



ROBINSON CRUSOE

Daniel Defoe



GULLIVER'S TRAVELS

Jonathan Swift



**ELEGY WRITTEN IN
A COUNTRY CHURCHYARD**

Thomas Gray



THE WAY OF THE WORLD

William Congreve

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

The 18th Century is one of the most interesting periods in literary history—particularly in the case of British/ English literary history. Britain underwent various changes – socio- economically, politically, and existentially. These changes did not only influence life in Britain alone, but affected most of the literary world.

By the time we finish going through this course we will realise that we have looked at the development of:

- Prose fiction in the 18th Century as we study Daniel Defoe (1660-1731);
- Satire after reading about Swift (1667- 1745);
- Restoration Drama/ British Drama in the 18th Century as we study William Congreve (1670-1729); and
- Poetry after examining Thomas Gray (1716- 1771)

This course covers important writers such as Defoe, Congreve, Swift, and Gray, while Dryden, and Pope have been dealt with in the previous course BEGC 107: British Literature 17th & 18th centuries.

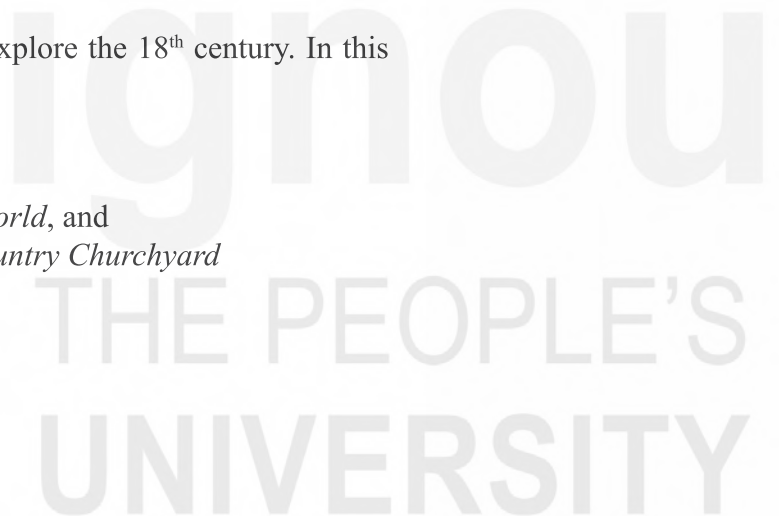
So without further ado let's jump right in and explore the 18th century. In this course therefore, we shall study 4 texts:

Block 1: **Daniel Defoe's** *Robinson Crusoe*

Block 2: **Jonathan Swift's** *Gulliver's Travels*

Block 3: **William Congreve's** *The Way of the World*, and

Block 4: **Thomas Gray's** *Elegy Written in A Country Churchyard*



Block

1

DANIEL DEFOE: *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Daniel Defoe has been celebrated as the father of the English novel and his most famous fictional narrative - *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) continues to be an integral component of the English literary repertoire as well as of western popular culture in general. In order to critically understand the significance of its popularity, we have to locate the novel concretely in its socio-historical and political context.

The four units of this Block obviously do not constitute an exhaustive representation of all the critical interpretations of *Robinson Crusoe*. But we have tried to incorporate discussions on the important aspects of the story so as to familiarise you with the author, the historical setting and the ideological politics of the novel. We have also included explanations of difficult words and concepts and complemented the analysis of the novel with relevant check your progress exercises so that you can simultaneously assess your understanding of the text.

The Units are as follows:

Unit 1: Daniel Defoe: Life and Works and *Robinson Crusoe*

Unit 2: *Robinson Crusoe*: An Analysis

Unit 3: *Robinson Crusoe*: Themes

Unit 4: *Robinson Crusoe*: Character Analysis



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UNIT 1 DANIEL DEFOE: LIFE, WORKS AND ROBINSON CRUSOE

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Biographical Details of Daniel Defoe
- 1.3 Politico-historical Circumstances of 17th and 18th century England
- 1.4 Daniel Defoe- Life, Works and the English Novel
- 1.5 Summary of Robinson Crusoe
 - 1.5.1 Summary of the Preface
 - 1.5.2 Summary of the Story
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 1.8 Glossary

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will familiarise you with Daniel Defoe, the man and the prolific writer who has been celebrated as the father of the English novel. It will also provide you with the political and historical milieu of 17th and 18th century England so that you can concretely locate Defoe in the annals of English literary history.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Situating Defoe in the political circumstances of his time will enable an informed understanding of the novel that apart from foregrounding some universal dilemmas of humankind, participates in some of the most intense political preoccupations in modern English history. Consequently, this novel is amenable to a multiplicity of readings and has been studied as an adventure story, a cautionary tale upholding Christian morality, a spiritual autobiography, a celebration of individualism, an imperial fable and so on and so forth. For a detailed understanding of the divergent possibilities embedded in the story, this unit will do a summarising of the novel so as to grasp the factors that shape the *bildungsroman* of the eponymous hero. Let us begin with the biographical details of Daniel Defoe.

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS OF DANIEL DEFOE

Daniel Defoe was born in London in 1660 to James Foe, a fairly prosperous tallow chandler and, had a very chequered life trajectory owing to his peculiar circumstances and vocational pursuits - trader, writer, pamphleteer and intelligence agent. Since his father was a Dissenter from the Church of England, his station in life forbade Defoe from attending the traditionally elite schools of his time such as Oxford and Cambridge; instead, he attended Charles Morton's dissenting academy, where he studied Science and Humanities, preparing to become a Presbyterian minister. However, very soon he gave up on the plan to join the Presbyterian ministry and entered the burgeoning world of the trade and, by 1683 he had managed to set himself up as a merchant. He improvised at manifold commercial schemes and dealt with a variety of commodities, but kept failing

miserably and incurred bankruptcy often. In the next section, we shall examine the political historical circumstances of the 17th and 18th Centuries in England.

1.3 POLITICO - HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES OF 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY ENGLAND

Apart from trying his luck in trade, Defoe also exhibited an active interest in the politically volatile circumstances of the 17th and 18th Century England and attained some notoriety as a polemical writer and also because of his status as a religious Dissenter. Defoe's year of birth coincided with Charles II's restoration to the throne where he served the mutually reinforcing roles of being both the king of England and the head of the newly reinstated Church of England, much to the chagrin of the Dissenters. Protestant Dissenters, including the likes of Defoe's Presbyterian family, were forced to inhabit the peripheries of the reinstated regime and were unable to exercise their say in matters of public offices and policies. King and Parliament, stakeholders in governance ceaselessly struggled with one another for political clout. One of the first political pamphlets by Defoe was released in 1683 and vociferously expressed his politico-religious affiliation. The death of Charles II and the accession of his brother, James, to the throne in 1685, exacerbated an already combustible political situation. James II was a Roman Catholic and an ally of England's political rival - France. He was seen by his adversaries as embodying a danger not only to the Church of England but also to civil liberties, especially in a country that had just emerged out of a civil war (1642-1651) that was fought to safeguard those very liberties. By the fag end of 1688, James II was displaced by his nephew and son-in-law, William of Orange, in a progression of episodes labelled as the 'Glorious Revolution.' Like many of his fellowmen, Defoe, a passionate supporter of William III, became his leading pamphleteer and eulogised this revolution as championing the cause of the Protestant people of England against persecution and discrimination of religious minorities (Bullard 85).

However, after William III died, Defoe went through a series of setbacks and found himself constantly persecuted for being a Dissenter. Dissenters including Defoe were generally "Whigs" and the political tide once again turned against them when the "Tories" became more powerful after William III died. As a combative response to an ever-increasing aggressive Toryism, Defoe wrote "The Shortest Way with Dissenters," where he lampooned High Anglican extremism that culminated in his prosecution and brief imprisonment. After his release from jail, he was stuck in a public pillory for three days. Defoe was employed by subsequent ministries as a propagandist and sometimes even as a spy. His social and financial circumstances also compelled him to swear loyalty to the Tory party when he served as Queen Anne's pamphleteer. However, he continued to struggle financially and died of a stroke while trying to escape from an indefatigable creditor in 1731 (Keymer xi - xiii). The next section will examine his life and works in some detail.

1.4 DANIEL DEFOE – LIFE, WORKS AND THE ENGLISH NOVEL

By 1719, when his magnum opus, *Robinson Crusoe*, appeared, Defoe had spent about two decades of his active life writing pamphlets, periodicals and political tracts. The fictional narratives that went on to immortalise his name in the English literary canon were published broadly between 1719-1724. A series

of fictional narratives followed soon after *Robinson Crusoe*, including its sequels - *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and *Serious Reflections During the Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, and other works like *Moll Flanders*, *Colonel Jack*, *Captain Singleton*, *Memoirs of a Cavalier*, *Journal of the Plague Year* and *Roxana*. These narratives consolidated his reputation as the progenitor of the English novel. In *The Rise of the Novel*, **Ian Watt** maps the development of a realist mode of writing in England as it happened during the 18th century in the fictional works of Daniel Defoe, **Samuel Richardson** and **Henry Fielding**.

The genre of the novel at around this time came to supplant the courtly form of romance, a narrative genre primarily obsessed with the ideals of chivalry. Romances were often written in an allegorical mode, dealt with idealised figures of knights and ladies and traced their fantastical expeditions in picturesque landscapes and were usually concerned with universal truths rather than the particularity of the experience. While courtly forms of literature necessitated a taste refined by education in classical learning and cultivated leisure, the novel came to be associated with the middle class and their aspirations and values that started assuming conspicuousness from the 18th century onwards. It is commonly accepted now that the development of the realist novel dovetailed with and latched onto the modern secular materialist understanding of "reality." Broadly, it can be said to be a form of fiction writing that renounced the magical and the outlandish and very self-consciously tried to attempt a faithful imitation of "social reality." The publication of *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 therefore, became an extremely crucial event in the English literary aesthetics. Certainly there have been prose narratives before Defoe appeared on the literary scene, but this narrative is one of those first few fictional accounts that constantly drew attention to the authenticity of an individual's experiences and its narrative style urges the readers to believe in the "realism" it foregrounds by highlighting minute details.

However, the problem with definitions of "realism" is that one often tends to link this term with literary writings that are expected to contain an exact equivalence to a pre-given socio-political reality. It is crucial to be cognisant of the fact that "realist" novels do not and cannot possibly reproduce reality as it is. They can never mirror reality with complete faithfulness simply because any piece of writing has to consciously choose certain themes, select and arrange its narrative material, figure out the point of view, narrative voices etc. It is therefore, a highly complex process involving the ideological politics of the writer and must not be simply reduced to being understood as imitating some kind of an ossified reality/life. You should check your progress so far next.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) What do you think were the most intense political preoccupations of 17th and 18th century England?

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- 2) How do you think the historical circumstances of England impacted Daniel Defoe's writings?

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- 3) Do you think Daniel Defoe had to constantly negotiate with his circumstances because he was a dissenter from the Church of England?

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- 4) Comment on the rise of the genre of the novel with respect to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*?

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1.5 SUMMARY OF *ROBINSON CRUSOE*

In this section we shall quickly summarise *Robinson Crusoe* for you so that you get an idea of what we will be talking about. But, please note, this summary is in no way a substitute for your reading of the novel.

1.5.1 Summary of the Preface

An unnamed editor tries to elucidate his rationale for making the readers privy to the narrative that they are about to read in the following pages. He does not give away the name or story of *Robinson Crusoe* in a detailed manner but chooses to designate the narrative as a “private man’s adventures in the world.” An onus is put on the apparent realism inherent in the pages when he calls it a “just history of fact.” Adopting a very humble stance, he argues that it is unassuming, sincere and didactic in its style and instructs one to acknowledge and pay due respect to “the wisdom of Providence.” Thus, the editor reiterates that he is doing a tremendous service to the world in publishing *Crusoe*’s tale and rendering it accessible to many.

