

**UGC MHRD e Pathshala**

**Subject: English**

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**Paper 02: English Literature 1590 – 1798**

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**Module No 29: Daniel Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe***

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**A Gateway to all Post Graduate Courses**

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## Lesson Plan

The lesson intends to discuss Daniel Defoe as a novelist placing him in the eighteenth century scenario amidst literary, socio-economic and other developments. The eighteenth century was a period, which saw the emergence of the modern English novel. The eighteenth century novel is a fertile territory where engagement with social issues and moral dilemmas were of primary concern. The lesson while establishing that the novel emerged in the early eighteenth century precisely because a new kind of commercial society was taking shape at this time, considers Defoe as one of the first writers who dared to experiment with a 'new form', giving it a proper shape and contributing towards its growth and popularity. In most of Defoe's fiction, the situation is that of the hero (male or female) alone against the world, surviving by dint of perseverance and sheer native energy and *Robinson Crusoe* seems to be the best example of this. The lesson discusses *Robinson Crusoe* in detail with special emphasis on the way in which this novel tells us a great deal about the various crosscurrents at work in society in the early eighteenth century. The lesson also touches upon the various re-readings and re-writings of this canonical text revealing how a text such as this encodes a politics of racism, colonialism, and literary interpretation.

### S1 HISTORICAL AND BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

#### The Rise of the Novel:

Literary historians have always tried to trace the origins of the novel in antiquity and there are varied opinions regarding this. Some regard *Chanson de Roland* as having some remote connection with the eighteenth century English novel and others mention Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrims Progress* (1678) and Lyly's *Eupheus* (1579). Chaucer's great work is always remembered for its superb characterization, realism and its subtle humour. *Eupheus* was written in the form of letters and *The Pilgrims Progress* as religious allegory. However, the influence of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, which was translated into English in 1612 on the eighteenth century English novel, is very often regarded as being profound. The Elizabeth period noted for the flowering of Renaissance poetic drama did not allow the rise of any other genre. The English stage from about 1580 to 1640 dominated the Elizabethan and Jacobean literatures. An interest in 'theatricality' more than in 'the real' and 'the plausible' dominated the minds of the audience. In his observation

on *The Pilgrim's Progress* Walter Allen regards it as being similar to the conventional picaresque novel. "Christian's progress is nothing if not a journey through the world, and though the characters encountered on the way have only moral tags for names they are unerringly characterized by the words Bunyan puts into their mouths." (Allen 32)

When the 'new form' rose however it had entirely different demands. The novel demanded realism and conformity to the facts of the world. Shakespeare's characters moved in a non-realistic world but this could not happen for a genre like the novel which was to deal primarily with man in society. Mrs. AphraBehn's most famous prose fiction *Oroonoko: The Royal Slave* may be interpreted as the forerunner of anti-colonial literature, depicting the idea of the noble savage (70 years before Rousseau). Congreve's *Incognita* written towards the end of the century may also be described as a work of prose fiction and not the novel proper. Congreve possessed a witty and conversational style using which he created characters almost fit for novels and yet he was a brilliant dramatist and not a novelist. The characters of Addison's *Spectator* papers also need to be mentioned here for their ability to exist outside the limited horizons of the essays that describe them. Yet Sir Roger is a fictitious character in an essay or a series of essays and not in a novel.

This finally brings us to the man who co-incidentally and on retrospection becomes the first novelist of the eighteenth century to have laid the foundation of the English novel at the turn of the century. The novel finally emerges from a tradesman, Daniel Defoe who had originally produced journals or transcripts of actual experience not for any aesthetic pleasure but for monetary gains.

### **Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) – Life and Works:**

Defoe was born in London in the year 1660, the son of James Foe, a Butcher (who from 1655 on changed his name to Defoe). Having attended Morton's academy for Dissenters at Newington Green, he had an interest in the ministry. However, recognising his independent, ambitious nature, he wanted to be a part of the rapidly growing business world of London. His mercenary interests are shared by his protagonists especially Crusoe in the novel *Robinson Crusoe*. By the time, he married Mary Tuffley in 1683/4 he was established as a hosiery merchant in Cornhill. He was an avid traveller having travelled in France, Spain, the Low Countries. He also tried his hands at politics. He was a staunch believer in religious freedom and from 1685 for the next 3 years he published several pamphlets protesting against the king's policies. In 1662, the economy collapsed leading to Defoe's loss in fortune after

which he had to struggle to pay off his debts. He took part in Monmouth's rebellion, and in 1688 joined the advancing forces of William III. After King William's death, Defoe still a Dissenter, found himself persecuted once again. He was imprisoned for debt and sentenced to stand in a pillory for 3 days on a charge of sedition for publishing a satirical pamphlet. He died at the age of 70.

