The Myth of the Natural Man
In the 18th century many philosophers and scientists put forward a view of the universe as a living organism (this view was also favoured by the discoveries of the new science, biology, which showed how living organisms were not fixed but subject to change and evolution). The philosophers of the Enlightenment saw nature as a dynamic entity and believed in the interaction between nature and man. In simplified form: nature is good, and the closer man is to nature the better he/she is. From this idea comes the myth of the bon sauvage and of the myth of the good natural man which will be central to both the English Enlightenment and Romanticism. Its main exponent was the French-Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes he considers society to have spoilt the freedom and virtue of primitive peoples who lived close to Nature. Rousseau deals with this theme in his two best known works: the novel La nouvelle Héloïse and the political treatise Du Contrat Social, in which he argues that the basis of society is artificial and advocates a return to nature.

Rousseau's reading of Defoe's novel

Rousseau wanted his philosophy of Man and Nature to be at the core of the modern educational system. In this view he wrote Emile, in which he says that only by stimulating the natural impulses and interests of the child can a true education be achieved. To do so, according to Rousseau, no books are necessity except one, Robinson Crusoe: "The one book that teaches all that books can teach". Defoe's novel is considered essential to a child's education especially for two reasons: it shows him/her how to satisfy only natural or primitive necessities, such as those experienced by Robinson on the island; also, Robinson embodies one of Rousseau's favourite ideas: a radical, that is complete, individualism.

Modern readings of Defoe's novel

Rousseau's view of Robinson Crusoe, however, seems idealised, or perfectly suited to his own philosophy. Modern critics and readers have pointed out that, in fact, Defoe and Rousseau had very different ideas of nature. Robinson, in the first place, doesn't choose to live a natural life in a deserted place, as Rousseau's heroes do: he is forced into solitude and lives the island as soon as he can. Secondly, Defoe mainly conceived of nature as a resource to be exploited economically. Robinson alone on the island doesn't feel closer to nature, nor does he lose much time philosophising. The absolute freedom from social restraints which Rousseau asks for man is used by Robinson to exploit the island, first alone and then with the help of Friday who provides him with free labour force. As a critic has pointed out: "For the original Crusoe, 'nature' is appealing not for adoration but for exploitation".
While he is no flashy hero or grand epic adventurer, Robinson Crusoe displays character traits that have won him the approval of generations of readers. His perseverance in spending months making a canoe, and in practicing pottery making until he gets it right, is praiseworthy. Additionally, his resourcefulness in building a home, dairy, grape arbor, country house, and goat stable from practically nothing is clearly remarkable. The Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau applauded Crusoe's do-it-yourself independence, and in his book on education, *Emile*, he recommends that children be taught to imitate Crusoe's hands-on approach to life. Crusoe's business instincts are just as considerable as his survival instincts: he manages to make a fortune in Brazil despite a twenty-eight-year absence and even leaves his island with a nice collection of gold. Moreover, Crusoe is never interested in portraying himself as a hero in his own narration. He does not boast of his courage in quelling the mutiny, and he is always ready to admit unheroic feelings of fear or panic, as when he finds the footprint on the beach. Crusoe prefers to depict himself as an ordinary sensible man, never as an exceptional hero.

But Crusoe's admirable qualities must be weighed against the flaws in his character. Crusoe seems incapable of deep feelings, as shown by his cold account of leaving his family—he worries about the religious consequences of disobeying his father, but never displays any emotion about leaving. Though he is generous toward people, as when he gives gifts to his sisters and the captain, Crusoe reveals very little tender or sincere affection in his dealings with them. When Crusoe tells us that he has gotten married and that his wife has died all within the same sentence, his indifference to her seems almost cruel. Moreover, as an individual personality, Crusoe is rather dull. His precise and deadpan style of narration works well for recounting the process of canoe building, but it tends to drain the excitement from events that should be thrilling. Action-packed scenes like the conquest of the cannibals become quite humdrum when Crusoe narrates them, giving us a detailed inventory of the cannibals in list form, for example. His insistence on dating events makes sense to a point, but it ultimately ends up seeming obsessive and irrelevant when he tells us the date on which he grinds his tools but neglects to tell us the date of a very important event like meeting Friday. Perhaps his impulse to record facts carefully is not a survival skill, but an irritating sign of his neurosis.

