoe still takes it with him, ignoring the fact that it is of no use for him. He does the same thing later in the novel (RC 153) and eventually takes all the money he found in shipwrecks with him when he finally leaves the island 28 years after his arrival (RC 218). Yet, the examples of realism of the ordinary are far more numerous than those of Crusoe’s dealing with money.  Right after his fateful shipwreck the reader gets the idea that Defoe is more into describing ordinary things in a realistic manner than elaborating on the nature or the landscape of the tropical island. That becomes clear when Crusoe spots his fellow sailor’s clothes at shore: “I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them, except three of their hats, one cap and two shoes that were not fellows” (RC 39).

Subsequently, Defoe’s fascination with ordinary events and facts is predominating when it comes to the description of Crusoe’s life on the island. One example would be the protagonist’s

habit of making lists and keeping everything he does in a journal. The latter starts relatively soon after his shipwreck and documents Crusoe’s daily activities in a short, but precise way (RC 57ff.). It is important to point out that most of the journal entries are concerned with every-day life, as can be seen in the following quotation:

 “Nov. 2. I set up all my chests and boards, and pieces of timber which made my rafts, and with them form’d a fence round me (…). Nov. 3. I went out with my gun, and kill’d two fowls like ducks, which were very good food. In the afternoon went to work to make me a table  (RC 58).”

This quotation also gives a first hint towards Defoe’s interest in producing and building things, which will be discussed further down. In addition to the journal, which may not be a list in the traditional sense, there are three more examples of lists in the novel that emphasise Defoe’s intention to be realistic in most cases. First there is the one that represents Crusoe’s rather rational weighing up of good and evil regarding his desperate situation on the deserted island (RC 54), secondly the very accurate description of the weather and the seasons on the island (RC 85) and thirdly his completely emotionless recital of the killed cannibals, whilst taking into account how and by whom they were killed (RC 186). The last argument for the omnipresence of realism in Robinson Crusoe shall now be the abovementioned emphasis on the creation of ordinary things such as bread or a clay pot. These two passages will be representative of numerous other examples of this kind of realism. The making of the bread is described in great detail, since it seems to be important for Defoe to point out how much work it is to finish just one loaf of bread: “ (…) I believe few people have thought much upon, the strange multitude of little things necessary in the providing, producing, curing, dressing, making and  finishing this one article of bread (RC 94).”

On the following pages Defoe goes on particularising the difficult process from the planted seeds to the actual baking of bread (RC 98). The manufacturing of vessels and pots is described on these pages as well (RC 95ff.). Defoe uses almost three pages to report on Crusoe’s attempts to make himself some containers without having the proper tools to do so, which is why Defoe even includes the protagonist’s studying of the fire to find out how to burn the pots in the appropriate manner without the aid of an oven (RC 96). Defoe’s elaborations on this kind of episode as well as the accurate treatment of economic elements are obvious examples for the great significance realism has in his novel.

**IV. Conclusion and Final Statements**

To sum it all up it can be said that Virginia Woolf’s assertion that reality and fact are dominating Defoe’s  Robinson Crusoe , while God does not exist is probably not only correct, but has to be widened to Moll Flanders . It would be incorrect to claim that there are no traces of religion in the discussed novels at all. It has been proven that both protagonists’ life’s share features of a spiritual autobiography. Furthermore, there are many passages in the novels where the protagonists show some sort of repentance and especially Crusoe gives the impression to live a rather Christian life on the island and some passages even have a Protestant connotation, which could be interpreted as Defoe’s willingness to share his religious beliefs. Yet, somehow the religious atmosphere seems to be inconsistent. The facts that Crusoe only talks to God during or before a great crisis and that he was intoxicated during his first serious religious experience make his conversion seem sanctimonious. The examples quoted above show Crusoe’s and Moll’s fondness of accurate calculating and/or detailed descriptions of transactions. Admittedly, it has to be said that, according to Spielman, the sums of money Crusoe and Moll gain throughout their lives are unlikely, but still, they are presented in a realistic and accurate manner. Moreover, Robinson Crusoe features numerous examples of realism of the ordinary, of which some of the most convincing one’s have been quoted above. All in all one has to come to the conclusion that Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders are contemporary examples for pioneering novels in the field of realistic fiction. Thus it is valid to say that realism is not only a main feature of the discussed novels, but of Defoe’s fiction in general.

**V. NOTES**

1 In the following referred to as Robinson Crusoe. The two lesser-known sequels The Farther  Adventures of Robinson Crusoe (1719) and Serious Reflections During the Life & Surprising  Adventures of Robinson Crusoe, With His Vision of the Angelic World (1720) will not to be discussed here.

2 It is interesting to bear in mind that Defoe was quite a rapid writer. He published all novels mentioned in this brief selection within only five years:  Robinson Crusoe in 1719, Captain Singleton in 1720, Colonel Jack   and Moll Flanders in 1722 and Roxana in 1724.

3 The essay is taken from Virginia Woolf’s essay collection The Common Reader –  Second Series  which was published in 1932 and contained several essays, which had already been published  before.

4 Since the term “original sin” is used by Defoe himself, it seems appropriate to use it in this context as well.

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