He was one of the most prolific writers in the eighteenth century and beyond producing some 560 books, pamphlets, journals etc. Apart from his novels (for which he has earned applause) he also wrote poetry, political pamphlets, economic commentaries, a family conduct book, works, of history, and a guidebook to the whole of Britain. Peck and Coyle in their *A Brief History of English Literature* write: "His publications provide the best evidence there is of a new class of people, with new energy and new values, coming into existence at the start of the eighteenth century." *Robinson Crusoe* appeared in 1719; *Life and Adventures of Mr. Duncan Campbell* and *Captain Singleton* in 1720; *Moll Flanders*, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, *The History of Peter the Great*, and *Colonel Jack* in 1722.; *Roxana* and *A New Voyage Round the World* in 1724; *The Four Voyages of Captain George Roberts* in 1726. His last principal works were *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726), *Triumphs* (1728), *A Plan of the English Commerce* (1728), and *The Complete English Gentleman* (1890).

## **S2 THE NOVEL AS A DISTINCT LITERARY GENRE**

### **Realism and the Romance**

The successors of the 18<sup>th</sup> century novelists were on the one hand the medieval romance and the courtly novels of Italy and France among others. On the other hand, works belonging to the picaresque tradition like Cervantes served as models for the new literary form. Arnold Kettle defines the novel as "a realistic prosefiction, complete in itself and of a certain length." The point to consider in this definition is the term "realistic" and the other related term "romance". Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines the term romance as (loosely) a narrative of heroic or spectacular achievements, of chivalry, of gallant love, of deeds. An example of this is *Don Quixote* whose influence is to be tremendously felt in the 18<sup>th</sup> century novel especially in the picaresque narrative of adventures. However, along with the romance and the picaresque elements, the novel in the 18<sup>th</sup> century aspired towards the everyday, the social and the domestic. Ian Watt in his discussions on realism in *The Rise of the Novel* argued that the novel's novelty was its 'formal realism' – the idea that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience.

Aristotle describes mimesis as “the faithful representation of reality”. Eighteenth century realism begins from the position that the individual through the senses can discover truth. In literary history, realism is associated with the efforts of the novelists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in France. Balzac, in *La Comedie Humaine*, saw himself as a scientific historian, recording and classifying the social life of France in all its aspects. With the advent of realism, the common people make their collective entry into the literary arena. Eric Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1953) also regards realism as a form, which prioritizes and gives value to the daily activities of men and women and lets them make a collective entry into the literary arena. It was precisely with this intention that the novel as a ‘new form’ rose.

### **Defoe and the Novel**

It may be said that the novel arose in the eighteenth century for a number of reasons. The rise of the middle class which allowed for the first time in history, a widely educated, reading public; the demand being more among women readers. This public did not find the theatre as a feasible form of entertainment for reasons related to middle class ideologies and their way of life.

Defoe’s novels are chiefly written in the picaresque tradition. The Oxford Companion to English Literature regards this term as having derived from the Spanish ‘pizaro’- a wily trickster. The term was first used in England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Arnold Kettle, this term came to be associated with the type of novel which deals with the life histories of the feudal outcasts, of men and women who have no satisfactory place in feudal society, and their characteristics – variety, adventurousness, colour, irreverence, a lack of guiding principle – are the characteristics of the rebels and adventurers who had not yet become a self-conscious class.” (Kettle 1978: 52) However, Defoe adapted the idea of the ‘pizaro’ to the eighteenth century social scenario where the ‘pizaro’ was no longer a feudal outcast but a participant in the market based economy controlled chiefly by the bourgeoisie action of the society.