1.5.2 Summary of the Story

An Englishman hailing from the town of York in the seventeenth century, *Robinson Crusoe*, records his own life story. He is the youngest of the three sons of a fairly well-to do merchant of German origin. Highlighting the significance of the respectable "middle-station," his father vehemently tries to argue and persuade him to study law and carve a financially and socially secure life for himself and not squander away the privileges he has inherited owing to his social position. Guilt-trapped into following the diktats of his father, *Crusoe* tries his best to fulfil his familial commitments and obligations. However, unable to suppress his longing for the open seas, he gives in to temptation and embarks on a ship bound for London on September 1, 1651 with one of his friends, much to the grief of his parents. His first sea journey is not exempt from hindrances and a violent storm drives him and his friend very near to death. *Crusoe* comes to see this storm as a divine warning that he should quit sea travel and his friend's father also dissuades him from sailing which again reminds him of his father's warnings. But *Crusoe* is not daunted by this and establishes himself as a successful merchant on a ship

leaving from London. He makes a fortune as a merchant and immediately plans another voyage after making a widow the custodian of his newly acquired wealth.

The second voyage turns out to be disastrous as his ship is besieged by the Moorish pirates and Crusoe is captured and made a slave in the North African town of Saltee. When out fishing, Crusoe and another slave boy, Xury, manage to free themselves from the clutches of their captors and sail away. A good natured Portuguese captain helps them out, takes them to Brazil and expresses a desire to buy Xury from Crusoe. After some moral dilemma, Crusoe agrees to sell him on the condition that the captain will set him free after ten years. The sojourn in Brazil proves to be financially successful for Crusoe as he sets himself up as a tobacco plantation owner.

Motivated by this success and the profit that he earns, Crusoe becomes restless and longs to procure black slaves and sails on a slave-gathering expedition to West Africa. However, things do not go as per plan and he ends up shipwrecked and miserable on the coast of Trinidad. Crusoe soon realises that he is the sole survivor of the shipwreck and after pondering over the warnings of his father and earnest pleas of his mother not to go sailing, Crusoe slowly but steadily comes to terms with his current situation. He undergoes an emotional turmoil and after experiencing intense grief and despair, reaches a state of reconciliation and acceptance. Soon this acceptance transforms into gratitude to God for having saved his life and he becomes determined to start his life afresh and he actively seeks food and shelter to survive and sustain himself on the island. He exhibits a lot of resourcefulness and makes twelve trips to the wreck's remains to secure guns, food and other items that can prove useful to him. Scared of savages, Crusoe perseveres to build himself a "fortress."

On the shore, he discovers goats that could provide him with sustenance. He erects a cross and carves it with the date of his arrival on the island, September 1, 1659, and makes a notch every day so that in the absence of anything to record time, he does not get lost in a sea of chronological confusion. He also regularly maintains a journal where he records his daily activities, both his struggles and achievements and serendipitous moments - candle-making, accidental discovery of sprouting grains, his building of a cellar and many such episodes.

In June 1660, Crusoe takes ill and in a state of hallucination believes that an angel visits him and goads him to repent. While drinking tobacco-steeped rum, Crusoe has an epiphany and comes to believe that his soul has been purified and God has delivered him from his former sins. He devotedly starts reading the New Testament that he finds in the wreck and sees his island experience not as a punishment but as a kind of deliverance from his erstwhile life where he has sinned. After convalescing, he maps the area and does a survey. Much to his joy, he comes upon a cornucopian valley where he builds a shady retreat for himself. He experiences a surge of positivity and optimism at the prospect of being on the island and proclaims himself as its "King." Soon after this, his ink runs out and he is compelled to discontinue the habit of writing in his journal. He trains a pet parrot, adopts a goat as his pet and cultivates his skills in a variety of tasks - basket-weaving, bread-making and pottery. After cutting down a gigantic cedar tree, he makes a big canoe from its wood, but realises that it is not viable as he cannot take it to the sea. So he builds himself a smaller boat and sails around the island but narrowly escapes drowning when his boat is tossed by a forceful wave. On reaching his side of the shore, he is comforted by the sound of his pet parrot calling out his name and once again he expresses his gratitude to God for sparing his life. He becomes skilled in animal-husbandry and is quite elated with

his "absolute command" over all the subjects of his little kingdom on the island and excitedly provides the readers with an inventory of his possessions on the island which includes his two homes, the "fortress" and the "country seat," grape valley, agricultural lands and enclosures for the grazing of his cattle.

His slow-paced rhythms of life characterised by occasional eureka moments and hard work continues for several years without any disruptions. This blissful existence is broken one day when Crusoe is horrified to come upon a man's footprint on the island. Initially he assumes the footprint to be that of a devil but then he soon realises that it must belong to one of the cannibals who he believes resides close by. This episode sends shivers down his spine and he arms himself and becomes very vigilant. He herds his goats at night in the underground cellar that he has built and also figures out a way to do cooking underground. He starts entertaining thoughts of ambushing the savages but then another dilemma starts plaguing him. He questions his authority to pass judgement on their practices and then decides that he will only intervene and attack them if provoked to do so. He takes many steps to avoid being discovered or seen by the cannibals.

While reading the Bible one day, he hears gunshots and the next day he witnesses a ship wrecked on his coast but on investigation, he finds that the men on it are either dead or gone. He rummages through the ship and realises that it is Spanish and manages to find some ruined provisions and clothing, gold bars etc. Once again he expresses gratitude to the almighty for sparing his life.

Crusoe becomes preoccupied with thoughts of leaving the island and wonders about what might have happened had he heeded his father's warnings and never left home or had he been satisfied with the profit of the tobacco plantations in Brazil. He believes he would have been living a good life now. He starts feeling guilty again for not having been content with whatever he had and wanting more. However, he soon finds out that the island is scattered with dead human bodies which resemble the aftermath of a cannibal feast. His terror knows no bounds and he continues being circumspect. Soon after, he witnesses a group of thirty cannibals heading for the shore with their victims. One of the victims who is about to be slaughtered, manages to flee and seeks shelter in Crusoe's home. Crusoe guards him and slays and injures some of the cannibals and eventually defeats most of them.

As a gesture of gratitude for saving him and granting him liberation from his captors, the victim promises total submission to Crusoe and vows to serve him selflessly. Crusoe gives him the name, Friday, to solemnise the day on which he was rescued. Since Friday exhibits eagerness to please and learn from Crusoe, he teaches him a few English words and some fundamental Christian tenets. Friday explains that the cannibals are categorised into distinct groups and that they only consume the flesh of their enemies. He also apprises Crusoe of the fact that the cannibals are responsible for rescuing the men from the shipwreck that Crusoe encountered earlier and those men, the Spaniards, are residing in close proximity among the natives. Friday once expresses a wish to return to his people but the idea of losing Friday, his new found companion on the otherwise deserted island, makes Crusoe unhappy. Crusoe decides to visit the Spaniards and Friday also admits that he cannot bear the thought of losing Crusoe and decides to build a boat with Crusoe to visit the land of the cannibals'. But before they manage to depart, they are shocked to discover the arrival of twenty-one cannibals in canoes. The cannibals have three victims in their custody and one of them is prima facie a European distinguishable because of his attire. Crusoe and Friday manage to kill most of the cannibals and secure the release of the captives. Friday is euphoric

to realise that one of the rescued victims is his father. The other rescued man is a Spaniard. All of them retire to Crusoe's dwelling for food and shelter. Crusoe makes provisions to welcome them into his community.

Later, he sends Friday and his father to survey and explore the island nearby. Their slow-paced existence is once again disrupted when they encounter an approaching English ship. This terrifies Friday and makes Crusoe cautious. Eleven men from that ship take three prisoners onshore in a boat. Nine of them go on an exploring expedition of the area while two of them stay back to watch over the prisoners. Using their wits and muscular strength, Friday and Crusoe manage to subdue these men and secure the release of the prisoners, one of whom is the captain of the ship, which had been seized through a mutiny. Eventually Crusoe and Friday confront the rest of the mutineers. Crusoe agrees to spare their lives on the condition that the ringleader, Will Atkins, pays the price for the mutiny. These mutineers then surrender and Crusoe and the rescued captain devise schemes and regain control over the ship. Crusoe and the captain pretend that the island is an imperial territory and that the Governor has granted their lives so that they may be sent back to England for due processing. Retaining five men as hostages, Crusoe orders the other men to seize the ship. The captain expresses gratefulness and gratitude to Crusoe for helping him retrieve his besieged ship and gives him many gifts. He also offers to take him and Friday back to England.

On December 19, 1686, Crusoe embarks on the ship departing for England. Some of the mutinous crewmen are abandoned on the island. On arrival in England, Crusoe realises that in his absence there, his widow friend has kept his money safe and he has become a very prosperous man. However, he finds out that all his family members have passed away except for his two sisters. He then travels to Lisbon to enquire about his business affairs. The Portuguese captain apprises him of the fact that his plantations in Brazil have been highly profitable. He arranges to sell his Brazilian lands. Suspicious of sea journey, Crusoe endeavours to return to England by land but is hindered by unfavourable weather and wild animals in northern Spain. On reaching England, he is informed that the sale of plantations has earned him quite a fortune. Crusoe again starts experiencing the pangs of travel and decides to pacify his desire by returning to Brazil, but the prospect of having to convert to Catholicism acts as a deterrent. He marries, and has three children. However, his wife dies soon after. Crusoe leaves for the East Indies as a trader in 1694 and revisits his island, and finds out that the island is being administered quite efficiently and has become a flourishing colony.

Check Your Progress 2

1) What role do you think the preface plays in setting the tone of the story?

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2) Explain the significance of the ordeals at sea in the story.

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3) Comment on the development of the character of Robinson Crusoe in the story.

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4) What role does Christian morality play in the unfolding of the story?

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5) Comment on the development of the character of Friday in the story.

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6) Crusoe is constantly trying to master his circumstances. What do you think is the relevance of this to the plotline?

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7) What do you think is the significance of repentance and self-awareness in the trajectory of Crusoe's character?

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8) What purpose does Crusoe's journal serve?

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9) What is the importance of the island setting in the story?

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10) Comment on Crusoe's daily struggles on the island.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has offered a discussion of Defoe's biographical circumstances and how he negotiated with them to carve a niche for himself in the world of writing. In this discussion, an attempt has been made to co-relate the specific circumstances of Defoe's life to those of the historical and political turmoil of 17th and 18th Century England that would enable us to understand the larger context of the changing literary aesthetics. This led to an understanding of the significance of the founding of the genre of the novel by Defoe and its ramifications for the representation of "reality." Apart from these, we tried summarising the story with the intention of closely reading the narrative so that we are equipped with the textual framework to critically analyse it in the next unit and are in a position to connect the inside world of the text to the extra-textual sources.

1.7 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The divide between the Whigs and the Tories. The rivalries between Catholicism and Protestantism. The succession debate, fight between monarchy and parliament.
2. When Defoe appeared on the literary scene, the society of England was undergoing a transition, especially with the loosening up of the feudal order and the rise of middle-classes. The changing social scenario also demanded a change in literary aesthetics and Defoe capitalised on this and wrote a series of fictional narratives in a "realist" mode with close attention to minute details and authenticity of experiences.
3. Defoe often found himself victimised and discriminated against owing to his religious affiliations.

Being a minority made him susceptible to persecution and he had to carefully manoeuvre his way around. Circumstances compelled him to swear loyalty to the Tory party though he did not fully identify with their manifesto.

4. The rise of the middle-classes and the consolidation of their sensibilities significantly transformed the literary aesthetics. The rhetorical excesses and allegorical modes of romances did not coincide with the change in societal structures and privileging of merit over inheritance. The novel as a genre of writing, for instance, *Robinson Crusoe*, catered to these demands as its narrative often concerned itself with the bildungsroman of a protagonist who is concretely located in a specific time and place and who carves a niche for himself after trials and tribulations in a "realist" manner.

Check Your Progress 2

1. It introduces the style of narration which inaugurated the genre of the novel. Focuses on faithful representation of "reality." Even though an extraordinary story of adventures, the language is bereft of rhetorical excesses.

