

# Cruso's island vs. foe's england



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

J. M. Coetzee's 1986 novel *Foe* recounts the adventures and aspirations of Susan Barton, a fictional young woman who finds herself cast away on a most unusual island with the stolid Cruso and his tongueless slave Friday. The novel's beginning takes place on the island, where Susan falls into a slow but steady rhythm of life with her new cohabitants, all the while developing a great deal of experiences and philosophies which she grows eager to share. The novel's latter then details her rescue and return to England—a place quite immediately established as a sort of locational foil to the island. It is here that she turns her attentions to writing—or rather to convincing distinguished author Daniel (De)Foe to write for her—and in the process drives herself mad. Caught up in the throes of language, Susan ironically enough seems to lose hold of her story itself. Coetzee here adopts a somewhat unconventional perspective for an author: through the oppositional forces symbolized by the island and by England, he presents the idea that reality and occupational storytelling are perhaps destined to clash heads, that authorship might in fact rob one of his (or her) most real and substantial identity.

Cruso and his secluded home, in short, represent simplicity and truth. On the island, he and Friday are autonomous in an almost literal sense of the word, abiding not necessarily by their own laws but certainly by their own intuition, unrestrained by societal regulations and thus unpressured to be anything besides themselves. Upon arrival on the island, Susan serves as a sort of link between this simple, lawless establishment and the urbanized world. She immediately shakes things up a bit, playing devil's advocate when she calls into question the primitive nature of island life, to which Cruso simply

responds that “ as long as [their] desires are moderate [they] have no need of laws” (36). Throughout her stay, she is continually impressed by Cruso's remarkably simple lifestyle of building terraces and preparing food, but more notably by his indifference toward keeping records of any of it. She remarks that she “ might have lived most happily on [the] island, but who, accustomed to the fullness of human speech, can be content with caws and chirps and screeches...and the moan of the wind” (8). It is evident here that her societal roots prevent her from truly connecting to life's simplest pleasures; while Cruso is very much secure in his ability to find contentment without words, Susan remains somewhat burdened by her craving for deeper, language-driven meaning.

After arriving back in England, this burden only grows; the novel switches here from its mostly-narrative form to a more epistolary fashion, reflecting Susan's shift from a very primitive experience to fabricated storytelling. As Susan becomes increasingly preoccupied with this author to whom she writes, she concedes more and more of herself and her story to Foe (whose literary vision does not quite match her own). And just as England foils the island, the character of Foe likewise seems to foil Cruso. While Cruso had lived in simplicity and truth, Foe presses her for details and urges her to alter the narrative. He also instructs her to teach Friday how to write—a gesture that, although it may be well-intentioned, only reinforces the notion that a human's purpose is contingent on language. Towards the end of the novel, it is clear that Susan has lost a significant piece of herself in her attempt to turn an organic experience into a written story. She even remarks that “ the life [she] lead[s] grows less and less distinct from the life led on Cruso's

island" and that she consequently " sometimes wakes up not knowing where [she is]" (96). Despite her initial discomfort on the island, she eventually seems to recognize the value behind its truth and self-sustainability.

By the end of the book, despite Susan Barton's poignant self-doubt in her own writing ability, she has without question proven herself an author. But as Coetzee so cleverly establishes through her change of setting, company, and perspective, her authorship comes at the ultimate expense of substance in herself and in her story. Perhaps he is suggesting that every author-maybe even himself included-comes to a crossroads at which they must choose between truth and fabrication. " When I reflect on my story," Susan muses, " I seem to exist only as...a being without substance" (98). She then wonders: " Is that the fate of all storytellers?" J. M. Coetzee, of course, leaves the answer ambiguous and his readers ever so curious.