Daniel Defoe’s first novel *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719 when the author was nearly 60 years old. His debut as a novelist followed a long and varied career as a wholesale hosier; importer of wine and tobacco; investor in ships, real estate and bricks; journalist, essayist and pamphleteer. As these professions might suggest, Defoe was a global citizen, a man who was enmeshed in the rapidly expanding commercial networks of the 17th and early 18th centuries. *Robinson Crusoe*, often credited with being the first novel published in the English language, and among the most popular and enduring novels ever published, therefore was more than a simple adventure story. In a sense, it was a utopian novel, since it offered a vision of the ideal economy, a model for religious faith, and a template for the civilizing influence of English culture in an imperializing world; none of these ideals, however, was free of contradictions or ambiguity, making *Robinson Crusoe* a complex and fascinating artifact, a peek into the mind of an engaged participant in a rapidly changing 18th century world.

Perhaps the most debated aspect of the Robinson Crusoe story is what it has to tell us about “economic man,” or at least what Defoe has to say about him. When Crusoe is shipwrecked alone on an uninhabited island somewhere just north of Brazil, he is faced with the immediate challenge of survival. This means he must construct an economy, which can provide him with food, clothing and shelter. His behavior, therefore, can be used to describe the fundamental qualities of a human as an economic being, stripped of social and cultural trappings and advantages. Following his initial shock and despair, Crusoe proceeds to reconstruct all the basic historical stages of pre-industrial development. The detail with which Defoe describes Crusoe’s efforts is remarkable. It is also significant, in that it shows the importance he places on Crusoe’s economic activities.
At first, Crusoe can only hunt and gather, but he does not see this as a long-term solution, given the limits of his gunpowder. He is also very concerned about security and constructs an elaborate hidden shelter. Fortuitously, after he has emptied the useless chaff from a sack, he discovers grain growing near his shelter. He carefully nurtures it, frugally saving the seed for the next year. He creates a field, plants and replants the grain, and after four years of careful husbandry is able to make bread. Thereafter, he rationally calculates how much he needs to grow on a yearly basis in order to support himself, and never grows more. In addition, Crusoe domesticates the goats, which abound on the island, creating enclosed pastures, which eliminate the need to chase game and use the gunpowder. He becomes a craftsman, learning to make baskets and create pottery in the fire. By the end of the book, when he is joined on the island by the famous Friday, Friday’s father, and a Spaniard he rescues from cannibals, Crusoe has created a sort of landed estate, with him as “king” or “master,” his two dwellings his “castle” and his “country seat,” and his companions his servants. (See Appendix C for illustrations of Crusoe as “Economic Man.”)

With all these varied activities, Crusoe creates a thriving subsistence economy. He repeatedly emphasizes how hard he works, how thrifty he is and how inventive he has become, with more than a touch of pride. His is the very model of the sober and industrious middle rank of 18th century England – “regular in their habits, conscious of the need to ‘redeem the time’, sober, thrifty, prudent and responsible” (Wrightson 296). This is consistent with de Vries’s reference to Daniel Defoe as the “chronicler of the industrious revolution” (de Vries 258). Clearly, Defoe intends to present Crusoe as a character worthy of admiration.

A contradiction arises, however, when Crusoe claims to prefer his life on the island, however isolated, to his previous existence as a businessman. This claim is based on his freedom to enjoy the fruits of his labor without the need to accumulate worldly goods:

I had enough to eat, and to supply my wants, and what was all the rest to me?  If I killed more flesh than I could eat, the dog must eat it, or the vermin.  If I sowed more corn than I could eat, it must be spoiled.

In a word, the nature and experience of things dictated to me upon just reflection that all the good things of this world are no farther good to us than they are for our use; and that whatever we heap up indeed to give others, we enjoy just as much as we can use, and no more. (129)
Passages like the one above, or another in which Crusoe looks at his money and exclaims, “Oh drug! . . . what art thou good for?” (60), have led economists, including Karl Marx, to use Crusoe as an illustration of the difference between “use value” and “exchange value.” The idea that the value of an item is determined by its use was not new at the time that Defoe was writing, since it was one of the main ideas in John Locke’s theories. However, while Crusoe is clearly being offered by Defoe as the model of a man who succeeds against all odds because of his thrift, foresight and hard work, Defoe’s apparent further claim that the “use value” of a subsistence economy is morally superior rings false. In *The Complete English Tradesman*, he equally praises the English merchant as the “stoutest and best,” whose wealth can only be derived from “exchange value.”