2. Creates thrill and adrenaline rush for the readers as they follow the adventures of Crusoe. Ordeals at sea can symbolically stand for the punishment that Crusoe has to endure for disobeying his father given the biblical resonances of Adam disobeying God and having to suffer its consequences. Contributes to the moral framework of the novel.
3. From seeing himself as a miserable castaway, he starts to think of himself as the King of the island. From having the feeling of getting punished to seeing the sojourn on the island as an act of divine blessing. Lot of emphasis on individualism and work ethic. Exhibits imperialist tendencies. Occasionally finds slavery problematic but justifies it for economic gains.
4. Very didactic framework. Constantly harks back to Adam's disobedience to God to throw light on Crusoe's disobedience to his father. Religious epiphanies provide comfort to Crusoe in times of distress. Violent storms symbolically imply divine warnings. Crusoe's daily routine and emphasis on work ethic are modelled on the tenets of Protestantism.
5. Provides companionship to Crusoe. Very hierarchical relationship. Assumes superiority of white races morally, culturally and politically. Friday exhibits the servile dependence expected out of a colonised native by the white coloniser.
6. Highlights the imperialist tendencies in Crusoe because he is always mapping, surveying the land so as to strategically become its lord and master. His individualistic ethos is tied to his racist notions and desire to master his circumstances. They also betray his mindset of imposing control and order as he deems fit.
7. The Christian morality framework is highlighted where sin leads to punishment but true repentance can lead to divine mercy. Nascent foregrounding of the inner workings of human mind which later go to become one of the striking features of a "Realist Novel"
8. Recording of information helps Crusoe to get a sense of chronological clarity and order. Since his recording of his day in the journal is obviously characterised by his subjectivity, this helps us to understand the importance of point of view and how representation of "reality" is always coloured by bias of inclusion and exclusion by the narrator.
9. Serves as a laboratory to test the human dilemmas, for instance, Crusoe contemplates whether he has the authority to judge the customs of those he designate as cannibals. The island also represents the European colonial expansion, for instance, Crusoe often envisages himself as the "King" of the island. Crusoe's sojourn on the island celebrates middle-class sensibility that places a lot of merit on the ability of an individual to change the course of life by "choosing" wisely and working hard for it.
10. His daily struggles and toiling represent the Protestant work ethic. Crusoe's daily struggles and overcoming them emphasise the merit that the novel places on the spirit of individualism and the idea of a self-made man that was gaining a lot of popularity in the 18th century especially in the backdrop of rise of capitalism. These struggles can also be seen as a part of the didactic framework where Crusoe is shown to inculcate the values of thrift, perseverance and piety through experiential learning.

1.8 GLOSSARY

- Bildungsroman:*** A novel which deals with the formative years of the main character especially focussing on his/her moral and psychological maturation.
- Eponymous:*** Something or someone named after a particular person or an entity.
- Dissenter:*** This term refers to a number of Protestant denominations – Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and Congregationalists, who due to their refusal to conform to the teachings of the Church of England in the 17th century, were subjected to persecutions under a variety of discriminatory acts and policies.
- Whig and Tory:*** 'Whig' and 'Tory' were members of two opposing political factions in England, particularly during the 18th century and the terms had assumed a lot of currency since the volatile conflict over the bill to exclude James, duke of York (afterward James II), from the succession. The nomenclature 'Whigs' came to imply Scottish Presbyterians and connoted nonconformity and rebellion and was applied to those who asserted their right to exclude the heir from the throne. 'Tory' was an Irish term implying a papist outlaw and was applied to those who endorsed the hereditary right of James despite his Roman Catholic faith.

THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 2 *ROBINSON CRUSOE*: AN ANALYSIS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Critical Analysis
 - 2.2.1 Part I
 - 2.2.2 Part II
 - 2.2.3 Part III
 - 2.2.4 Part IV
- 2.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 2.5 Glossary

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will acquaint you with the significance of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in the English literary canon by critically locating it in its historical moment of production, dissemination and reception. We will deal with the critical analysis of the novel and look at what it means to be able to critique something properly. By carefully avoiding the twin perils of anachronistic and reductive readings, we will try to wade through a sea of critical material available so as to comprehend this text.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

We will try and deconstruct the mythologisation of *Robinson Crusoe* and analyse how it continues to dominate literary and popular imagination even now. For Defoe, as for his most memorable protagonist, Crusoe, theological postulates emanating from the Protestant-Christian framework have formed the bedrock of his political ideology. For a detailed understanding of the importance of Crusoe's proverbial restlessness and individualism, this unit will analyse the text and will study it vis-a-vis the rise of capitalism and bourgeois ideology. This unit will also critically scrutinise the themes of colonialism and exploitation of the natives that have been embedded in the story.

2.2 CRITICAL ANALYSIS

We will be looking at the novel critically and have divided the novel into four parts to facilitate our understanding of it.

2.2.1 Part I

Daniel Defoe was most probably inspired to write *Robinson Crusoe* after having read an account of a man named Alexander Selkirk, who after a fight with his crewmen had marooned himself on a deserted island. When realisation prevails upon him about the repercussions of his actions, he implores his shipmates to rescue him, but it is too late by then. Consequently, he is compelled by circumstances to suffer four and a half years on the island and the chronicles of his adventures became quite popular and were widely published in England. Crusoe's adventures and survival tactics on the island have some parallels with Selkirk's account but Defoe also enriched the narrative by incorporating many

pressing socio-political and cultural debates of the time. As Richard Braverman (pp. 1-5), rightly points out - the initial few pages of Robinson Crusoe's story deal with questions concerning power relations, ownership and lawfulness. Robinson Crusoe is the youngest son and his two elder brothers have died/gone missing and therefore are unable to exercise their rights on the father's lands under primogeniture. Crusoe's father has been a successful merchant in the past and now leads a relatively genteel life and has managed to buy for himself a small estate that he now desires to bequeath to Robinson Crusoe. But Crusoe refuses to accept this inheritance and instead desires to seek wealth on his own in a much different pursuit. Crusoe's rejection of paternal authority also works as an analogy for the political crisis of the succession debate in England and the Jacobite rebellion that divided people into opposite camps of Tories and Whigs. It is possible to analyse that the overthrow of monarchic absolutism and the restriction of sovereign authority in England generated the historical background for Defoe's novel which deals with filial disobedience and Crusoe's eventual assertion of his political will on the island.

The rejection of paternal authority continues to haunt Crusoe for the rest of his life, beginning with the episode when his first sea travel goes horribly wrong and he views it as divine punishment. But after having survived his first misadventure, he forgets his promises to his father and embarks on more adventures which leads to his capture by the Moors and his subsequent enslavement. According to the dominant understanding, the narrative progression of Crusoe powerfully foregrounds "the misery that follows the breach of filial duty" but it also demonstrates that this moral lesson can be "commonly overlooked, when the curiosity of the mind is strongly excited, and the feelings powerfully engaged, by the circumstances of the story" (Trimmer 298-99). Crusoe's acquisitive and materialistic tendencies have been referred to briefly in the episode when he successfully manages to transform forty pounds into a three hundred pound profit. In fact, this episode prefigures later when to acquire more slaves for his plantations, he undertakes the voyage that culminates in his isolation on the island and forms the major portion of the story. When Crusoe plots with the young Maresco, and Xury, to escape from their enslavement, we notice his resourcefulness and strategising which comes to the forefront. But, this again, foreshadows his survival tactics on the island. His manipulation, subjugation and selling of Xury reveals Crusoe's inherent white supremacist ideologies and also foretells the terms and conditions of Crusoe's relationship with Friday.

All these episodes highlight Crusoe's materialistic ambitions as he procures more land and earns more profit. He becomes cognisant of the fact that he is now close to attaining the "middle station of life" which his father had very vehemently instructed him to aspire for back at home. As Crusoe tastes material success, he starts regretting the fact that he has sold off Xury, not because of emotional affinity but because he would have been useful as a slave. The moment he has the means, he wastes no time in getting himself a slave to work for him. Ever desirous to acquire more wealth, he once again courts danger by planning to go to Africa to buy slaves for his plantations. Robinson Crusoe has been primarily studied under two broad categories. Firstly, as a narrative tracing the trajectory of the consolidation of middle-class sensibilities, secondly, it has been read as a text that helped to mould and disseminate attitudes towards the non-European population which eventually laid the foundation for colonialism in the 18th century. Even though Crusoe is disgusted by the brutality of the slave masters, he never really interrogates the lawfulness of the institution. On the contrary, he thinks

that slavery has become inextricably intertwined with rising British commerce and trade (Todd 150). Let us now move on to analysing Part II of the novel.

2.2.2 Part II

As **Thomas M Kavanagh** rightly argues, "Robinson Crusoe is emblematic of those characteristics identified with the modern novel: the centering of the story in character, the emergence of the novelistic persona as a realistic psychological presence, the changing relationship of a secular to a religious basis of consciousness and a concern with the structure and temporality of narration" (416). Crusoe's trepidation on finding himself alone on the island, to his efficient transformation of the island as well as overcoming those whom he perceives to be his enemies, in a sense, plays out the tensions that were inherent in early 18th century Europe, that was grappling with the emergent modern secular understanding of the universe against, the erstwhile, equally powerful backdrop of a deeply religious framework and was trying to make sense of the modern world. We have already read about what was happening in Europe in BEGC 107, Block 2, Unit 1.

Coming back to *Robinson Crusoe*, there is no physical presence of a guardian on the island, but the all pervasive providential framework fulfils this role. In fact, the island episode becomes a tightrope walk involving the balancing of the individualistic ethos and self-reliance celebrated by the rise of middle-class sensibilities and repentance for the rejection of paternal authority. As the influential critic, **J Paul Hunter**, demonstrates, Crusoe often seems to contemplate his sojourn on the island as following the biblical footsteps of **Jonah**, **Job** and the prodigal son, supposedly far removed from any identification with contemporary tropes. But this pose of a *tabula rasa* comes across as a carefully cultivated stratagem. A plethora of travel books that were popular in the 18th century also necessitated certain horizons of expectations that Defoe had to satisfy. So, for all the novelty and the originality of the narrative, Crusoe participates in an already established textual tradition - stormy seas, pirates, money exchanges, unpredictable sea voyages, trade and commerce etc (6-7).

Crusoe is initially bewildered about his security on the island, but soon jumps to the conclusion that what really haunts him is a sense of a lack of order. Crusoe's island slowly comes to resemble Eden from the Bible. In the Bible, God had placed Adam in Eden "to dress it and to keep it" (Genesis 2:15). Following a similar rationale, Crusoe realises that if the bounties of God are not ameliorated by human labour then they will remain futile and unproductive. So when he decides to maintain a journal, he starts to gain a sense of clarity and coherence. He establishes his legitimacy and dominion over the island through his perseverance and active ordering of space rather than only depending on divine intervention. In fact, through labour, he transforms the barren island into a productive estate. In Defoe's time it was a commonly held assumption that God actively monitored all the processes of nature and sometimes intervened to reward or punish people. But this line of thought encountered challenges in the late 17th century when scientific explanations became more pronounced. When Crusoe witnesses barley growing outside his hut, he initially sees it as a miraculous event and links it to divine intervention. But then suddenly recalls that he had thrown out a bag of seeds and understands this episode to be a favourable result of a logical cause and effect sequence. His resourcefulness and ingenuity on the island and the precision with which he records his daily chores are described by **Watt** as the "distinctive technical features of modern capitalism." As the critic, **Christopher Hill** also contends that Crusoe's island sojourn seems to be a paragon of Protestant and bourgeois value systems premised upon hard work, disciplined routine and

self-monitoring. He observes the Sabbath as a non-working day and regularly expresses gratitude to God for sparing his life. For him, Protestantism gets complemented by prudent business ethics (7).