Finally, while not boasting of heroism, Crusoe is nonetheless very interested in possessions, power, and prestige. When he first calls himself king of the island it seems jocund, but when he describes the Spaniard as his subject we must take his royal delusion seriously, since it seems he really does consider himself king. His teaching Friday to call him “Master,” even before teaching him the words for “yes” or “no,” seems obnoxious even under the racist standards of the day, as if Crusoe needs to hear the ego-boosting word spoken as soon as possible. Overall, Crusoe's virtues tend to be private: his industry, resourcefulness, and solitary courage make him an exemplary individual. But his vices are social, and his urge to subjugate others is highly objectionable. In bringing both sides together into one complex character, Defoe gives us a fascinating glimpse into the successes, failures, and contradictions of modern man.
Probably the first nonwhite character to be given a realistic, individualized, and humane portrayal in the English novel, Friday has a huge literary and cultural importance. If Crusoe represents the first colonial mind in fiction, then Friday represents not just a Caribbean tribesman, but all the natives of America, Asia, and Africa who would later be oppressed in the age of European imperialism. At the moment when Crusoe teaches Friday to call him “Master” Friday becomes an enduring political symbol of racial injustice in a modern world critical of imperialist expansion. Recent rewritings of the Crusoe story, like J. M. Coetzee’s Foe and Michel Tournier’s Friday, emphasize the sad consequences of Crusoe’s failure to understand Friday and suggest how the tale might be told very differently from the native’s perspective.

Aside from his importance to our culture, Friday is a key figure within the context of the novel. In many ways he is the most vibrant character in Robinson Crusoe, much more charismatic and colorful than his master. Indeed, Defoe at times underscores the contrast between Crusoe’s and Friday’s personalities, as when Friday, in his joyful reunion with his father, exhibits far more emotion toward his family than Crusoe. Whereas Crusoe never mentions missing his family or dreams about the happiness of seeing them again, Friday jumps and sings for joy when he meets his father, and this emotional display makes us see what is missing from Crusoe’s stodgy heart. Friday’s expression of loyalty in asking Crusoe to kill him rather than leave him is more heartfelt than anything Crusoe ever says or does. Friday’s sincere questions to Crusoe about the devil, which Crusoe answers only indirectly and hesitantly, leave us wondering whether Crusoe’s knowledge of Christianity is superficial and sketchy in contrast to Friday’s full understanding of his own god Benamuckee. In short, Friday’s exuberance and emotional directness often point out the wooden conventionality of Crusoe’s personality.

Despite Friday’s subjugation, however, Crusoe appreciates Friday much more than he would a mere servant. Crusoe does not seem to value intimacy with humans much, but he does say that he loves Friday, which is a remarkable disclosure. It is the only time Crusoe makes such an admission in the novel, since he never expresses love for his parents, brothers, sisters, or even his wife. The mere fact that an Englishman confesses more love for an illiterate Caribbean ex-cannibal than for his own family suggests the appeal of Friday’s personality. Crusoe may bring Friday Christianity and clothing, but Friday brings Crusoe emotional warmth and a vitality of spirit that Crusoe’s own European heart lacks.
The Ambivalence of Mastery

Crusoe’s success in mastering his situation, overcoming his obstacles, and controlling his environment shows the condition of mastery in a positive light, at least at the beginning of the novel. Crusoe lands in an inhospitable environment and makes it his home. His taming and domestication of wild goats and parrots with Crusoe as their master illustrates his newfound control. Moreover, Crusoe’s mastery over nature makes him a master of his fate and of himself. Early in the novel, he frequently blames himself for disobeying his father’s advice or blames the destiny that drove him to sea. But in the later part of the novel, Crusoe stops viewing himself as a passive victim and strikes a new note of self-determination. In building a home for himself on the island, he finds that he is master of his life—he suffers a hard fate and still finds prosperity.

