

Daniel defoe: the father of the novel



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The rise of the novel is one of the most frequently debated literary themes in the history of literature. Scholars have always been divided in two factions that argue whether *Beware the Cat* by William Baldwin or *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe is the first English novel (Mackay, 32). While, on the one hand, scholars as Arthur F. Kinney and William A. Ringler claim that the ground-breaking satire *Beware the Cat* should be considered as the first English novel (Kinney, 398), on the other hand, intellectuals of the caliber of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf argue that *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventure of Robinson Crusoe, Ec.* is the text that started this new genre. *Robinson Crusoe*, in fact, is usually recognized as the first English novel since this book breaks with the writing standards fixed by past literary tradition. The theme of religion, which was the core theme of 17th century writing, has a major role in the book, but it does not represent the only theme that Defoe touched upon in the novel. According to Quentin G. Kraft, in *Robinson Crusoe* there are two main themes: the spiritual autobiography and the economic matters. These two themes, however, are not the only innovation that Defoe presents in *Robinson Crusoe*; in fact, the use of the first-person narration together with the values embodied by *Crusoe* make *Robinson Crusoe* the first novel of the English literature.

The English writer James Joyce describes Daniel Defoe as “ the first English author to write without imitating or adapting to foreign work, to create without literary models and to infuse into the creatures of his pen a truly national spirit, to devise for himself an artistic form which is perhaps without precedent” (321). Even if Joyce is right in describing Defoe as an innovator, the description he provides of Defoe is exaggerated. It is unquestionable that

Defoe has succeeded in doing something new; however, it is not true that he wrote the whole book without emulating other works. A great portion of Robinson Crusoe is based on the imitation of the spiritual autobiography, a form of writing that had reached its maximum success in the 17th century. As Kraft argues in his article “ Robinson Crusoe and the Story of the Novel,” the whole section of Robinson Crusoe in which Crusoe is on the island follows the typical pattern of the spiritual autobiography. In fact, Crusoe is shipwrecked on the island after having committed a sin, having disobeyed his father, and it is while he is on the island that Crusoe gradually turns to the bible and finally converts. Joyce also claims that Defoe’s innovation lies in the way he describes Crusoe, who personifies all the values of the perfect English man of the time who had to be able to adapt when in need (323). If necessary, indeed, Crusoe becomes an inventor, a farmer, a teacher, a governor, a slave trader, and a slave himself by breaking all the social schemes and creating a figure of man who is extremely modern. He is a person of superior intelligence, with a great ability to adapt and a strong natural survival instinct. When in Brazil, for instance, Crusoe has transformed himself into a plantation owner, and when captured by the pirates he has adapted himself to the condition of slave.

On the island, Crusoe was able to build himself a shelter, to produce milk and cheese from the goats, to create different tools and a canoe. Similarly, after being rescued he transformed himself into a governor and a trader. Joyce is so amazed by Defoe’s description of Crusoe, that he defines it as a prophetic description of the English men of his century (323). Crusoe’s vivid and realistic description has been achieved through the first-person narration

technique. According to Malinda Snow, this narration technique represents a further turning point in the history of fictional works, and it is another element that contributes to make Robinson Crusoe the first novel of the history. In her article “ The Origins of Defoe’s First-Person Narrative Technique: An Overlooked Aspect of the Rise of the Novel,” Snow explains that Robinson Crusoe first-person narration differs from the first-person narration of the spiritual autobiography. While Robinson Crusoe narrative style takes the cue from the scientific literature style, in which the narrator uses to report visible details realistically, the spiritual autobiography narration empathizes the abstract description of the soul by focusing the attention on the characterization of the emotion proved by the main character, creating a narrative that is, for the reader, a spiritual sensitive experience (181). The fact that in Robinson Crusoe the descriptions are vivid and realistic is remarkable from the first pages of the book. For instance, when Defoe describes the moment in which the sea comes calm again after the first storm, he writes, “ but towards Night the Weather clear’d up, the Wind was quite over, and a charming fine Evening follow’d; the Sun went down perfectly clear and rose so the next Morning” (8). The first-person narrator, as well as the accurate use of the adjectives, make the reader visualize the scene while reading. For the reader is easy to identify with the first-person narrator that describes the scene with meticulous detail. Yet when Defoe describes objects, animals or people that the reader is not familiar with, he tries to recall the unknown images to the reader by comparing the unfamiliar subject with things the reader already knows. A concrete example of this innovative technique can be found in the description that Defoe made of Friday. Defoe describes Friday nose as “

small, not flat like the Negroes” (149) and his skin as “ not quite black, but very tawny, as the Brasilians, and Virginians, and other Natives of America are” (149). When thinking about the savages the English could easily think of the African slaves that were traded during the 17th century, so Defoe tries to make the readers understand that Friday was different from the image that the English had of savages.

Even the description of Crusoe’s daily routine is detailed and descriptive. The reader could easily transport himself on the island with Crusoe and imagine himself adapting to this new undiscovered world. When Defoe writes. “ yet I built me a little kind of a Bower, and surrounded it at a Distance with a strong Fence, being a double Hedge, as high as I could reach, well stak’d, and filled between with Brushwood” (75), the reader, who still do not now the island, can imagine and visualize the shelter that Crusoe is building. It is in these descriptions that Snow’s point is more visible: Defoe describes everything Crusoe sees and does as a scientist would have reported on a text everything he had studied.

However, Robinson Crusoe is not just a book full of detailed description, but it is also a book that explore the spiritual growth of its main character. The novelty of the story is given by the combination of these two elements. On one hand, there are all the characteristics typical of the spiritual autobiography: the pattern sin, repentance, forgiveness, the description of the emotion of the protagonist, and the devotional growth; on the other hand, there are all the elements of modernity: the economic issue, the first-person outward-looking narration, and the fictional elements of the story.

Both Kraft and Snow agree on this: the originality of the narrative is conferred by the synthesis of the various elements. In particular, Kraft sustains that the loss of Crusoe's religion at the end of the book is what make this story a novel (548). Crusoe sudden disconnection from God gave to Defoe the opportunity to keep writing the story. If Crusoe had not forgotten all his religious believes, he would not have been to sea again and the last twenty pages of the book would have not been written. As a matter of fact, without the last twenty pages Robinson Crusoe should be consider a simple spiritual autobiography. All the element of novelty such as the versatile ability of Crusoe that so fascinated Joyce, his interest for the economics and his colonial spirit would be mere elements of description, that would make Crusoe a man with who the English could easily identify, but his loss of religion makes the story completely new. It gives the prompt to further develop the story and to write more books about this same topic, as the two sequels *The Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and *Serious Reflection During the Life & Surprising Adventure of Robinson Crusoe*.

On the whole, Crusoe had the ability to combine different styles, different themes and different settings generating a completely new genre. The vastness of the topic that Defoe explored has allowed him to reach a broader and more varied audience. The timeless fame he has reached is a further proof of the fact that Defoe was, undoubtedly, the first to create a text as innovative as *Robinson Crusoe*. Many writers have considered this book as an inspiration for their works, so that his book should be considered the first novel in the history of English literature.

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