Crusoe endeavours to carve a familiar space for himself on an alien island and is almost compelled by circumstances to also master the art of house-keeping that includes tasks such as, home-brewing, basket-making, pottery making, and bread-making. So while it has become proverbial to identify Crusoe with a sense of restlessness and a spirit of adventure, the other side of his island experience includes his desire to manufacture a simulacrum of a normative British life, especially in those episodes where Crusoe describes his dinner scenes with his "little family" which includes a parrot, a dog and two cats. Though often described as a capitalist entrepreneur, when Crusoe goes to rescue provisions from the shipwreck, his efforts also closely resemble an efficient management of the home with available resources. So while he comes across as a proto-capitalist sometimes, paying attention to his sojourn on the island also reveals his efforts to domesticate the island in the image of a comfortable middle-class existence. As Crusoe begins experimenting with the tools accessible on the island, he also starts behaving like a member of the gentry. His most famous accomplishments on the island include his rudimentary styled goat-skin garments, umbrella and his attempt to build a boat. Apart from these, he masters animal husbandry and with effective management creates a well-maintained garden and decorates his country retreat with a double hedge. His efforts to create a comfortable and pruned space for himself resemble the practices that were actively being carried out in the estates of 18th century England (Rogers 49-65). Before we move on to Part III, let us stop briefly and do a brief check on what we have learnt and understood so far.

Check Your Progress 1

1) What role do you think the theme of paternal disobedience plays in the plot of Robinson Crusoe?

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2) Critically comment on Crusoe's sojourn on the island.

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3) Do you think the story tries to accommodate these competing claims - the spirit of individualism on one hand and deference to authority figures on the other?

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- 4) What is the significance of Crusoe's meticulous house-keeping on the island to the plot of the narrative?

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2.2.3 Part III

One of the preliminary reactions to *Robinson Crusoe* as an imperial fable is predicated on the fact that his imposition of order symbolises the quintessential masculinist and imperial drive to go out into non-European lands and dominate them to bolster one's selfhood through an act of racial "Othering." As the critic **Dennis Todd**, rightly foregrounds, that, when Crusoe realises the intensity of his predicament on the first day on the island, he surveys the area from a high vantage point and then fires the gun. This of course goes on to become the proverbial moment of colonialism in literary texts as it symbolises the coloniser's attempts of mapping and mastering of the land (142-43). **Edward Said** has also demonstrated in *Culture and Imperialism*, that colonialism and the rise of the realism in novels are deeply intertwined and Robinson Crusoe inhabits a crucial space in this shared history. **Firdouz Azim** in *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, argues that the realistic novel is premised upon the construction of a European subjectivity that derives impetus from the domination of the colonial Other. A whole body of postcolonial criticism has understood Crusoe as a paragon of European colonialism constantly preoccupied with acts of identifying, mapping, charting and geographically mastering the "New World" by uprooting its native population. Crusoe has a very paternalistic attitude towards Friday especially when he teaches him English, familiarises him with domestic chores like baking, followed by instructing him about the elementary aspects of Christianity. By re-casting a colonial enterprise in such domestic terms, it creates a semblance of a benign mission bereft of the purely economic motivations that triggered them initially. As the critic, Dennis Todd rightly highlights - "Crusoe's progress on the island reads like a prospectus for British colonial activity and expansion - he settles, builds, plants crops and herds livestock; he faces down a hostile indigenous population; when the island is peopled, he replicates the orderly, hierarchical society of home. Like the New World for British colonists, the island for Crusoe is not only his for taking but a blank slate on which he can recreate the world he had come from" (143).

Crusoe seems to harbour absolutely no compunctions at having to make Friday his subordinate and colonising his identity. In fact, Crusoe seems to be vastly ignorant of the huge burden of Britain's imperial projects that the natives had to bear. As **Peter Hulme** has contended - the novel is a "paradigmatic fable" about "the primary stuff of colonial ideology", "the encounter between civilisation and savagery." It is also important to understand that though Defoe has been largely an endorser of Britain's colonial missions the novel itself, does not glorify colonialism in a straightforward manner. In fact, it is possible to look at the ruptures that have opened up by recuperating alternative possibilities from the margins of the text. The 17th century Puritan diktats expected an introspective analysis of the self so as to effectively monitor the mind through the virtuous application of reason. Crusoe's extensive self-introspection often provides avenues to rethink some of the basic prior assumptions about colonialism. For instance, he actually wonders if he has the prerogative to pass judgements on the customs of those he has designated as "cannibals."

The subjugation of natives of non-European lands was often justified on the grounds of their supposed cannibalism. Crusoe rethinks this and wonders whether people should be demonised for doing something that does not seem unjust to their ethos. Similarly, on close interaction with Friday, he realises that Friday is not the "savage" he thought him to be, on the contrary, he is capable of deep warmth and affection. While this rethinking surely does not exonerate Crusoe from his racist, paternalistic attitude, but given the context of the early 18th century, the novel surely provides spaces to re-assess Britain's dominant ideology regarding imperialism. Having said that, it is also important to understand that Robinson Crusoe is not an anti-slavery tract! Friday functions like a *tabula rasa* for Crusoe upon which he imposes his will. As the critic, **Richard Braverman** argues that Friday becomes Crusoe's metaphoric and political son that allows him to reproduce and transmit his acquired power (4-5). We are now reaching the end of the analysis of the novel, so let's move on to Part IV next.

2.2.4 Part IV

As **Carl Fisher** argues - "far from being an ideal, isolation was an imposed state. Crusoe accumulates because that is both a means to an end and an imbedded principle. He controls what he can of the environment, and does his best to foresee problems ahead. He stays as sane as he can, under the circumstances, but his longing for companionship and community is constant. The tension that the narrative creates, of the isolated human, both within and against the environment, of the desire for the agency in the world, of the evocation of the survival instinct, does not require the island isolation of Robinson Crusoe, but the narrative resonates because it encouraged identification with the striving impulse that typified the age" (101).

The spiritual angle of Crusoe's trials and tribulations achieves its peak when he finally reaps the rewards. He discovers that his fortunes have miraculously increased manifold and are almost equivalent to a divine blessing - manna from heaven. Keeping the Protestant framework of the story intact, we are made to believe that Crusoe sees this bounty as a compensation for his willingness to endure hardships, especially when he draws a comparison of himself to Job "I might well say now, indeed, that the latter end of Job was better than the beginning" (239). Crusoe's daily routine and emphasis on the work ethic are modelled on the tenets of Protestantism, specifically with its thrust on inculcation of the values of thrift, perseverance and piety through experiential learning. In the concluding chapters also, he highlights his Protestant-Christian affiliation by mentioning twice that he does not desire to go to Brazil because that would entail his proselytisation into Catholicism. Consequently, Crusoe transforms his tale of survival into a divine endorsement of his particular faith.

The colonial aspects of the story also become pronounced in the closure of the novel. Crusoe genuinely believes that he is helping Friday to ascend the ladder of civilisation by familiarising him with the English culture and letting him serve him. While negotiating with hostile mutineers and outwitting them, Crusoe and the captain terrify them by referring to a fictional "governor" of the island who will penalise them harshly for their rebellious ways. This fictional governor prefigures the very real governor with legal powers who will eventually administer the island with an iron hand, since Crusoe has anyway seemingly mapped and colonised the territory for England. After Crusoe returns to the island, the flourishing community life is a very visible presence there. The Eurocentric ideals of victoriously bringing the merits of "civilization" to a barren and undeveloped terrain is foreground in this story through the transformation of the island over

the course of years, foreshadowing the fate of many similar imperial enterprises. In fact, Crusoe distinctly designates this community as “my new colony in the island,” which makes us realise the inextricably intertwined relationship between mapping and mastering a territory.

The last chapters also compel readers to re-assess Crusoe's strategically arranged escape from the island. Even though Crusoe has been nostalgically longing to return to England, ever since he set foot on the island, it is ironic that when he finally manages to get off the island, the return to a prosperous sedentary British existence seems paradoxically unfulfilling to Crusoe's inherent restless nature. After having braved the stormy seas and the most elemental existence on the island, one might believe that the familiarity of European topography and cultural milieu would grant him some peace and bliss. *Au contraire*, in Spain, Crusoe faces unfavourable weather and wild animals. Strangely, his island with its shady retreat appears way more gratifying when juxtaposed with his journey to Spain. His sojourn on the island is frequently peppered with almost a primordial longing for companionship and emotional affinity till Friday makes an appearance and satisfies that craving for company to some extent. For all the familiarity that Europe holds for Crusoe, on returning, human society there does not seem to hold any deep attraction for him. The widow who has overseen his wealth and the Portuguese captain who supervised his plantation are courteous and have certainly proved to be immensely helpful, but somehow we feel they do not offer him the happiness that he seeks. When Crusoe finally gets married in England and fathers three children, he seems so emotionally distanced from his wife that, he does not even bother to tell us her name. It is very peculiar and a matter of deep concern that we are told absolutely nothing of the woman, Crusoe marries, and, that the women he ships to the island are only as significant as the other "supplies." The presence of women is conspicuous in the story by their virtual absence. Women are only briefly mentioned and given the overarching utilitarian logic in the novel - women exist for the sole purpose of being useful to the men involved.

In a nutshell, with “no family” and “not many relations,” and with negligible desire to form new relationships, Crusoe comes across almost as solitary in England as he does on his island. This ending also provides the readers with an opportunity to speculate and interrogate the worth of the return to "civilization" that Crusoe always thought he desired. Though the story is obsessed with the binaries of "self" and "Other" and "civilized" and "savage," but careful scrutiny reveals that for all the reinforcement of these dichotomous divisions of humanity, it is also possible to cull out moments and episodes from the novel, no matter how precarious that, foreground the unease with these watertight compartmentalisations.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) How does the progression of the narrative try to balance the contradictory claims of a spiritual autobiography and a tale of adventure?
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- 2) How does Crusoe's treatment of Friday reflect the master-slave relationship between the coloniser and the native?
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3) How does the novel foreground that cultural colonisation and geographical conquering go hand in hand?

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4) Critically comment on the binarisation of the "savage" and the "civilized." Does the story also blur this rigid binarisation sometimes?

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2.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has put under critical scrutiny, the story of *Robinson Crusoe* by trying to link its textual content with extra-textual sources and socio-cultural and politico-religious debates of 17th and 18th Century England. An attempt has been made to familiarise you with the spiritual framework of the novel and foreground how the didactic impulses of the story are aimed at a consolidation of the Protestant work ethic and reinforcement of bourgeois morality.

Delving deeper into the trajectory of Crusoe's character helps us to understand how the novel also functions as a manual for European colonisers and the racial profiling of the native population. We also tried to understand that there are episodes/moments in the story, no matter how fleeting, where the eponymous protagonist tries to re-think the fundamental postulates of white supremacist ideologies, but of course never takes this rumination to their logical conclusion. These very ruptures and fissures enrich the complexity of the narrative and make it amenable to a multiplicity of interpretations and perspectives.

2.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. It makes the plotline serve the purpose of a cautionary tale. It helps readers draw parallels with the Biblical Adam. The idea of repentance for paternal disobedience ensures that the domestic harmony is not completely destabilised in the wake of ambition.
2. It functions as a rule-book for colonialism. His isolation on the island gives him an opportunity to atone for his sin of paternal disobedience. Crusoe demonstrates his inherited white supremacist ideologies in his dealings with non-whites.
3. Yes, because on the one hand the story celebrates Crusoe's pursuit of his passion, on the other hand, he is also suitably chastised for disobeying his father and rejecting domestic stability for his personal ambitions and

aspirations. It is possible to see that the resolution of the plot tries to achieve a precarious equilibrium - valorisation of a self-realised man while also ensuring that social structures are not radically restructured to make way for his desires.

4. In a novel, which primarily deals with masculine ambitions and male-bonding, Crusoe's house-keeping on the island introduces the conventionally cherished feminine virtues in the story. His resource management skills also help him convert a remote island into a more homely space that eventually comes to somewhat resemble his life back in England.