But this theme of mastery becomes more complex and less positive after Friday’s arrival, when the idea of mastery comes to apply more to unfair relationships between humans. In Chapter XXIII, Crusoe teaches Friday the word “[m]aster” even before teaching him “yes” and “no,” and indeed he lets him “know that was to be [Crusoe’s] name.” Crusoe never entertains the idea of considering Friday a friend or equal—for some reason, superiority comes instinctively to him. We further question Crusoe’s right to be called “[m]aster” when he later refers to himself as “king” over the natives and Europeans, who are his “subjects.” In short, while Crusoe seems praiseworthy in mastering his fate, the praiseworthiness of his mastery over his fellow humans is more doubtful. Defoe explores the link between the two in his depiction of the colonial mind.

The Importance of Self-Awareness

Crusoe’s arrival on the island does not make him revert to a brute existence controlled by animal instincts, and, unlike animals, he remains conscious of himself at all times. Indeed, his island existence actually deepens his self-awareness as he withdraws from the external social world and turns inward. The idea that the individual must keep a careful reckoning of the state of his own soul is a key point in the Presbyterian doctrine that Defoe took seriously all his life. We see that in his normal day-to-day activities, Crusoe keeps accounts of himself enthusiastically and in various ways. For example, it is significant that Crusoe’s makeshift calendar does not simply mark the passing of days, but instead more egocentrically marks the days he has spent on the island: it is about him, a sort of self-conscious or autobiographical calendar with him at its center. Similarly, Crusoe obsessively keeps a journal to record his daily activities, even when they amount to nothing more than finding a few pieces of wood on the beach or waiting inside while it rains. Crusoe feels the importance of staying aware of his situation at all times. We can also sense Crusoe’s impulse toward self-awareness in the fact that he teaches his parrot to say the words, “Poor Robin Crusoe. . . . Where have you been?” This sort of self-examining thought is natural for anyone alone on a desert island, but it is given a strange intensity when we recall that Crusoe has spent months teaching the bird to say it back to him. Crusoe teaches nature itself to voice his own self-awareness.
**Counting and Measuring**

Crusoe is a careful note-taker whenever numbers and quantities are involved. He does not simply tell us that his hedge encloses a large space, but informs us with a surveyor’s precision that the space is “150 yards in length, and 100 yards in breadth.” He tells us not simply that he spends a long time making his canoe in Chapter XVI, but that it takes precisely twenty days to fell the tree and fourteen to remove the branches. It is not just an immense tree, but is “five foot ten inches in diameter at the lower part . . . and four foot eleven inches diameter at the end of twenty-two foot.” Furthermore, time is measured with similar exactitude, as Crusoe’s journal shows. We may often wonder why Crusoe feels it useful to record that it did not rain on December 26, but for him the necessity of counting out each day is never questioned. All these examples of counting and measuring underscore Crusoe’s practical, businesslike character and his hands-on approach to life. But Defoe sometimes hints at the futility of Crusoe’s measuring—as when the carefully measured canoe cannot reach water or when his obsessively kept calendar is thrown off by a day of oversleeping. Defoe may be subtly poking fun at the urge to quantify, showing us that, in the end, everything Crusoe counts never really adds up to much and does not save him from isolation.