Eighteenth century fiction is an important stage in the fashioning and a key tool for the understanding of the socially constructed self. Defoe’s novels demonstrate the pattern of a man or woman’s life. Be it *Robinson Crusoe* or *Moll Flanders*, we follow the various episodes of their life from birth to old age moving towards an essentially individualist attitude

to existence where a man/woman looks at the world from his/her own perspective. The attitude of Defoe and his contemporaries can be summed up in the line by Pope:

“The proper study of mankind is man”

(Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Man”)

Locke’s empiricist philosophy and Newton’s science build a new world full of hope and confidence replacing the doubt and uncertainty of the earlier 17<sup>th</sup> century. Defoe has been regarded as one of the first few writers to forward such a study bringing in the scientific advances through the medium of the new prose.

### **S3 THE TEXT AND CONTEXT: *ROBINSON CRUSOE***

#### **Plot Overview**

The opening lines of *Robinson Crusoe* give us a vivid picture about the various crosscurrents at work in society in the early eighteenth century. After having rejected the secured life of his family and not willing to settle down to the “middle state” of life, Defoe’s hero sets out to explore newer avenues, to ascertain the parameters of his own existence. It is the story of the individual’s search for selfhood as he was not to be confined within the middle station even though it was regarded as one having “the fewest Disasters”. It also depicts a power relationship – one among the many, which the novel highlights - in which the child Crusoe needs to assert himself, rejects the secured life offered by his father, and moves ahead.

When a storm causes the near deaths of Crusoe and his friend, the friend loses all interest in any further sea voyages but Crusoe remains determined and sets himself up as a merchant on a ship leaving London. After this successful trip Crusoe plans another, which turns out to be an unfortunate voyage as the ship is seized by Moorish pirates and Crusoe is taken prisoner and made a slave to the captain of the ship. He spends the next two years of his life looking after the garden of his master’s house and at the end of the second year escapes with a young slave boy named Xury on a boat. After days of sailing and adventure, they reach the Cape de Verde Islands and board a Portuguese slave ship headed for Brazil. The captain of the ship buys Crusoe’s boat from him and sells Xury to him as a slave.

Twenty days later the boat lands in Brazil and Crusoe settles down as a planter with a thriving new Plantation, once again, living a simple middle class life. But as had happened

earlier, he could not be content even now and being the “wilful Agent of all [his] miseries” - he once again set out on a new voyage to West Africa but ends up shipwrecked off the coast of Trinidad. Crusoe soon learns he is the sole survivor and thanks God profusely for sparing him his life. After having spent the first night on a treetop, he woke up in the morning to find his wrecked boat a few miles away from him. He returns to the boat twelve times to salvage guns, powder, tinned food, and other items that he thought would be necessary for him to survive. He builds a shelter for himself and in the course of the next few days makes the shelter as habitable and comfortable as he could. He also erects a cross that he inscribes with the date of his arrival, Sept. 1 1659, and makes a notch everyday in order never to lose track of time.

Gradually, he acquires a goat, a dog and a parrot as companions; he made candles and surprisingly discovered “stalks of rice” which he could use to make food, thanking God profusely for all these little comforts in an otherwise difficult time. A survey of the island made it very clear that though it abounded in wild animals it was practically free from human habitation, though he could never be sure of this. He begins to feel more optimistic about being on the island, describing himself as its “king” and thus spends a number of uneventful years. It is precisely at this point in the narrative when Crusoe is full of confidence regarding himself and his ownership of the island that he discovers a footprint on the beach, an event which leaves him paranoid for a long time. After this, he struggles hard to retain the mastery he has already achieved until the cannibals are defeated and Friday is rescued. For the next three years the two live happily till another boat of savages arrive with three prisoners of whom two are saved by them. One of them is a Spaniard and the other is Friday’s father. The Spaniards were the survivors of a shipwreck that Crusoe had once witnessed from the shore. Friday’s savage companions saved them and they lived on the other side of the island where the savages lived.