Check Your Progress 2

1. On the one hand the story increasingly resonates with Biblical episodes, thereby imparting moral lessons and preaching piety, thrift and self-discipline. For instance, Crusoe is perpetually haunted by the thought that he has disobeyed his father and he will have to pay the price for his disobedience.

On the other hand, the story follows the reckless adventures of Crusoe as he keeps going on sea voyages, surviving alone on a remote island, fighting cannibals, negotiating with mutineers etc. In fact the novel ends on a note promising more adventures in the pipeline.

2. Crusoe exhibits white supremacist tendencies throughout the novel and especially in his interaction with Friday. Crusoe thinks he is doing Friday a favour by familiarising him with western culture and Christianity, just like the colonisers assumed that it was their moral responsibility to bring civilisation and enlightenment to the lands that they have conquered for monetary gain.
3. When Crusoe finds himself marooned on an island, he wastes no time in mapping the area, mastering the flora and fauna and harnessing their productivity to his advantage. Simultaneously, he reconfigures the island by imposing order on it as he deems fit and slowly and steadily, after pruning and preening, it starts resembling a western establishment. In fact, Crusoe often calls himself the king of the island. His interaction with Friday also shows how he has culturally colonised Friday and made him an efficient partner cum slave in maintaining control over the geographical terrain of the island.
4. The story by and large maintains the binaries of the "savage" and the "civilized" and foregrounds that the west connotes reason, enlightenment, morality while the non-whites connote barbarity, violence, immorality, lack of emotion etc. For instance, Crusoe harbours no guilt at the prospect of slaving expeditions; in fact he actively participates in them.

But the novel also provides us with moments, when these binaries are momentarily rendered unstable. For instance, on closely interacting with Friday, Crusoe realises that a lot of his stereotypical assumptions about him are proved false. However, the storyline never takes these blurring of binaries to their logical conclusion.

2.5 GLOSSARY

Anachronism: A chronological error or attribution of a wrong date/period to a person or an event.

Reductive Reading: A reading that does not appreciate the narrative's multiple

themes/ perspectives and instead obsesses over a single aspect of the story thereby, producing a biased understanding.

Mythologisation: To make something/someone into a myth by endowing it with heroic or exaggerated qualities.

Bourgeois ideology: The social classes - professionals, manufacturers, merchants, that became influential during Industrial Revolution and whose concerns are primarily related to the preservation of their economic supremacy and "respectability" in society.

Protestant Work Ethic: This is a work ethic that places a lot of value on hard work, self-discipline, thriftiness and links worldly success and eternal salvation.

Primogeniture: A type of inheritance that generally, legally privileges the right of the eldest son to ancestral/family estate.

White Supremacy: A belief system that argues that white people are inherently superior - be it culturally, socially, politically or economically to other races and therefore have the mandate to be the dominant group in any society.

Tabula Rasa: A blank slate, something/someone existing undisturbed in its supposed pure state.

Othering: A process of perceiving someone/something as distinctly different/ unfamiliar in relation to "self."

UNIT 3 *ROBINSON CRUSOE*: THEMES

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Thematic Analysis
 - 3.2.1 Filial Disobedience
 - 3.2.2 Island
 - 3.2.3 Colonialism
 - 3.2.4 Civilisation Versus Savagery
 - 3.2.5 Individualism
 - 3.2.6 *Tabula Rasa*
 - 3.2.7 *Robinsonades*
- 3.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 3.5 Glossary

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will help you navigate the labyrinthine trails of *Robinson Crusoe* by discussing in detail the broad themes that Defoe has carefully woven in the fabric of the tale. By drawing attention to the themes in the text and associating them with the socio-historical context of England, the idea is to foreground how generic conventions cross-pollinate with the socio-political conditions of their time and consequently become fluid in their narrative possibilities.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The thematic aspects of any text do not exist in isolation but are interdependent and often overlap with each other, thereby endowing that text with a sense of multi-dimensionality. It is imperative to understand that the meaning of a text does not simply reside in the story itself, but is shaped by the reader in relation to the text in question and also the complex web of other texts and references, direct and indirect, involved in the process of reading it. Keeping this framework in mind, this unit will critically scrutinise the different themes and motifs that shape the story of Robinson Crusoe in their own peculiar ways. So let's begin by looking at the various themes that this novel deals with next.

3.2 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

What is a theme?

In a very broad sense, themes could be looked at as content or ideas that run through the fabric of the novel. Themes arise from the interplay of the various aspects of the novel such as, the plot setting, character, sometimes the element of conflict and the aspect of tone (under style). If we were to analyse the meaning of theme very simplistically we could say that, the theme of a piece of fiction novel is its views about life and about how people behave. The theme of a novel particularly these days is rarely didactic/ moralistic- in fact, most of the time it is not even presented directly. We locate the theme with the help of the characters, the action and the setting of the novel. In short what we really do is to try and

figure out or work out the themes ourselves. The novelist merely communicates his/ her message to the reader and it is up to the reader or us to decipher what the theme is. However, it is important to point out here that every idea a novel may seek to present does not necessarily develop into its theme. An idea becomes a theme only when it recurs through a novel in such a way as to demonstrate a novelist's preoccupation with it. A novelist often reveals his/her concern or preoccupation with a theme or a set of themes in several different ways, some of which are as follows:

- i) Indirectly through the medium of character/characters, as a character is widely held to be the chief vehicle of an idea or ideas in a novel.
- ii) Indirectly through certain patterns of imagery and symbolism that run through a novel.
- iii) Indirectly through key words or phrases that find a recurrent expression in a novel.
- iv) Directly through authorial comments that lie interspersed in a novel, where a novelist takes the liberty to comment on either the characters or situations or both.
- v) Through the title.
- vi) Through allusions that are made throughout the novel
- vii) Through details and particulars in the novel and the greater meaning that those details could contain. (BEGE 108: Reading the Novel, Aspects of the Novel, Block I, Unit 3, p. 39)

We have identified seven thematic strands in *Robinson Crusoe* and will now move on to discussing each in some detail. You should try and see if you can locate any there themes in the novel. The first theme that we take up for analysis is that of filial disobedience.

3.2.1 Filial Disobedience

The perennial fascination that the figure of Robinson Crusoe holds in the western imagination is also increasingly tied to the overt biblical framework of the story. In spite of having all the tropes and paraphernalia of a full-fledged adventure story that gives great doses of adrenaline rush to the readers, it also functions as a didactic tale that reinforces conventional Christian morality. In fact, the homiletic message is outlined in the Preface itself, which categorically delineates that Crusoe's story is being made available so as to enlighten the masses about God's wisdom and the need to repent for one's sins. The primordial sin in the western imagination is Adam's disobedience of God's command and partaking of the forbidden fruit. Similarly, Crusoe's father repeatedly counsels him about the merits of "the middle station" of life and forbids him to go on sea voyages. But like Adam, Crusoe does not resist the temptation to taste the forbidden fruit and goes sailing, much to the chagrin of his father. Even though Crusoe acknowledges the bounties of God and continuously expresses gratitude for having been spared his life when he loses all his shipmates to a shipwreck, it is never enough till he actively atones for his sins. In order to lead a truly fulfilling life, Crusoe needs to repent, something that he learns from the angel that visits him during the state of pyretic hallucination. It gets ingrained in Crusoe's consciousness that his biggest sin is his defiant behaviour towards his father, which continues to haunt him and makes his heart heavy. He designates it as his "original sin," analogous to Adam's first disobedience of God's command. This overarching biblical theme

also suggests that Crusoe's sojourn on the island, isolated from friends and family and having to toil hard for bare sustenance is reminiscent of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the idyllic life of Eden.

Atonement for Crusoe is premised upon admitting his deficiencies and his complete dependence on and subservience to divine authority. This newly-acquired knowledge coupled with a heightened sense of self-awareness propels Crusoe's spiritual awakening and he feels that he has had a rebirth. Though the old pessimism often comes back to haunt him, but he becomes relatively resigned to his fate and starts viewing his life on the island as an enabling and positive experience. When he is finally rescued and his fortunes have increased phenomenally, he draws parallels between his fate and that of Job Book who was also eventually rewarded for his patience. Paradoxically, the urgency of repentance ends up justifying sin. Crusoe would not have realised the importance of repentance if he had never committed the sin in the first place - filial disobedience. Thus, as powerful as the theme of filial disobedience is in the story, it is present in a nuanced manner and complicates the readers' response to notions of sin, repentance and redemption. Let us look at the next theme which is of the island.

3.2.2 Island

The island episodes are very crucial to the plot of *Robinson Crusoe* and provide good opportunities to test out some of the dilemmas and anxieties that plagued 17th and 18th century western imagination. Crusoe undergoes various trials and tribulations for the rejection of his father's wishes and spends a good deal of time on the island repenting for his filial disobedience. Interestingly, his stay on the island also grants him the chance to refurbish not only his surroundings but also his own existence and he goes on to become the self-made man valorised by the then emerging middle-class sensibilities. He starts afresh, seemingly removed from the burdens of modern living - something that holds a deep fascination for the readers even now and this has also helped in transforming the story of a shipwrecked person into a modern myth.

Later on, the island setting of *Robinson Crusoe* also coincides perfectly with the Romantic notions of childhood as a distinct world characterised by an inexhaustible reservoir of yet to be unleashed potential. Some historians and sociologists propose that this tendency by adults to indulge in watertight compartmentalisation of childhood and adulthood is prevalent even now and they designate it as "islanding." This term stands for the attempts by adults to isolate children from the territory of adult experiences and paint a very idyllic picture of childhood. In its role of an adventure tale which also at times serves the purpose of a cautionary tale, Crusoe's story again reinforces the need to "island" the young from the big, bad world outside. In spite of Crusoe's admirable resourcefulness and survival tactics, he does suffer for disobeying his father and often views his shipwreck and isolation on the island as divine retribution for his prodigal ways (Malley 16-18). So the anxieties caused by Crusoe's individualism and threat to parental authority are also to some extent eased by the eventual recognition of providential framework and need for atonement while he is marooned on the island.

The site of the island again, works as a metaphor for colonisation because Crusoe actively maps the island and imposes order on it as he deems appropriate. In fact, the island sojourn, subjugation of Friday and his productive labour there function as a manual for mastering and claiming an alien land as one's own and that too by taking a moral high ground. So, we may conclude that the island serves multiple

purposes in the progression of the narrative and accordingly shapes the readers' response to the story. Let us look at colonialism as the third theme.

3.2.3 Colonialism

Robinson Crusoe has been hailed and celebrated for espousing a modern, western individualism premised upon a somewhat omnipotent and omniscient subjectivity i.e. a belief system that gives man some control and agency to determine his life trajectory. However, Crusoe's aspirations also make him the ambassador for the 18th and 19th century's imperialist ambitions of Britain. While on the one hand, his sojourn on the island is seen as a punishment for rejecting paternal authority, on the other hand, the island also affords him the opportunity for the socio-cultural and geographical colonisation of non-European lands. It is true that to some extent Crusoe realises the relativity of cultural normatives in his interaction with non-whites, but by and large he continues to carry and act according to his deep-seated white supremacist ideologies. Once Crusoe realises he is the sole survivor on a remote island, after the shipwreck, he wastes no time in mastering his physical surroundings and harnessing them to his advantage. Just like, he loses no time in imposing his socio-cultural and religious teachings on Friday as if Friday was a blank slate waiting for edification. The novel is directly and indirectly celebrating Britain's colonial projects for non-Europeans, for the island functions like a clean slate which Crusoe can claim and re-make by imposing the socio-cultural and economic set-up he approves of.

However, Crusoe's obsessive ruminations often provide avenues to critically re-assess the ideological impulses underlying the colonial enterprise. These are crucial moments and as readers we must pay special attention to them because the novel along with celebrating colonialism, also offers a mild critique of Britain's colonial ventures. For instance, Crusoe contemplates whether he has the right to pass value judgements on the socio-cultural practices of the community which is different from his - "cannibals." Crusoe is at times genuinely moved by Friday's ability to express and experience affection and warmth and momentarily, the lines between "civilisation" and "savagery" are blurred. Having said that, it is also significant to take into account that Crusoe is never really able to break free completely from the racist stereotypical assumptions and continues to treat Friday as a lesser human being. The next theme under study is that of the nation of civilisation versus savagery.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Critically comment on the importance of repentance for the resolution of the plot of Robinson Crusoe.