**Eating**

One of Crusoe’s first concerns after his shipwreck is his food supply. Even while he is still wet from the sea in Chapter V, he frets about not having “anything to eat or drink to comfort me.” He soon provides himself with food, and indeed each new edible item marks a new stage in his mastery of the island, so that his food supply becomes a symbol of his survival. His securing of goat meat staves off immediate starvation, and his discovery of grain is viewed as a miracle, like manna from heaven. His cultivation of raisins, almost a luxury food for Crusoe, marks a new comfortable period in his island existence. In a way, these images of eating convey Crusoe’s ability to integrate the island into his life, just as food is integrated into the body to let the organism grow and prosper. But no sooner does Crusoe master the art of eating than he begins to fear being eaten himself. The cannibals transform Crusoe from the consumer into a potential object to be consumed. Life for Crusoe always illustrates this *eat or be eaten* philosophy, since even back in Europe he is threatened by man-eating wolves. Eating is an image of existence itself, just as being eaten signifies death for Crusoe.
“I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen who settled first at Hull. He got a good estate by merchandise and, leaving off his trade, lived afterward at York, from whence he had married my mother whose relations were named Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutznaer; but by the usual corruption of words in England we are called, nay, we call ourselves, and write our name “Crusoe,” and so my companions always called me.”

Crusoe’s opening words in Chapter I show us the fact-oriented, practical, and unsentimental mind that will carry him through his ordeal. Crusoe introduces his parents objectively through their nationalities, professions, and places of origin and residence. There is no hint of emotional attachment either here or later, when Crusoe leaves his parents forever. In fact, there is no expression of affection whatsoever. The passage also shows that leaving home may be a habit that runs in the family: Crusoe’s father was an emigrant, just as Crusoe later becomes when he succumbs to his “rambling” thoughts and leaves England. Crusoe’s originally foreign name is an interesting symbol of his emigrant status, especially since it had to be changed to adapt to English understanding. We see that Crusoe has long grasped the notion of adapting to one’s environment, and that identities—or at least names—may change when people change places. This name change foreshadows the theme of Crusoe’s changing identity on his island, when he teaches Friday that his name is Master.

Choose another quote from the texts we have read together and comment it.
THE PLOT

Robinson Crusoe is an Englishman from the town of York in the seventeenth century, the youngest son of a merchant of German origin. Encouraged by his father to study law, Crusoe expresses his wish to go to sea instead. His family is against Crusoe going out to sea, and his father explains that it is better to seek a modest, secure life for oneself. Initially, Robinson is committed to obeying his father, but he eventually succumbs to temptation and embarks on a ship bound for London with a friend. When a storm causes the near deaths of Crusoe and his friend, the friend is dissuaded from sea travel, but Crusoe still goes on to set himself up as merchant on a ship leaving London. This trip is financially successful, and Crusoe plans another, leaving his early profits in the care of a friendly widow. The second voyage does not prove as fortunate: the ship is seized by Moorish pirates, and Crusoe is enslaved to a potentate in the North African town of Sallee. While on a fishing expedition, he and a slave boy break free and sail down the African coast. A kindly Portuguese captain picks them up, buys the slave boy from Crusoe, and takes Crusoe to Brazil. In Brazil, Crusoe establishes himself as a plantation owner and soon becomes successful. Eager for slave labor and its economic advantages, he embarks on a slave-gathering expedition to West Africa but ends up shipwrecked off of the coast of Trinidad.

Crusoe soon learns he is the sole survivor of the expedition and seeks shelter and food for himself. He returns to the wreck’s remains twelve times to salvage guns, powder, food, and other items. Onshore, he finds goats he can graze for meat and builds himself a shelter. He erects a cross that he inscribes with the date of his arrival, September 1, 1659, and makes a notch every day in order never to lose track of time. He also keeps a journal of his household activities, noting his attempts to make candles, his lucky discovery of sprouting grain, and his construction of a cellar, among other events. In June 1660, he falls ill and hallucinates that an angel visits, warning him to repent. Drinking tobacco-steeped rum, Crusoe experiences a religious illumination and realizes that God has delivered him from his earlier sins. After recovering, Crusoe makes a survey of the area and discovers he is on an island. He finds a pleasant valley abounding in grapes, where he builds a shady retreat. Crusoe begins to feel more optimistic about being on the island, describing himself as its “king.” He trains a pet parrot, takes a goat as a pet, and develops skills in basket weaving, bread making, and pottery. He cuts down an enormous cedar tree and builds a huge canoe from its trunk, but he discovers that he cannot move it to the sea. After building a smaller boat, he rows around the island but nearly perishes when swept away by a powerful current. Reaching shore, he hears his parrot calling his name and is thankful for being saved once again. He spends several years in peace.