In fact, it is hard to see how Crusoe could seriously be offered by Defoe as the model “economic man” for the early 18th century. However much Crusoe’s thrift and industry represented much admired values, the fact is that, according to Keith Wrightson in *Earthy Necessities*, England was already experiencing what has been called the “Commercial Revolution,” a long period of commercial expansion in which “the livelihoods of individual households had become increasingly dependent on the markets for their products, skills and labour within a substantially more integrated economy” (Wrightson 231). It was well past the time when most people could “self-provision” as Crusoe did. Even rural people were increasingly integrated into commercial networks in which “exchange value” was fundamental. Possibly the language in the novel is nostalgic, reflecting the “unease” that Maxine Berg points out that many people felt about the wealth and luxuries resulting from international trade (94), or possibly it is moralism based on Defoe’s strong Puritan beliefs. In any case, it seems a contradiction for an author so deeply involved in and supportive of trade.

However, the most startling contradiction in Crusoe’s economic behavior and attitudes comes toward the end of the book, when he finally has the possibility of being rescued. Despite his protests that he felt “how much more happy this life was… than the wicked, cursed, abominable life I led all the past part of my days” (113), when an English ship arrives to take him away, he wastes no time in taking advantage with apparently no regrets. He soon retrieves his wealth, which was first gained in the “Guinea trade” and then invested in a Brazilian sugar plantation. In the meantime, he makes meticulous plans for leaving behind his “plantation,” or colony, in the hands of the rescued Spaniard and another group of Spanish castaways soon expected to join
him. They are instructed exactly in how to maintain the fields and herds he has created, just as English investors gave instructions to their “plantations” in the New World (Canny 10). In a sequel to the first novel, he even brings them wives so that they could become a true colony. Thus, despite his heartfelt testimony to the joys of “use value,” Crusoe readily and happily reintegrates into a world of trans-Atlantic trade. Possibly, then, Defoe means to tell us that the simple life appears to be a happy one, but man is really incomplete without the challenge of commerce with his fellow man.

The second prominent theme of the Crusoe saga is that of piety. The novel is littered with religious references, especially to “Providence.” Some analysts have claimed that the religious language is only window dressing designed to satisfy the tastes of the potential audience for the book (which turned out to be enormous). For instance, images of the sea, of storms at sea, and of shipwrecks were commonly used in sermons and literature of the time as metaphors for spiritual journeys, which contemporaries would surely have recognized (Greif 555). But others point out that Defoe was knowledgeable about theology and took his religion seriously. He was a dissenter and a “radical in a society in which there was no alternative to the corrupt rule of a gentry Parliament; in which the urgencies of revolutionary Puritanism had been watered down to accommodate life in a sinful commercial society (Hill 13).” Seen in this context, it seems unlikely that Defoe would have written of spiritual matters casually.

At the beginning of the novel, Crusoe seems to have no strong religious inclinations. Even after having survived the shipwreck, he says “I had not the least religious thought, nothing but the common, ‘Lord, have mercy upon me!’” (83) After he discovers the grain, he at first feels a sort of wonder at God’s mercy, but “then the wonder began to cease; and I must confess, my religious thankfulness to God’s Providence began to abate too upon the discovering that all this was nothing but what was common” (81).

The turning point for Crusoe’s religious conversion occurs when he becomes ill and has a dream in which he sees a man descend from a black cloud carrying a sword and saying, “Seeing all these things have not brought thee to repentance, now thou shalt die” (89). In the long passage that follows this dream, Crusoe reflects at length on his previous wickedness and “stupidity of soul.” When he is well enough, he takes out one of the Bibles he retrieved from the ship and opens it randomly to a
passage that says, “Call on me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver, and thou shall glorify me” (95). This so deeply affects him that he sets aside time every day to read the Bible and tries to honor the Sabbath as a day of rest, although he can never be sure which is the right day. (See Appendix D for illustrations of Crusoe’s conversion.)

What is significant about this sequence of events is not so much that Crusoe saw the light, but that he was able to reach spiritual awakening and understanding completely outside any organized religion, using only his Bible and his own conscience. In this way, Defoe puts Crusoe firmly in the radical Protestant tradition of establishing a personal relationship with God. It seems likely that his was not simply an accidental outcome of the Crusoe story line, which puts him alone on an island, but a conscious attempt on Defoe’s part both to offer a critique of the Catholic and Anglican churches and to offer an alternative path to religious faith.