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- 2) What are the multiple purposes served by Crusoe's sojourn on the island?

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3) What are the repercussions of drawing parallels between Robinson Crusoe and Adam?

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4) What role do white supremacist ideologies play in the unfolding of the narrative?

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3.2.4 Civilisation Versus Savagery

Crusoe expresses an irrepressible longing for a companion while he is marooned on the island. But when he befriends Friday, he analyses his gratitude and remarks in a very self-satisfying manner that Friday "made all the signs to me of Subjection, Servitude and Submission" (Defoe 174). For Crusoe, he embodies "civilisation" and Friday exhibits "savagery," therefore, it becomes his moral obligation to enlighten Friday about the normatives of western cultural environment and religion.

Many passages in the story disrupt the neatly constructed hierarchies predicated on the supposed moral difference between Europeans and the Caribbean people. During one crucial moment, Crusoe wonders whether the priests of the *Spanish Inquisition* will turn out to be more brutal than the people he designates as "savages." Also, when Friday mistakes the English mutineers to be potential cannibals, the hierarchies are momentarily destabilised. Sometimes Crusoe's response to the institution of slavery, especially in his interaction with Friday highlights how the novel does have nascent self-awareness of the exploitation and unfairness inherent in using fellow human beings as slaves. But he deploys the services of slaves on his Brazilian plantation and goes on three expeditions to hunt for slaves. Crusoe might not admit it explicitly but it is actually his slaving expedition that culminates into his solitary confinement on the remote island, far away from his familiar world. He never really questions the legitimacy of such institutionalised exploitation and does not see it as anything abnormal. Even when he thinks of the sins he has committed and seeks mercy, he never really expresses any compunction for having acquired wealth through slavery. When he expresses regret for selling Xury into slavery, it is purely for practical purposes because he would have proven to be helpful on his plantations for making more money. Of course, Crusoe's attitude towards slavery cannot be judged as per our contemporary parameters of human justice, because the publication of *Robinson Crusoe* precedes the abolitionist movement and an indisputable argument against slavery does not make an appearance in the print form till the 18th century (Keymer xxxvi -xxxvii). But Crusoe seems to have naturalised these racial hierarchies in his mind and cannot envisage an economic system that is bereft of the exploitation of human beings, stereotyped as "savages."

So, though it is possible to retrieve occasional incidents from the novel which destabilise the rigid division of human beings in watertight compartments of races,

but by and large, the plot of *Robinson Crusoe* lays the foundation for imposition of the western way of living on the non-European lands and harnessing the productivity of the natives for the economic gain of the west. Let us look at the theme of individualism next.

3.2.5 Individualism

Many critics and scholars have read *Robinson Crusoe* as a tract celebrating the rising influence of bourgeoisie. Crusoe's ingenuity and tale of endurance under extremely testing circumstances coupled with his monetary accomplishments made him the poster boy of the upcoming middle-class ethos and of the capitalist economy of which this class was to become both the instrument and the main recipient. **Ian Watt** argues that the quintessence of Crusoe's individualism is grounded in his isolation from his familiar community life and structured practices and established traditions. This breaking away from his moors, relinquishment of inheritance and following his passion and making a fortune after toiling hard endows Crusoe's journey with a relatively modern secular materialist understanding of life (60-62).

However, the rising influence of individualism also triggered new kinds of anxieties and tensions especially with reference to the stability of societal structures both at the microcosmic (domestic harmony) and macrocosmic level (the larger public sphere). In the novel, while Crusoe embodies the virtues cherished by the upcoming middle-class sensibilities - independence and self-sufficiency, his waywardness and free-spiritedness also pose a threat to the stability of familial order and social establishments. Therefore, these traits have to be constantly monitored and suitably penalised so that his individualistic personality is well-integrated with that of society and his aspirations and desires do not exist at loggerheads with the greater good and the grand scheme of things. For instance, Crusoe undergoes suffering for rejecting paternal authority and domestic comfort. Even on the island, he spends a lot of time making an alien land into a familiarly ordered space by practising meticulous house-keeping. Therefore, we may conclude by arguing that on one hand, the novel jubilantly welcomes individualism, on the other hand, it also foregrounds the uneasiness that individualistic pursuit creates and how it must be efficiently tamed and domesticated, if need be. The notion of *tabula rasa* needs to be examined next.

3.2.6 *Tabula Rasa*

The notion of *tabula rasa* makes repeated appearances in the plotline of *Robinson Crusoe* and trying to make sense of the socio-cultural significance of it is very integral for a comprehensive understanding of the text. As the critic, **Malley**, argues that this text has been considered very suitable by eminent western theorists for educating children so that they go on to become socially aware and integrated members of society (23-24). *Robinson Crusoe* has often been seen as the universal representative of humankind, someone every reader could identify themselves with, apparently. By placing Crusoe on a solitary island and making him lead an elementary existence, Defoe seems to provide a laboratory for testing out basic human instincts. It is because of this universalisation of his *bildungsroman* in the repertoire of western culture, that he has been appropriated by adults for pedagogical purposes for amelioration and divertissement of children especially by the 18th century educationists. **John Gill** contends that childhood is "modern society's myth of both origins and destiny, our explanation of who we are and what we will become" (33). The notion of childhood as the carrier of yet untapped potential has been most articulately argued by the 18th century theorists

in their concern for streamlining curriculum for children's education. *Richard Barney* very cogently shows that *Robinson Crusoe* follows very closely what Barney designates as John Locke's "supervisory" model of education specified in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1694) that speaks of the infant mind as a *tabula rasa* awaiting edification (15). The critic **Samuel Pickering** has also demonstrated that "after the shipwreck he resembled Locke's infant with a mind like a blank tablet or empty cabinet" (60). But it is also imperative to understand that while Crusoe does lead a life removed from civilisational trappings on a remote island, he eventually re-makes it to resemble his home back in England. So he does not actually break away from what he considers a relatively familiar zone, in fact, he replicates it as much as he could given the limited resources.

Crusoe also treats Friday as a *tabula rasa* on which he freely imposes western and Christian learning. However, it is important to remember that this tendency of Crusoe to treat Friday as a blank slate, underlines his intellectual, social and moral superiority because he absolutely negates Friday's ideologies and belief systems by indoctrinating him with ideas and concepts that he deems suitable. By treating Friday as bereft of any cultural or moral systems, Crusoe severely infantilises him and renders him incapable to go about his life without his guide and counsel. Therefore, we can conclude that the notion of *tabula rasa* that was very popular in the theories of 17th and 18th century has been dominantly read in a very problematic manner in *Robinson Crusoe* because everyone, be it Crusoe on a remote island or Friday after he is rescued, carries traces of socio-cultural, political and emotional baggage and these continue to influence who they are and negating these do not make them go away. What is *Robinsonades*? We shall look at it next.

3.2.7 *Robinsonades*

The roaring success of the story of *Robinson Crusoe* and its translation into virtually every written language has led to the creation of a literary sub-genre called the 'Robinsonade.' This term was conceived in 1731 by **Johann Gottfried Schnabel** in the preface to his own robinsonade, *Die Insel Felsenburg (Felsenburg Island)*, to designate an increasing body of narratives loosely modelled on the tropes inspired by Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. These stories usually involve shipwrecks, adventure tales or survival tactics of Europeans in isolated locales. It is important to understand that no text exists in a void and Defoe drew onto a variety of sources to enrich the story of *Robinson Crusoe* - travel narratives, accounts of pirates, spiritual autobiography, political pamphlets etc. As a consequence, these were embedded narrative possibilities play out in an imaginative manner in the many re-interpretations of Crusoe's story (Fisher 98-99). By the 19th century, this genre was commonly identified with adventure narratives catering to male adolescents. These stories reiterate the masculinist normatives of aggressive ambition, mastering of circumstances and colonial conquests. The critic, **Martin Green** argues that the robinsonade tradition is "profoundly masculinist, both in its character's indifference to women, and in the stimulus it gave men to find fulfilment exclusively in bonds to other men" (36). Ironically, along with facing strenuous situations and mind-numbing ordeals, this sub-genre also represents how these male protagonists carve a homely space for themselves amidst unfamiliar locales. Consequently, conventionally feminine practices of house-keeping and domesticity also become an integral aspect of the narrative trajectory. This genre, despite having the overarching backdrop of an adventure tale also contains the seemingly contradictory ideals of home and domesticity (Malley 48-58). By the 18th century, writers also started to experiment with the solitary female Crusoe

type of protagonists, though the female castaway stories were not as popular as those of their male counterparts. **Michel Tournier's** *Friday* (1977) and **J M Coetzee's** *Foe* (1986) are two of the most influential postcolonial reevaluations of the original story especially with respect to the character portrayal of Friday.

More than any other piece of literary fiction, *Robinson Crusoe* has generated phenomenal interest among audiences, cutting across socio-economic strata. Consequently, the story has been translated and transcreated in multiple formats and mediums and has been very liberally incorporated in our popular culture. Immediately after its publication, heavily edited chapbook versions retaining the rudimentary plotline of the original narrative of *Robinson Crusoe* had flooded Britain and America. In 1781, **Richard Sheridan** produced a pantomime stage adaptation of Crusoe's journey and it opened to such tremendous reviews that it not only became a staple for decades to follow but also gained a reputation for being the paragon of the English Christmas pantomime performances well into the twentieth century. The celebration of the thematic thrust of Crusoe's story has also registered its presence in the world of music, for instance, "*Where did Robinson Crusoe go with Friday on a Saturday Night*" was performed by **Al Jolson** in the former half of the twentieth century. There has been a plethora of cinematic adaptations of Crusoe's bildungsroman ranging from the most burlesque like *Lt. Robinson Crusoe, U.S.N* (1966), to the faithful version like *Luis Bunuel's Robinson Crusoe* (1954). Contemporary popular television shows like "*Survivor*" (2000) and "*Lost*" (2004-2010) also owe their success to the resonance of Crusoe's narrative in our socio-cultural parlance (Malley 1-3). These imaginative reinventions of the story of *Robinson Crusoe* help us understand the original narrative from many different points of view and simultaneously critique and pay homage to the popularity of the genre.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In what ways does the novel celebrate individualism?

- 2) How does the dichotomy of "civilisation" and "savagery" work in the relationship between Crusoe and Friday?

- 3) Do you think Friday is literally a blank slate/tabula rasa before he meets Crusoe?

- 4) What does the increasing popularity of the sub-genre of Robinsonade specify about Robinson Crusoe?

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3.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has tried to engage with the important thematic aspects of *Robinson Crusoe* by highlighting their socio-political relevance for the time frame in which the story is situated. A detailed analysis of how the story closely revolves around notions of colonialism, binaries of "civilisation" and "savagery," the rising middle-class and individualism has been done. An attempt has been made to help you understand the reasons for the popularity of the story in dominant western imagination even today. We have also tried to comprehend the reasons and repercussions for giving the advancement of Crusoe's journey an aura of universality, even though the narrative constantly draws attention to the specificity of its spatio-temporal location. No text exists in a vacuum. All narratives exist in a reciprocal relation with the texts gone by and anticipate the texts about to come, it is a kind of open-ended intellectual enterprise. This is absolutely befitting for *Robinson Crusoe* because it has founded a new sub-genre of writing that is still flourishing, 4 centuries after Defoe had published the novel.