One day Crusoe is shocked to discover a man’s footprint on the beach. He first assumes the footprint is the devil’s, then decides it must belong to one of the cannibals said to live in the region. Terrified, he arms himself and remains on the lookout for cannibals. He also builds an underground cellar in which to herd his goats at night and devises a way to cook underground. One evening he hears gunshots, and the next day he is able to see a ship wrecked on his coast. It is empty when he arrives on the scene to investigate. Crusoe once again thanks Providence for having been saved. Soon afterward, Crusoe discovers that the shore has been strewn with human carnage, apparently the remains of a cannibal feast. He is alarmed and continues to be vigilant. Later Crusoe catches sight of thirty cannibals heading for shore with their victims. One of the victims is killed. Another one, waiting to be slaughtered, suddenly breaks free and runs toward Crusoe’s dwelling. Crusoe
protects him, killing one of the pursuers and injuring the other, whom the victim finally kills. Well-armed, Crusoe defeats most of the cannibals onshore. The victim vows total submission to Crusoe in gratitude for his liberation. Crusoe names him Friday, to commemorate the day on which his life was saved, and takes him as his servant.

Finding Friday cheerful and intelligent, Crusoe teaches him some English words and some elementary Christian concepts. Friday, in turn, explains that the cannibals are divided into distinct nations and that they only eat their enemies. Friday also informs Crusoe that the cannibals saved the men from the shipwreck Crusoe witnessed earlier, and that those men, Spaniards, are living nearby. Friday expresses a longing to return to his people, and Crusoe is upset at the prospect of losing Friday. Crusoe then entertains the idea of making contact with the Spaniards, and Friday admits that he would rather die than lose Crusoe. The two build a boat to visit the cannibals’ land together. Before they have a chance to leave, they are surprised by the arrival of twenty-one cannibals in canoes. The cannibals are holding three victims, one of whom is in European dress. Friday and Crusoe kill most of the cannibals and release the European, a Spaniard. Friday is overjoyed to discover that another of the rescued victims is his father. The four men return to Crusoe’s dwelling for food and rest. Crusoe prepares to welcome them into his community permanently. He sends Friday’s father and the Spaniard out in a canoe to explore the nearby land.

Eight days later, the sight of an approaching English ship alarms Friday. Crusoe is suspicious. Friday and Crusoe watch as eleven men take three captives onshore in a boat. Nine of the men explore the land, leaving two to guard the captives. Friday and Crusoe overpower these men and release the captives, one of whom is the captain of the ship, which has been taken in a mutiny. Shouting to the remaining mutineers from different points, Friday and Crusoe confuse and tire the men by making them run from place to place. Eventually they confront the mutineers, telling them that all may escape with their lives except the ringleader. The men surrender. Crusoe and the captain pretend that the island is an imperial territory and that the governor has spared their lives in order to send them all to England to face justice. Keeping five men as hostages, Crusoe sends the other men out to seize the ship. When the ship is brought in, Crusoe nearly faints.

On December 19, 1686, Crusoe boards the ship to return to England. There, he finds his family is deceased except for two sisters. His widow friend has kept Crusoe’s money safe, and after traveling to Lisbon, Crusoe learns from the Portuguese captain that his plantations in Brazil have been highly profitable. He arranges to sell his Brazilian lands. Wary of sea travel, Crusoe attempts to return to England by land but is threatened by bad weather and wild animals in northern Spain. Finally arriving back in England, Crusoe receives word that the sale of his plantations has been completed and that he has made a considerable fortune. After donating a portion to the widow and his sisters, Crusoe is restless and considers returning to Brazil, but he is dissuaded by the thought that he would have to become Catholic. He marries, and his wife dies. Crusoe finally departs for the East Indies as a trader in 1694. He revisits his island, finding that the Spaniards are governing it well and that it has become a prosperous colony.