But once again, Defoe’s message is not consistent, or at least not doctrinaire. Crusoe constantly disparages Catholics, but welcomes Catholic Spaniards onto his island (albeit as second class citizens). He converts Friday to Christianity, but shows no inclination for further missionary work, despite his apparent religious fervor. Before he was shipwrecked, he conformed to Catholicism in Brazil, and even after he is rescued, he lives in Portugal and considers returning to Brazil, where once again he would have to be, at least outwardly, a practicing Catholic. In fact, his religious fervor seems to wane once he reintegrates into the modern world, since he rarely talks about religion at all. As Hill points out, Crusoe seems “more a man of the enlightenment than a traditional Protestant” (9) since he claims to have “allowed liberty of conscience throughout my dominions.” What this seems to suggest is that religious conviction is less important than commercial ends, and that Defoe emphasizes toleration because it is consistent with the needs of trade (Hill 9).

The final theme of Defoe’s novel is both the most compelling and the most disturbing to the 21st century mind. This has to do with the relationship between Europeans and the indigenous people, and the civilizing mission of the Europeans. In the novel, the people who show up from time to time on Crusoe’s beach are identified as Caribs. From the beginning, Crusoe is terrified of them because they are cannibals. It is this that leads him to go to extraordinary lengths to fortify and conceal his “castle.” In fact, his fears prove to be justified. First he finds evidence on the beach in the form of bones and body parts, both cooked and uncooked. Then he actually witnesses a party of “savages” killing and consuming their victims. Eventually he
rescues Friday, himself a Carib, as well as Friday’s father and a Spaniard from the cannibals. (See Appendix E for illustrations of cannibals and Friday.)

Needless to say, this is a negative depiction of Native Americans, which might be expected to have an effect on the attitudes of readers. The question arises of where Defoe, and therefore Crusoe, got the idea that Caribs were cannibals and whether it was true. What was the evidence? According to anthropologist Robert Myers, the connection between Caribs and cannibalism began with Columbus’s first voyage. In fact, the source of the word “cannibal” is the name of the Island Carib, the second group encountered by Columbus; the variation in form is due to Spanish mistranslations. From the Columbus journals, we learn that:

Indians with Columbus pointed out “Bohio.” They said that this land was every extensive and that in it were people who had one eye in the forehead and others whom they called “cannibals.” Of these last, they showed great fear, and when they saw that this course was being taken, they were speechless, he says, because those people ate them and because they are warlike (Myers 153-4).

If we do not believe there were actually one-eyed people in the Caribbean, what makes us believe the equal claim that there were cannibals? According to Columbus, “I did not find, as some of us expected, any cannibals amongst them, but on the contrary men of great deference and kindness” (Myers 154).

On the second Columbus voyage, the expedition physician Diego Alvarez Chanca reported more rumors of cannibalism, and of finding the head of a man cooking in a house. However, actual cannibalism was never observed, nor was it observed on the third voyage when similar reports surfaced. The reports mainly came from Arawaks who had a reason to try to please the Spanish, or possibly to misdirect them toward another group of people. For that matter, the cooking head could have been real, but due to ritual practices of cleaning the skull of flesh after death. Nevertheless, belief in cannibalism became firmly entrenched, and as Myers points out, served Columbus’s needs well because it was easier to enslave people who were so clearly beyond the pale of civilized society.

Over the next 200 years, similar reports continued, including second hand accounts from Amerigo Vespucci in 1503, Bishop Salamanca of Puerto Rico in 1587, Father Raymond Breton in 1665, Père Jean-Baptiste Labat in 1700 and many others. In one such story, the Caribs were reported to say that “the Spaniards are stringy and full of gristle, the French delicious, and the Dutch fairly tasteless” (Myer 164). Illustrations also surfaced, such as woodcuts from Hans Staden in 1557 and copper
engravings from Theodore de Bry in 1556. (See copies of these illustrations in Appendix B.) The 1516 map of Martin Waldseemüller labels an island near South America and the Guianas as containing cannibals, and includes an etching of a cannibal victim. We have no way of knowing if Defoe had knowledge of these particular sources, but we do know that reports of cannibalism in the Caribbean region were rife.

While we cannot entirely discount the possibility that reports of cannibalism were true, the evidence is less than convincing. In *The Man-Eating Myth*, William Arens questions the existence of “customary cannibalism” among any group of people, but as Myers points out, the layers of legend were so quickly built up around the subject of Carib cannibalism, it is now impossible to know the truth. In the meantime, there were also numerous reports of peaceful contact and trade between the Caribs and Europeans, including one by John White, governor of the Roanoke colony, who stopped in Dominica in 1590:

> The first of May in the morning many of the Salvages came aboard our ships in the canoes, and did traffique with us; we also the same day landed and entered their towne whence we returned the same day aboard without any resistance of the Salvages; or any offence done to them (Myer 165).