3.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The notion of repentance connects the story of Robinson Crusoe with the Biblical Adam. It helps in introducing a didactic purpose to the resolution of the plot. The transgressive tendencies exhibited by Crusoe owing to the pursuit of his passion are tamed and domesticated. Consequently, the threat posed by his individualistic streak to the familial structure, domestic harmony and the larger social establishments are suitably eased.
2. Serves as a quintessential locale to experiment and examine the human behavioural tendencies in the most elemental circumstances. The island also gives Crusoe an opportunity to achieve the ideals associated with middle-class sensibilities - self-reliance and resourcefulness. It also helps him repent for his sin of filial disobedience especially the excessive manual labour that he has to do to sustain himself there. The island also provides Crusoe with an opportunity to culturally and geographically colonize the non-European territory and govern it as per western normatives.
3. It gives a spiritual dimension to the trajectory of Crusoe's life and makes it much more universal in its appeal. The Biblical framework also makes the story more didactic in scope as like Adam, Crusoe also paid the price for disobedience of God/father's command. It also makes Crusoe's imperialistic ventures relatively less problematic as everything is eventually subsumed under a divine framework.
4. Crusoe is extremely racist in his dealings with Xury as he does not suffer from any guilt for having sold him into slavery. He often goes on slaving expeditions. His behaviour with Friday is also very hierarchical in nature.

The plotline seems to be endorsing Crusoe's imperial ventures and he resembles a proto-imperialist when he is marooned on the remote island.

Check Your Progress 2

1. The entire novel charts the trajectory of how Crusoe rejected the wealth he inherited from his father and went on to pursue his passion. Crusoe's sojourn on the island helps him become the self-realised human being cherished by the 18th century middle-class sensibilities. In the end, Crusoe is rewarded for his toil and enduring spirit when he discovers that he has made a lot of money on his plantations and his savings have also increased manifold.
2. Friday connotes irrationality, wildness, gullibility, lack of emotion for Crusoe. On befriending him, some of Crusoe's prejudiced expectations are corrected and he comes to appreciate Friday. But by and large, their relationship remains very hierarchical in nature as Crusoe never treats Friday as his equal.
3. No, Friday is not a blank slate. He has his own belief system and notion of polity and religion. It is Crusoe's white supremacist attitude that makes him think that Friday must be exposed to western ideologies and Christianity so that he becomes relatively more compatible to live with Crusoe.
4. Since Robinson Crusoe is a very multidimensional text, it has been read from so many perspectives. These multiple narrative possibilities that are interwoven in the text make it very amenable to adaptation in different forms and versions, be it a cautionary tale or self-reflexive parody of the original story. Therefore, the story can speak to audiences/readers across generations in a variety of contexts and formats.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Biblical Adam:

According to the creation myth in the Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, Adam was the first man. He along with the first woman, Eve, were placed in the garden of Eden by God. Adam and Eve were told that they could eat from all trees in the garden except the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." One day Satan, the fallen angel, comes in the disguise of a serpent and tempts Eve to taste the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge. Eve partakes of the fruit and also persuades Adam to have it. For their disobedience of God's command, they are expelled from Eden and are forced to toil to sustain themselves.

Romantic:

The Romantic period (approximately between 1798-1832) was characterised by major socio-political and cultural transformations, especially in England, due to Industrialization, Agricultural Revolution and the French Revolution. Economically, the Industrial Revolution and the Agricultural Revolution had severely altered the landscapes of England through depopulation of country sides and creation of overcrowded cities dotted with factories and mills. Politically and socially, the French Revolution accompanied by the toppling of monarchy was seen by the conservatives in England as a nightmarish unleashing of anarchy and posing a major

threat to the social order of England. So even though, it was a multi-dimensional movement, but by and large, Romanticism placed a lot of emphasis on natural landscapes, retreating inwards, personal feeling, imagination and forging new bonds with nature to lead a truly fulfilling life.

Microcosmic:

A miniature representation of a larger object, idea or institution.

Macrocosmic:

A large organized structure, institution or even the universe considered in its entirety and contrasted with a miniature representation of it.

John Locke:

He was one of the most influential philosophers and political theorists of the 17th century. In his most famous work, the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke provided a study of the human mind and its acquisition of knowledge. According to his theorisation, human mind is analogous to a "blank slate" or *tabula rasa* at the time of birth, bereft of any conventions for processing information and ideas are acquired primarily by sensory experiences of the world. So the notion of *tabula rasa* implied that individuals have the agency to be the authors of their lives depending on what kind of experiences they expose themselves to.

Transcreation:

This is a creative and flexible kind of translation from one language into another that endeavours to evoke similar sentiment and response as the original, but in a new context and language.

UNIT 4 *ROBINSON CRUSOE*: CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Analysis of Major Characters
 - 4.2.1 Robinson Crusoe
 - 4.2.2 Friday
 - 4.2.3 The Portuguese Captain
 - 4.2.4 Xury
 - 4.2.5 Crusoe's Father
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 Hints to Check Your Progress
- 4.5 Glossary
- 4.6 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will undertake an in-depth discussion on the major characters in *Robinson Crusoe*. The attempt will be to assess the characters vis-a-vis the contexts in which they appear and then examine their contribution to the progression of the narrative.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A critical analysis of the portrayal of characters will make us aware about the workings of the ideological politics of the author. The narrative spaces enjoyed by different characters give us a sneak-peek into the socio-political and cultural belief systems espoused by Defoe and the parameters that readers are expected to keep in mind while understanding the characters. Since posterity has called Defoe, the father of the English novel, it is important to be cognisant of the fact that he makes painstaking efforts to differentiate his characters from those one-dimensional characters which had populated the world of fantastical tales and chivalric romances. *Au contraire*, he very self-consciously draws focus to the "realism" of his characters and the authenticity of their experiences. Let's begin the analysis of the major characters of the novel.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF MAJOR CHARACTERS

We begin this section by firstly defining what characters are in a novel/ play/ any other literary genre. Character very simply put, would mean a figure in any literary piece of work. Characters could be human as well as non - human entities such as animals or even inanimate entities - that however, have been personified by the author / novelist. The word character also connotes a sense of morality. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century England and France, the term character used to mean or refer to a literary genre. As far back as the late 4th and early 3rd Century BCE, the term characters was used to mean a genre in which a character type, rather than a truly individual being/ character was sketched in a brief work written in prose or verse. A character may also be a persona in a novel/ a drama/ a poem who, has been endowed with physical, moral and psychological attributes

by the novelist in such a way as to ensure that we as readers come to look upon them as real. There are several ways of classifying characters but ultimately it boils down to Forster's classification of Flat and Round characters that are easily and readily distinguishable and identifiable. Let us deal with flat characters first. Flat Characters are usually built around a single idea or quality. They are often presented rather cursorily in a single phrase or sentence and so do not go beyond a mere outline. They derive from a sense of collective identity from the type or group (social or literary) to which she/ he belongs. So, words, deeds and attitudes are dismissed as quirks of the class. And finally, flat characters are two-dimensional and so do not undergo change in the course of a novel. Round characters on the other hand are a combination of several ideas or qualities. They are sketched in detail rather painstakingly and may require an extensive treatment. They do not derive from any group. They have a distinct sense of personal identity and are often responsible for their words, deeds and attitudes. And lastly, round characters are three-dimensional and have the power to surprise us through an unexpected (though not totally improbable) act of transformation. Let us examine the character of Robinson Crusoe next. (BEGE 108, pp 23-24, Block I, Unit 2, IGNOU)

4.2.1 Robinson Crusoe

Robinson Crusoe is not an epic hero who goes on fantastical adventures, but a protagonist of the text which has been hailed by posterity as one of the first English novels that deploys a "realist" mode to tell a story about a character's extraordinary but believable bildungsroman. The narrative introduces Crusoe as a son of a merchant who leads a relatively genteel life now and desires to bequeath his wealth to Crusoe. Despite his father's repeated counselling, Crusoe is unable to suppress his longing to go on sea voyages and finally gives in to temptation. His rejection of the paternal inheritance and authority are symptomatic of his breaking away from established traditions and going on a quest for re-making his life. The narrative as a whole bears testimony to Crusoe's ingenuity and resourcefulness. These traits become all the more pronounced during his sojourn on the island where he not only survives for so many years but also toils hard to carve a comfortable retreat for himself. He perseveres for months to build a canoe, and relentlessly practices pottery making till he masters the art of it. He builds a home, a shelter for his goats, a country home, a grapes arbor, a dairy, all from scratch and keeps a journal so as to maintain a sense of order. These are crucial moments in English literary aesthetics as Crusoe's assertion of will and agentiality signal a new kind of hero - someone who is not living in an absolutely pre-determined world but is a self-realised individual. The Genevan philosopher *Jean-Jacques Rousseau's* high recommendation of Crusoe's hands-on approach in his fictional text, *Emile*, also plays a major role in making Crusoe's experiential learning proverbial. Crusoe not only equips himself with a fully functional survival tool kit, but also masters the art of doing business and making profit. Throughout the story, he goes on to make money efficiently, in fact, partly because of his sound business instincts. He is also able to earn a fortune in Brazil without being physically present there for twenty eight years.

It is also important to understand that Crusoe is not a uni-dimensional character but has a well-rounded personality. If he exhibits a variety of positive traits, he is not immune to the pangs of basic human emotions especially guilt, fear and panic. For a large part of the narrative, he is haunted by an irrepressible guilt for having disobeyed his father's commands. In fact he considers his solitary confinement on the island as punishment for his sins. He spends a great deal of

his time on the island fearing for his life and worrying about his security. It takes a lot of time and effort including an episode of feverish hallucinations to make him believe that an angel has paid him a visit and convince him that he has been liberated from his sins and given a fresh chance to start anew. After this, Crusoe actively rebuilds his life, combines his business ethics with Christian morality and reconciles himself to the current state of affairs. The emotional turmoil that he goes through to achieve this state of mental peace renders his character portrayal "realistic."

Since the novel is thoroughly enmeshed in the valorisation of individualism and self-sufficiency, Crusoe's approach to life is premised upon utilitarian logic to the extent that he measures a person's worth solely on the basis of their usefulness to him. He harbours no guilt for selling Xury, into slavery. His attitude towards Friday is relatively better but the relationship is extremely hierarchical and predicated on racial prejudices. In fact his dealings with people often bring out his acquisitive tendencies and obsession with power and prestige. He deploys slave labour on his plantations and consequently, amasses a lot of wealth. He goes on slaving expeditions and has no compunction at the prospect of using fellow human beings as slaves. In fact, like a proto-capitalist he seems to have internalised the popular belief that exploitation of the coloured/ black races is integral to British commerce and trade. His absolute indifference towards his wife (since he does not even tell us her name in spite of having fathered 3 children with her), again brings out the fact that for Crusoe, people exist for the sole purpose of serving him. It is impossible to fully grasp Crusoe's character portrayal without taking into account his white supremacist ideologies and colonialist tendencies. In fact, his bildungsroman reveals that rise of individualism, middle-class sensibilities, Protestant work ethic, capitalism and imperialism are inter-related and cannot be made sense of in isolation from each other. Let us look at Friday next.

4.2.2 Friday

Friday's character is portrayed as loaded with social and political significance in not only the English literary landscape but also the larger cultural repertoire. Though a highly individualised character, he is also a representative of all the natives of non-European lands who are eventually, economically, culturally and psychologically colonised. Defoe has given a vibrant personality to Friday and has depicted him as an affectionate human being, thereby, defying the western stereotypical assumptions about coloured people. Friday is very expressive and delights in human bonds, for instance, his joy knows no bounds when he is unexpectedly united with his father. He has a very thorough understanding of his own god *Benamuckee* and asks some very intelligent questions to Crusoe that sometimes leave the latter baffled, for instance, Crusoe is unable to satisfactorily reply to his question on the role of the devil in Christianity.

Having said all that, it is also important to understand that though Crusoe realises on befriending Friday that he is not exactly the "savage," he assumed him to be, but he cannot envisage a friendship of complete equality with Friday. Crusoe's attitude is extremely condescending and paternalistic towards him. Even though Friday has his own ideological beliefs and understanding of religion, Crusoe never gives them due importance or credit. Instead, he interprets his gratitude (for having saved his life), as a sign of complete subordination to him for the rest of his life. Crusoe treats him like an infant and imposes his will on him by teaching him the fundamentals of Christianity, English language and the English way of living without having any desire to imbibe any of his cultural norms.

