

# Cultural differences in robinson crusoe



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Robinson Crusoe is a classical adventure with themes ranging from imperialism to providence but one of the key features of the novel is the cultural differences displayed throughout the tale. Crusoe embarks on a journey, which sees him confronted with contrasting cultures such as middle class England and indigenous tribes. These cultural clashes are evident through the narration that Defoe uses. When looking at the depiction of such cultures it is important to recognise who is telling the story. It primarily appears that each of the different cultures introduced are described through the eyes of Robinson Crusoe.

However it is equally vital to recognise Defoe's own cultural prejudices that creep into the narration of the tale. The most obvious one of these is Crusoe's nonchalant acceptance of the slave trade, a form of slavery that would shock and appal contemporary cultures but was an aspect of everyday life in the eighteenth century. The clashes between the cultures in the novel and that of Defoe's contemporaries is also apparent, particularly the themes of imperialism and religion, aspects of eighteenth century life that were seen as imperative to the survival of man. Daniel Defoe was writing Robinson Crusoe at a time of great communal and economic change.

At the time of the novels publication the country social culture was changing quite considerably, no longer were ones standing in society based on predetermined wealth and status of your forefathers, but a persons own determination to succeed. This cultural change is blatantly paralleled by Defoe in Robinson Crusoe when Crusoe tries to escape the trite "middle station" 1 of life in search of adventure and riches. Crusoe's father explains to him that, " The middle station had the fewest disasters, and was not

exposed to so many vicissitudes as the higher or lower part of mankind” (p. 4). The father refers to the middle class as having the fewest surprises or “vicissitudes”, however where the father uses this aspect of middle class life as a positive Defoe almost seems to present it as a negative, perhaps indicating that Crusoe’s desire to leave the life of mediocrity and boredom behind him in search for a better life is a key aspect to imperialistic and colonial culture that the novel was written in.

Colonialism is a major feature of Robinson Crusoe and is shown in the wide spectrum of situations that Crusoe is successful through implementing western capitalist practices such as farming. Ultimately it is his plantation in the “Brasils” (p. 37), a western development, which is used as the novel’s positive resolution with only a sentence on his family. At the end of the tale Crusoe describes briefly how, “In the meantime.

.. I married, and not either to my disadvantage or dissatisfaction” (p. 305). It is interesting to note that this brief mention of Crusoe’s personal life is lodged in between a section of text portraying Crusoe’s own desire to go travelling and earn some more money, perhaps Defoe is suggesting that to the eighteenth century man commerce and imperialism should be more important than personal affections.

This idea is supported in the previous quote by Crusoe when he declares his marriage as not being a “disadvantage or dissatisfaction”. This serves not only to highlight the lack of importance the personal life holds in Crusoe’s mind but also supports Defoe’s writing style as empirical and almost devoid of emotion. The notion of commerce and enterprise being more important to

a man's life than his family is an idea that would without a doubt strike the modern reader as unusual, however it is one of the many cultural differences that is highlighted in this novel between Defoe's contemporaries and the twentieth century reader. In an age of imperialistic progression and commerce, Crusoe's infamous listing and attention to detail depicts a culture obsessed with ownership and value. The eighteenth century was an empirical age of science and discovery, readers wanted realism and fact rather than artificial details. Defoe's deliberate and precise writing style is testimony to this.

Defoe's persistent and compulsive references to money and its worth highlights this; "in exchange for 32800 pieces of eight... payment of 100 Moidores.

.. and 50 Moidores" (p. 304) .

It can be argued that this inclusion of worth and financial gain in the novel is a tribute to the imperial and capitalist aspects of Defoe's world. However, This notion of financial worth is in stark contrast to Crusoe's position on the island where finance and monetary economy become almost redundant in comparison to the tools and materials Crusoe uses to survive on his island. Crusoe even describes "gold as silver..

.. thirty six pounds sterling" as "sorry useless stuff" (p. 110).

Crusoe's realisation that capital has no real worth on an island devoid of concrete civilisation is an idea that would have warmed to the image of Crusoe as the ultimate survivor. It is also interesting to note that during

Crusoe's time on the island he goes through a completely spiritual journey, perhaps Crusoe's dismissal of money supports the idea of Crusoe as a poor agent of God. Religion is one of the key themes of the novel that concern the presentation of cultural differences. At the beginning of the tale Crusoe is presented as a young man going against the wishes of "The Father.

.. wise and grave... serious man" (p.

4) This father not only refers to his biological father but also the father in a religious sense. Defoe by depicting Crusoe as a man who disregards his father's wishes indicates that Crusoe is a character without spiritual guidance. This notion is employed later on in the novel when Crusoe, in the middle of a torrential storm and rueing his decision of taking to sea refers to his father as "an Emblem of our Blessed Saviour..

. (p. 14) Defoe, himself a Puritan moralist, presents Crusoe as a man in search of his faith, who ultimately finds it when deserted and destitute on island. One particular moment where religion and cultural differences converge in the novel is when Crusoe attempts to impose his western religion on the "savage" (p.

204) Friday. Crusoe starts to "instruct [Friday] in the knowledge of the true God" (p, 21). Crusoe's use of the word "true" not only reinforces Crusoe's own fate in the mind of the reader but also indicates Crusoe's disregard for any other religion. An idea again referring back to the cultural imperialistic aspects of the novel, Crusoe's enforcing of his religion on Friday also supports this.

This religious cultural difference between Crusoe and Friday also highlights another key theme of cultural difference that occurs through out the novel, that of the western imperialist and the slave or “Negroe” (p37). D Defoe wrote Robinson Crusoe in the early eighteenth century, a time where the slave trade was at its most prolific. This element of imperialism is apparent at various stages through out the novel. The most apparent of these is when Crusoe, upon getting rid of some of his possessions ends up selling his comrade Xury to the Captain, admittedly Crusoe claims that “he did wrong by the boy” (p. 35) yet he still sold him for a measly “60.

pc of eight” (p. 33). The fact that Crusoe sold his companion not only highlights the cultural differences between the modern day reader and Defoe’s contemporaries but also supports the notion of imperialism in the eighteenth century. Later on in the novel when Crusoe comes across Friday claims that he’s beginning to “really love the Creature” (p. 213).

The reference to Friday as creature not only highlight the lack of respect that the western cultures had for the indigenous black people but also hints at the social hierarchy that Crusoe is starting to structure around him. The way in which Defoe represents the “Negroes” is indicative of the culture of the eighteenth century. Its one of the many cultural differences that are highlighted through out the novel between the modern reader and Defoe’s contemporaries. It appears that Defoe’s depictions of cultural differences are primarily used to praise Western culture and show its success and uses in any given situation. The novel’s conclusion is that because of Crusoe’s strength as a white capitalist male, he is ultimately very successful; “success” (p.

303) being prosperous as opposed to raising a happy family. Defoe shows how the Western culture, personified by Crusoe himself, with its imperialistic and capitalist tendencies imposes itself on the other cultures inhabiting the world, which is largely shown in the relationship between Crusoe and the “savages” (p. 04) he meets along the way, most importantly Friday. The Spaniard and the Captain are viewed by Crusoe as higher up in the social hierarchy because their cultures are the most similar to his own, whereas Friday is automatically viewed as a “servant” (p. 221) It can be argued that Defoe presents cultural differences to stress the journey that Crusoe has taken, however it is also fair to say that unintentionally Defoe has highlighted the cultural differences that lie between the contemporary cultural beliefs and Defoe’s own time.