The fact is that the definition of the Carib people as “naked,” “savage” and “cannibal,” words repeatedly employed by Crusoe, has the effect of distinctly separating civilized, clothed European Christians from the indigenous people. As historian Jill Lepore points out in her book on King’s Philip’s War in New England, the idea of nakedness was central to the English. “Naked men, after all, were barbarians, and naked land a wilderness.” (79) The significance of the use of naked cannibals as a major plot device is that it helps to construct European identity in contrast with a clearly inferior group of people; as such, it serves the needs of an imperial or imperializing nation. Defoe, by publishing such a story, wittingly or unwittingly contributed to that process.

It should be noted that in addition to the ethnically loaded terms used by Crusoe for the Caribs, there is even more objectionable content in terms of the portrayal of Africans. Early in the novel, Crusoe makes a profit of 700% in the “Guinea trade,” traveling to Africa to exchange trinkets for gold dust. When he is enslaved by a Turk and then escapes, he sails in a boat along the African coast, where he hears the roaring of wild beasts and fears the African people, “for to have fallen
into the hands of any of the savages had been as bad as to have fallen into the hands of lions and tigers” (30). When he comes close to the shore, he sees Africans who are “quite black and stark naked,” with no weapons except a stick (33). As Wheeler points out, two essential distinctions for Europeans between themselves and others were clothing and arms (along with facial hair), so these descriptions are significant. When Crusoe uses his gun to kill a lion, he says the Africans were astonished by the noise and ready to fall down in terror. Later, Crusoe’s fateful shipwreck is occasioned by a slave-trading venture from Brazil to Africa, which he had suggested to the other planters and offered to lead. During his conversion experiences on the island, he expresses regret over the “wickedness” of his past life, but this regret never extends to his involvement in the slave trade; in fact, he continues to own his plantation in Brazil, whose significant profits were presumably generated by slave labor.

Unflattering depictions of Caribs and Africans can easily be explained as a simple reflection of the Eurocentric ethos of the time – a logical extension of a developing imperialist system in which Europeans were exerting their power and influence. However, Crusoe will not let us off so easily. He takes for granted his superiority over Friday when Friday lies down before him and places Crusoe’s foot upon his head; Crusoe immediately defines Friday as a servant. Yet his descriptions of Friday are admiring, albeit sometimes by comparison to a lesser type of human, the African, or to a superior one, the European:

He was a comely, handsome fellow, perfectly well made, with straight strong limbs, not too large, tall and well shaped. …He had a very good countenance, not a fierce and surly aspect, but seemed to have something very manly in his face, and yet he had all the sweetness and softness of a European in his countenance, too, especially when he smiled. His hair was long and black, not curly like wool; his forehead very high and large; and a great vivacity and sparkling sharpness in his eyes. The colour of his skin was not quite black, but very tawny…. His face was round and plump; his nose small, not flat like the Negroes’ ...(202)

Crusoe’s description of Friday is admiring, but by describing him using comparisons with other groups it also renders boundaries imprecise. According to Roxann Wheeler, at the time the novel was set, African slavery was systematically replacing other forms of servitude in the West Indies, and racial categories were still shifting. It was not yet simply slave/black vs. master/white. There arose a tradition of seeing Native Americans as like Europeans, or at least more like Europeans than Africans. As Jean Baptiste du Tertre wrote in 1667: “Only skin color distinguishes
them from us, for they have bronzed skin, the color of olives” (Wheeler 843).
Richard Bradley, a contemporary of Defoe’s, said, “A sort of White Man in America (as I am told) that only differs from us in having no beards” (Wheeler 843). Crusoe himself, after getting to know Friday, says of the savages that God:

has bestowed upon them the same powers, the same reason, the same affections, the same sentiments of kindness and obligation, the same passions and resentments of wrongs, the same sense of gratitude, sincerity, fidelity, and all the capacities of doing good and receiving good that He has given to us; and that when He pleases to offer to them occasions of exerting these, they are as ready, nay, more ready to apply them to the right uses for which they were bestowed then we are. (206)

Friday seems to be firmly in the mold of the Noble Savage: a naked, beardless, Godless version of Europeans, only better in the sincerity of his feelings.