His last great adventure on the island happens when a ship suddenly appears in his harbour. Crusoe feels the men aboard this English ship were up to no good. He watches as three men are put ashore by a group of mutineers. He acts as the deliverer and rescues these men and their ship from the mutineers. Pretending to be the governor of the island, he seizes the ship on which he sets sail to England on Dec 19 1686 thus ending his twenty-eight years on the island. He revisits the island again in the year 1694, when once again he embarks on a voyage to the West Indies leaving behind his children, and meets the Spaniards and the mutineers once again.

## Reading *Robinson Crusoe*: a critical overview

It is a generally accepted notion that in writing *Robinson Crusoe* Defoe was not consciously writing a novel. *Robinson Crusoe* is indebted to many travel books and it remains until date a highly scientific work full of accurate data. It may be regarded as a novel of romantic adventure and at the same time, a children's adventure story, Crusoe being both a hero and an archetype of *homo economicus*, a man for whom everything can be rendered in terms of double entry book-keeping, as well as an Adam who builds his second paradise in the island. Crusoe right from the beginning fictionalizes the need for individualism and private enterprise through the actions and adventures of its chief protagonist. Ian Watt regards it more as a myth than a novel, one which naturally falls into place with *Faust*, and *Don Quixote* among others. Faust with his insatiable curiosity to know, Quixote with his almost blind faith in chivalric idealism has always been regarded as cultural heroes depicting the aspirations and pursuits of Western man. In a similar vein, Crusoe too has come to be associated with a triumph of human achievement and enterprise, one standing against all odds and celebrating the status of a rebel who, "without asking God's blessing, or my Father's, without any consideration of Circumstances or Consequences" set out on his first sea adventure, in spite of the character being imaginary.

At one level, the text seeks to represent and recreate in terms of empirical realism, the socio-economic and sexual underworlds of eighteenth century England, using a self-reflexive autobiographical narrative mode. This is one reason why contextualizing the text becomes an important aspect of understanding the finer textual nuances and the sub-text of the novel. The dexterity with which Crusoe masters nature after he finds himself in an uninhabited island can be viewed in two ways –

1. As part of the individualist human enterprise that the novel partly celebrates,
2. As part of the colonial enterprise that the novel as a whole projects.

According to the first point, Crusoe (as has already been mentioned) is often regarded as an 'economic man' who uses nature to his benefit thereby setting an example of the triumph of human achievement and enterprise. The other point that highlights England's status as a rising Empire reveals a complex colonizer-colonized relationship that not only forms an integral part of reading *Robinson Crusoe* but also allows multiple counter readings and responses.



Postcolonial studies are concerned with the various kinds of representation/ misrepresentation of non-European cultures within European literary texts. A discursive understanding of such a concern leads to processes of re-reading and re-writing literary texts for furthering an anti-colonial as well as a postcolonial view. Postcolonial authors challenge the imperial ideologies inculcated and stabilized through the British canonical texts. A. D. Hope's poem "Man Friday" (1958) is an earlier response to *Robinson Crusoe* concerned with what happens to Friday after he has been "rescued" from the island along with Crusoe. He regards himself as a castaway in 'England's Desert Island' and strives to protect his identity as a "natural" man among the "cultured". Like Defoe's Friday, J. M. Coetzee's Friday in *Foe* (1986) also reached England. *Foe* is a post modern novel that interrogates and subverts the master-slave paradigm implicit in *Robinson Crusoe* with the help of a female narrator Susan Barton and a 'tongueless' and 'speechless' Friday. Derek Walcott's *Pantomime* (1978) is another work that "writes back" to Defoe's "master" narrative of empire.

#### **S4 Characterisation**

##### **Robinson Crusoe: From the Castaway to the self proclaimed Master**

The credibility of the story of *Robinson Crusoe* by Defoe springs from the focus on Crusoe the man himself. Crusoe's rebellion against his father's middle class dreams, his restlessness, the tremendous urge in him to move on, to gain more profits leads him to a life of isolation and solitude. Even in the midst of tremendous distress he not only survives physically on the island by means of a resourcefulness and cunning (which at times seems almost improbable) but also moves beyond the destructive effects of isolation and establishes himself as a master of the island with everything (himself and his environment) under his control. However, throughout his period of isolation a spirituality of a strong nature and the belief on Providence helped him struggle with self-assurance on the one hand and utter hopelessness on the other hand. Just as Providence led him to his isolated state, it also gave him a tremendous courage to turn disasters into meaningful turning points and Crusoe is ultimately able to find meaning in flux, hold back his own potential hysteria, and shape his own character. The utilitarian methods he employs to make the island and its environment suitable for living makes him a self-determined Defoe protagonist whose attempts at establishing 'culture' in nature are rewarding. Crusoe displays this very stability and possessiveness upon himself and his island when he encountered society. Providence guides