It is important to understand that though some stereotypical assumptions are destabilised by representing Friday as a warm and loving companion to Crusoe, but the narrative as a whole does not take these destabilisation of racial hierarchies to their logical conclusion and ends up reiterating white supremacist ideologies. Friday enjoys narrative space and a relatively positive character portrayal only because he is very passive and willing to subsume his identity under that of Crusoe's. His servile nature is symbolic of his acknowledgement of the cultural and socio-political superiority of Crusoe. Postcolonial rewritings of *Robinson Crusoe*, from the point of view of Friday, like *J. M. Coetzee's Foe* and *Michel Tournier's Friday*, give a completely different trajectory to the plotline and starkly highlight the brutal consequences and eventual repercussions of master-slave relationships as in the case of Crusoe and Friday.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Do you think Crusoe would have been favourably predisposed towards Friday if he had not been servile?

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- 2) How are industrialisation, rise of the bourgeoisie and colonisation inter-related? Explain with reference to the character portrayal of Crusoe.

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- 3) How is Robinson Crusoe a "realist" novel? What is the larger significance of its popularity in the 18th century?

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- 4) How does negative cultural stereotyping contribute towards colonisation? Explain with reference to Robinson Crusoe.

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4.2.3 The Portuguese Captain

The Portuguese Captain is another relatively developed European character and functions as a harbinger of good news for the eponymous protagonist, Crusoe. He arrives at very significant climactic moments in the text and positively contributes in propelling the narrative. Firstly, he helps Crusoe and takes him to Brazil, after he flees from the captivity of the Moors. He helps Crusoe to successfully run his

plantations and earn huge profits. Secondly, when Crusoe is marooned on the island, he takes care of his plantations for 28 years and later informs him about the wealth that he has amassed and works out the logistics to sell the plantation and send him the money. As far as the conventional morality of 18th century Europe is concerned, the Portuguese captain is a paragon of all virtues. However, it is also important to understand that he buys Xury from Crusoe to work as a slave for him. Actively practising slavery does not seem to contradict his inner conscience. In fact, it appears that slavery is a part and parcel of a successful European estate. This particular instance again highlights that morality is a construct and the binaries of "good" and "evil" are subject to change.

The novel as a whole largely endorses Crusoe's resourcefulness and self-sufficiency and posterity has celebrated him as the poster boy of individualism. But critically scrutinising the role and contribution of the Portuguese captain in Crusoe's eventual monetary success makes one question the praises that have been heaped on Crusoe's enterprising skills and business acumen. No doubt that Crusoe manifests exemplary ingenuity on the island but his success and eventual profit on the plantations are largely because of the Portuguese captain who not only helps him establish the plantations but also oversees them during his absence. Thus, analysing the character portrayal of the Portuguese captain makes the readers re-visit the character of Crusoe also. Crusoe might not admit it but he does benefit from the human connections that he forges during his sea journeys and friendship with the Portuguese captain has certainly played an important role. In fact, the Portuguese captain takes on the role of his surrogate father. Let's look at Xury next.

4.2.4 Xury

Xury is a young Maresco servant on the ship on which Crusoe is a slave. Xury exhibits great loyalty to Crusoe and together they plot and plan their escape from the Moors. Xury's unconditional devotion to Crusoe also foreshadows Friday's unquestioning obedience to Crusoe. Like Friday, the positive representation of Xury is premised upon his willingness to acknowledge the socio-cultural, political and racial superiority of Crusoe. On the contrary, Crusoe does not really feel obligated to return that loyalty. In fact, he manipulates Xury's loyalty and affectionate nature strategically to his advantage and does not shy away from selling him back into slavery to the Portuguese captain for a good profit. Xury's character portrayal and contribution to the progression of the narrative is once again a reminder that the novel is written from the perspective of a white middle-class man and celebrates his good fortune and adventures, often at the cost of undermining the liberties of the non-white people. This reiterates once more that the rise of the bourgeoisie and their influence in the socio-political sphere and industrialisation of Europe were inextricably tied to the colonial desire to find new lands for raw materials and free labour so as to maximise profit and cut down production costs. The character of Crusoe's Father also needs to be examined we shall do that next.

4.2.5 Crusoe's Father

Crusoe's father is a merchant who earns enough money to buy himself a small estate and lead a cultivated middle-class life. In fact, he is the embodiment of the merits of the Protestant values and counsels Crusoe to partake of this lifestyle rather than relinquishing his inheritance and going on sea voyages. Since the *bildungsroman* of Robinson Crusoe echoes the biblical story of Adam's disobedience of God's command, Crusoe's father becomes an important

character in driving the narrative forward. Though physically absent for most of the narrative except for the initial few chapters, the guilt of Crusoe for defying his father's wishes continues to haunt him for a very long time. The trajectory of the plot is centred around the sin of filial disobedience, atonement for going against his father's desires when marooned on the island and deliverance from his sins when he discovers his wealth. While Crusoe initially goes against his father who apart from being his biological patriarch, is also a representative of established traditions and authority, he eventually ends up practising Protestant work ethic coupled with business acumen during his sojourn on the island. In fact, he manages to replicate a somewhat comfortable middle-class living for himself on the island.

So even though Crusoe's father does not enjoy much space in the narrative, the novel as a whole is obsessed with patriarchal and patrilineal transference and traditional heritage between fathers and legitimate sons, which exclude women. Again, it reinforces the fact that the primary, driving impulse of the plotline is to valorise the middle-class sensibilities that celebrate white supremacist and masculinist values.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In what ways does the novel celebrate masculinist norms and male-bonding?
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- 2) What role does the Portuguese captain play in Robinson Crusoe?
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- 3) What does the treatment of Xury say about the ideological politics of the novel?
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- 4) Is Crusoe a changed man at the end of the novel or is he still the same?
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4.3 LET US SUM UP

This unit has undertaken an in-depth analysis of the major characters of Robinson Crusoe and has critically engaged with them to understand the ideological politics

of the narrative. The character portrayals cannot be divorced from 18th century English society that was slowly transitioning from an extremely feudal society characterised by rigid hierarchies to a relatively fluid social order which started prizing personal merit over inheritance. Crusoe is the quintessential 18th century hero and closely scrutinising his character makes us realise that he often derived his selfhood at the cost of subjugating non-Europeans like Xury and Friday. This unit has helped you to make sense of the major players in the story, who by their presence and even absence contour the narrative and make it possible for readers to read it from alternative perspectives, by going against the grain.

4.4 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

1. The novel has portrayed Friday as a warm and affectionate being, contrary to the stereotypical assumptions that had labelled all non-Europeans as irrational, violent, aggressive and incapable of reasoning. In depicting Friday as a good human being, the storyline has also rendered him obsequious and servile in nature. According to the ideological politics of the novel, a non-European is good only if he/she passively accepts the tutelage of a white man. So "goodness" in a "savage" implies subservience to white authority. Given the rationale of the plot, Crusoe would not have been favourably predisposed towards Friday had he not been so servile.
2. Given the narrative politics of the novel, Crusoe represents the rising bourgeoisie in England who had become a social force to be reckoned in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Industrial Revolution necessitated cheap raw material and labour and therefore provided the solid economic motive to hunt for them in faraway lands. This purely economic-driven phenomenon was given the semblance of bringing the so-called enlightenment to non-European territories. Similarly in the story, Crusoe exhibits the prized middle-class virtues of self-sufficiency and resourcefulness and goes on to become the quintessential self-realised man after braving sea storms, wild animals, mutinies and nature in its most elemental form. But it is also important to understand that this self-sufficiency is premised upon procuring slaves from non-European lands and exploiting their services. Like a proto-capitalist, Crusoe is quite excited about his "absolute command" over all subjects of his little kingdom on the island and happily provides the readers with an inventory of his possessions on the island which includes his two homes, the "fortress" and the "country seat," grape valley, agricultural lands and enclosures for the grazing of his cattle.
3. 18th century is the age of rising bourgeoisie who go on to assume social and economic clout. This necessitates a demand for a new conceptualisation of the "hero." Chivalric knights and warriors who fight epic battles amidst grand backgrounds no longer meet the requirements of a society that is in the process of getting industrialised, urbanised and mechanised. With rigid feudal structures losing some of their former relevance and merchants, traders and professionals gaining some power, the backdrop is set to welcome a new kind of hero who is a self-made man. The novel is very self-conscious about not dabbling in the realms of fancy and ensuring that Crusoe embodies the virtue of self-sufficiency by following the Protestant work ethic. The story pays great attention to minute details and tries to capture the authenticity of the experience by repeatedly foregrounding the ruminations of Crusoe and how they shape his journey. Even though the Providential framework remains

intact, Crusoe seems to have a relatively secular materialist understanding of life.

4. Historical events bear witness that cultural stereotyping and geographical colonisation have worked in tandem. Since Robinson Crusoe has been read as a handbook for European colonialism, it is possible to understand how labelling a race as culturally inferior and making sure they internalise this inferiority make the members of that race very susceptible to colonisation. Crusoe's behaviour towards Xury and Friday are perfect examples to understand how the binaries of "civilized" and "savage" work in enabling the colonisation of the identities of those designated as "savages."

Check Your Progress 2

1. The theme of filial obedience is pervasively present throughout the narrative. Even though Crusoe's father does not make any appearance after the initial few pages, disobeying his wishes continues to haunt Crusoe. The storyline repeatedly stresses bonds between men, for instance, Crusoe's friendship with the Portuguese captain. Women are mostly absent and if present, they have token presence. For instance, Crusoe alludes to his marriage and the death of his wife in mere two lines. This speaks volumes about the gender politics of the story.
2. The Portuguese captain embodies virtues of generosity of spirit, kindness and affection and his social connection with Crusoe really helps him to consolidate his position as a successful plantation owner in Brazil. His presence in the story highlights the fact that Crusoe might want to believe that he has single-handedly achieved everything, but the benefits of his friendship with the captain cannot be dismissed. Secondly, in spite of being an embodiment of Christian ideals, the Captain does not seem to harbour any guilt for buying Xury as a slave. This again foregrounds how conceptualisation of morality cannot be divorced from the socio-political and economic circumstances.
3. Xury is represented as a simple-minded youth who actively helps Crusoe to plan their escape from the Moors. After having escaped enslavement, Crusoe does not have much guilt pangs to sell Xury back into slavery. According to the ideological politics of the novel, slavery is integrally tied to the prosperity of the plantation owners, so for all the endorsing of Protestant work ethic and piety, the novel does not fully condemn the exploitation of slaves.
4. Yes and no both. He has gone through lot of trials and tribulations and has come to acknowledge and appreciate the bounties of God and is filled with huge gratitude for the Providence for overseeing his welfare. He has shed some of his prejudices regarding non-whites, for instance, he befriends Friday (though he is very condescending in his attitude towards him). But he still continues to have a very utilitarian approach towards people, for instance, his attitude towards his wife.

4.5 GLOSSARY

Jean Jacques Rousseau: a Genevan philosopher and political theorist who had played a major role in revolutionizing the development of modern socio-political thought process in Europe. One of his most important piece of writing, *Emile* (1762), is an educational treatise that argues that

children learn faster by precept rather than instruction and stresses a lot on the experiential dimension of acquiring knowledge. This novel hails Robinson Crusoe as an ideal text for children so as to become self-realized individuals.

Ideological politics: Ideology implies a systematic set of beliefs and values that shape our perception of the world around us. Ideological politics mean organizing the thought process/ values/ moral concerns in a manner that they privilege certain socio-political and economic structures over others.

Internalization: It means to imbibe cultural values/social hierarchies/ customary beliefs through socialization and conditioning.

Conventional morality: The societal norms regarding "good" and "bad," "moral" and "immoral." Though these binaries are subject to change in case of re-structuring of socio-cultural and economic forces, but for a given historical moment they carry a semblance of fixity and rigidity.

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