In one of the most fascinating passages of the novel, though, Defoe moves beyond a somewhat sentimental idealization of the Noble Savage to a much more complex and nuanced consideration of the issue of cannibalism that approaches cultural relativity. When Crusoe first discovers evidence of cannibalism, his initial reaction is shock and horror. “I looked up with the utmost affection of my soul, and with a flood of tears in my eyes, gave God thanks that had cast my first lot in a part of the world where I was distinguished from such dreadful creatures as these” (163). He obsessively considers how he can stop the cannibals from eating any more captives. However, after further reflection, he comes to the conclusion that:

these people were not murderers in the sense that I had before condemned them in my thoughts; any more than those Christians were murderers, who often put to death the prisoners taken in battle; or more frequently, upon many occasions, put whole troops of men to the sword, without giving quarter, though they threw down their arms and submitted. (169)

Crusoe goes on to say that if he should attack the cannibals, who had not done anything to him personally, he would be no better than the Spanish, who everyone knew had behaved atrociously in the New World, where:

they destroyed millions of these people, who, however they were idolaters and barbarians and had several bloody and barbarous rites in their customs, such as sacrificing human bodies to their idols, were yet, as to the Spaniards, very innocent people; and that the rooting them out of the country is spoken of with the utmost abhorrence by even the Spaniards themselves, at this time, and by all other Christian nations of Europe, as a mere butchery, a bloody and unnatural piece of cruelty…(169).
As almost modern as these ideas seem, the passage above makes an important point about the contemporary discourse concerning the treatment of indigenous people. It is easy today to look at the appalling racism in Robinson Crusoe and conclude that this was simply the way people thought at the time, and therefore we cannot blame Defoe or Crusoe or anyone else for expressing such views. Yet apparently Defoe knew better, because he expresses awareness of how unjust it was to treat Native Americans the way the Spanish had, or even to judge the “savages” and “barbarians” through one’s own cultural lens. It seems likely that Defoe would have read the work of Bartoleme de Las Casas, whose 16th century treatise “In Defense of the Indians” was translated into English and widely available. According to Lepore, its grisly depiction of Spanish actions in the New World “invited English readers to define their colonial ventures in opposition to that model” (9). One wonders if Dafoe had also read Michel de Montaigne, whose 1562 essay entitled “On Cannibals” makes a withering attack on European claims to cultural superiority:

I consider it more barbarous to eat a man alive than to eat him dead; to tear by rack and torture a body still full of feeling, to roast it by degrees, and then give it to be trampled and eaten by dogs and swine—a practice, which we have not only read about but seen within recent memory, not between ancient enemies, but between neighbors and fellow citizens and, what is worse, under the cloak of piety and religion—than to roast and eat a man after he is dead.

It is probably a mistake to overstate the positive aspects of Robinson Crusoe in terms of imperialist attitudes toward conquered and enslaved peoples; after all, Crusoe chooses, despite all his agonizing over the question, to fight the cannibals, save Friday, make him into a servant, and convert him, all the while playing the role of master and civilizer. In the same way, it is a mistake to take Defoe’s apparent glorification of the economically independent man, or pious repentance, at face value. Time and again, Defoe offers mixed messages. Crusoe is a man alone, making use of thrift and hard work to get ahead, yet he is in thrall to international trade. He expresses strong religious convictions based on personal spirituality, but does not seem to act on these convictions once more worldly concerns intervene. He entertains notions of the Noble Savage and cultural relativity, but when push comes to shove, meaning when money and power are in play, he chooses to act in a way consistent with the imperialist categories of “civilized” and “savage” people.
Does *Robinson Crusoe* matter? Perhaps. It was a bestselling novel in 1719 and remains one of the best-known stories in all of English literature. Surely it has had an effect, for better or worse, on how we think about man as a castaway, man as a spiritual being, and man in relationship to his fellow but darker-skinned man. If this is the case, we owe it to Defoe and to ourselves to recognize the complexities and contradictions of the actual novel, for these reflect what it meant to be human in the rapidly changing 18\textsuperscript{th} century world.
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Appendix A

Illustration and title page of first edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, 1719.

Appendix B

Woodcut from *Hans Staden: True Story and Description of a Country of Wild, Naked, Grim, Man-eating People in the New World, America*, 1557

Appendix C: Robinson Crusoe as “Economic Man”

1823 Wright edition

1835 Cruikshank edition
Appendix D: Robinson Crusoe as a Religious Model

1720 French language edition

1831 edition
Appendix E: Robinson Crusoe as Civilizer

Early unknown illustrator

1840 edition
Source of all illustrations in Appendix C-E:
“Picturing the First Castaway: The Illustration of Robinson Crusoe.”
http://www.camden.rutgers.edu/Camden/Crusoe/Pages/crusoe.html