him to a servant-companion thereby ending his period of absolute solitude and leading to an increase in his political power. He is a true colonialist at heart who knows perfectly well to rule, to exploit and to assert. The arrival of the mutineers gives a tremendous boost to Crusoe's political career on the island as he now rescues the three castaways from the ship, thus playing the role of Providence (himself) in their lives.

### **The Slaves: Xury, Friday: the 'natural' man**

Xury is the servant on the ship where young Crusoe serves as a slave. When Crusoe escapes with two other slaves in a boat, he forces one to swim to the shore but keeps Xury on board. They become good companions. However, after a Portuguese captain rescues them, Crusoe sells Xury to the captain with the promise that he would be set free after a period of ten years. Crusoe does not consult Xury in this regard. Xury is later replaced by Friday in the island. However, Crusoe's colonial mind is evident in his handling of Xury initially in the text.

Friday makes his appearance as a victim rescued from sacrifice who soon makes "all the Signs to me of Subjection, Servitude and Submission imaginable, to let me know, how he would serve me as long as he lived." However, Friday had a far more important role to play than merely the role of a victim. Crusoe does not ask for Friday's name instead gives him a name; it is also to be remembered that the story of Genesis reveals that Man was created on the sixth day that is a Friday. Friday is the cultural other of Crusoe – one who is capable of exhibiting emotion towards others (especially towards Crusoe and his father whom he saves from the cannibals). Friday jumps and sings for joy when he meets his father – the kind of emotions Crusoe is never capable of displaying. He is described as brave, "handsome", "perfectly well made", "well shaped", "very manly", "with a great vivacity" and a "sparkling sharpness in his eyes." Crusoe also finds him "faithful", "loving", "sincere", "merry", "a fast runner", "diligent" and above all grateful. His gratitude demonstrates the perfect foundation for a contract between a citizen and the state (in this case Crusoe's state, his 'empire'). Friday accepts the Christian religion, acquires English habits leaving behind his 'savage' ways, learns the English language and regards Crusoe as his master. It is through Friday that Crusoe learns about the pagan gods and priests and gets to understand the 'savage' way of life. Friday's transformation from a savage to a Protestant, his acquiring the ability to speak in a new language taught by his 'master' brings to light a relationship of racial and colonial

superiority where it is important for readers to question the master-slave paradigm, which Crusoe's narrative creates.

### **The other subjects**

Friday's father and the Spanish captain (who remained unnamed throughout) are the other two 'subjects' of Crusoe's 'empire'. After rescuing these two unfortunates from the cannibals, Crusoe finds himself in a position to engage in social relations with them while keeping his spiritual distance. The Spaniard was a Papist and Friday's father was a savage and a cannibal. Though Friday's father did not threaten him or pose to be a danger, he definitely feared the Catholic and his other compatriots who lived on the other side of the island with the savages. He wanted to form a team in order to escape the island but feared that he might be overpowered by them and taken to their country where he would be punished for being a Protestant. However, with the help of these men he was able to develop his estate further and increase his food store for more Spanish guests with whom he wanted to formulate a plan of escape.

### **S5 THEMES:**

The 'self' and the 'new form'

The novel as a 'new form' was seriously involved in depicting the daily lives of ordinary people. Common people were now the proper subject of literature. Robinson Crusoe, if viewed as a capitalist, belonged to a new economic order, which ensured enormous individual freedom at the cost of the family, the church, or any other collective unit. Crusoe has always been regarded as an excellent embodiment of economic individualism keeping the readers fully informed of his money stocks, commodities, of survival strategies etc. Early in the novel, Crusoe frequently blames himself for disobeying his father's advice or blames the destiny, which drove him to sea followed by a period of calculations when he worked with unbelievable care watching the tides and cooperating with their flow and at the same time blaming Providence for all that has gone wrong. It took him nearly eleven days to enumerate the positive side of his situation and explore the island's opportunities. Finally, Crusoe emerges as the orderly master of himself and his island until the point in the narrative when he discovers the footprint on the beach. The free individual is suddenly threatened by the presence of other individuals whose claim to freedom is as total as his own. However, as he

gains mastery over the art of survival and as he establishes himself as the “master of all he surveys” he stops viewing himself as a passive victim and strikes a new note of self-determination along with a sustained theological emphasis. He at once announces that, “I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly, and had a right of possession.” In fact, in his classic study *The Rise of the Novel*, Ian Watt writes:

Robinson Crusoe is certainly the first novel in the sense that it is the first fictional narrative in which an ordinary person’s daily activities are the centre of continuous literary attention. These activities it is true are not seen in a wholly secular light; but later novelists could continue Defoe’s serious concern with man’s worldly doings without placing them in a religious framework (Watt 2000: 74).

*Robinson Crusoe* asserts the primacy of the individual human subject for the first time in literary history. Ian Watt attributes such individualism to the rise of capitalism and the spread of Protestantism. It is certain that Daniel Defoe was able to give sufficient importance and interest to the individual’s daily life and make it a subject matter of a ‘new form’ that was more accommodative and representative of the middle class society.

### **The Colonial Myth**

Postcolonial modes of reading expose the layered subtexts within certain canonical texts work. Such a reading acknowledges Crusoe - Friday relationship as the most intriguing part of the Crusoe story. When Crusoe witnessed the cannibal feast and saw that one of their victims was trying his best to make an escape, he immediately thought of having a “servant, and perhaps a companion or assistant” and “that [he] was called plainly by Providence to save this poor creature’s life.” At the end of this battle, he won for himself a servant for life who remained ever grateful to him for saving his life. From the point in the narrative when Crusoe discovers the footprints on the beach, he is driven into a state of paranoia. Even though by that time he had come to almost own the island, he was not sure how to deal with others (most probably cannibals). Immediately after arriving on the island, he established himself as the unchallenged Emperor of the Island indicating the beginning of a colonizer-colonized relationship, which becomes even more complex with Friday’s arrival. In Chapter XXIII, Crusoe teaches Friday the word “master” even before teaching him “yes” and “no” and indeed, he lets him “know that was to be [Crusoe’s] name.” It is Crusoe’s colonial mind

along with his imperialistic spirit, which disallows him from regarding Friday as his companion or equal. He exclaims with joy “My island was now peopled and I thought myself very rich in subjects...How like a King I looked...My people were perfectly subjected: I was absolute Lord and Law giver...”

Crusoe names him Friday as he was saved on a Friday thereby claiming his possession upon his subject or rather slave. Crusoe at the beginning of his voyage had sold Xury to the captain of a ship. Even after rescuing Friday from the other cannibals, Crusoe begins a narrative on how he transforms Friday from a cannibal to a Protestant, thereby enlightening him, giving him an organised religion, bringing him into contact with a superior civilization – all part of the civilizing and evangelical mission of colonialism. In fact, Crusoe’s method of establishing himself as the owner of the island and his colonial domination of the natives and other Europeans he meets exposes and reiterates England’s mercantile culture combined with imperial concerns.

## STORYBOARD

Daniel Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe*

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- Rise of the novel in the eighteenth century
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### SECTION 2: The Novel as a distinct literary genre

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- The other subjects: Friday's father and the Spanish captain

#### SECTION 5: *Robinson Crusoe*: Themes

- The 'self' and the 'new form'
- The colonial myth

#### POINTS TO PONDER

- The role of capitalism in shaping Crusoe's character
- The absence of women characters in the novel except for the captain's unnamed wife who keeps Crusoe's money intact.
- The theme of alienation
- Religion as being central to the narrative of Crusoe
- Friday's conversion: Its nature and importance in *Robinson Crusoe*

#### Do you know?

- I. Daniel Defoe was arrested in May 1703 for writing the pamphlet "The Shortest Way of Dissentors."
- II. Daniel Defoe was constantly running into financial problems and eventually died, hiding from debt collectors.