Daniel Defoe
(1660 – 1731)
The prototype of the middle-class citizen

- Daniel Foe: "De" – hiding…
- Dissenter
- His father wanted a religious career for him
  BUT
  prototype of that skilled middle-class citizen
“The Review”

- No man has tasted differing fortunes more, And thirteen times I have been rich and poor.

- **Journalist** (greatest achievement: “The Review”)
  - organ of **moderation**, **religious** and **political interests**
  - it contained a **moralizing** and **amusing section**
Prison and Pillory

well-paid intellectual until the reign of **Queen Anne** (1702 – 1714)

↓

she *did not like his critical attitude*

↓

Defoe was *arrested, tried, imprisoned, locked 3 times in a pillory*

↓

fascination with criminals and their ability to survive
For publishing the pamphlet *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), the English novelist and journalist Daniel Defoe was placed in the pillory, where the mob could torment him. Defoe's pamphlet satirized the intolerance of the Church of England towards Dissenters—Protestants who refused to accept the authority of the established church.
SUCCESS

• He **denied his Whig ideas** to be **freed**
• became a **secret agent** for the new government
• **59: he started to write novels: enormous success**

↓

**1719: Robinson Crusoe**

★ *Moll Flanders* (1722)
★ *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722)
★ *Roxana* (1724)
and many others

(± 560 works considering books, pamphlets and journals)
SUCCESS

no literary or artistic purpose

BUT

business activity paid better than others:

his aim was no longer to satisfy

the standards of patrons

but booksellers’

• He died poor in a rented house in London
  chased by creditors
The Father of the English Novel

NOVEL

↑

NOVUS
NEW AWARENESS

which laid great stress on CONTEMPORARY REALITY, REALISTIC CHRONOLOGICAL SEQUENCES OF EVENTS

→

significant move away from the fantastic world of the romances of the Middle Ages
PRACTICAL and REALISTIC outlook

- Defoe’s original bourgeois, capitalist, Puritan readership found portrayed in his novels what they were eager to see:
  - their life and ideals
  - their PRACTICAL and REALISTIC outlook

  the novelist was the spokesman of the middle classes
NEW WAY OF TELLING STORIES

plots taken from history, legend and mythology abandoned in favour of

REALITY

↓

LIFELIKE, CREDIBLE STORIES

- **Plots** taken from incidents at that time **quite common**
- **Time** and **place** become 2 measurable and measured elements
- 'Preface' by the author which stresses their authenticity

*IF ever the story of any private Man's Adventures in the World were worth making Publick, and were acceptable when Publish'd, the Editor of this Account thinks this will be so.*

Robinson Crusoe, Preface
NEW WAY OF TELLING STORIES

- Fictional autobiography pretending to be a "true" story:
  - retrospective first person narration
  - Title Page
  - source and changes: Selkirk’s and Crusoe’s stories
- Detailed descriptions
- Simple, matter-of-fact, concrete style in order to be understood even by less well educated readers
THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF ALEXANDER SELKIRK, THE REAL ROBINSON CRUSOE. A NARRATIVE FOUND ON FACTS.

CINCINNATI: PUBLISHED BY U. P. JAMES, NO. 1, BAKER STREET. 1835.

Sir Richard Steel, Alexander Selkirk, first published in 1713
THE LIFE AND STRANGE SURPRIZING ADVENTURES OF ROBINSON CRUSOE, OF YORK, MARINER:

Who lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an uninhabited Island on the Coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of ORONOQUE;

Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, where in all the Men perished but himself.

WITH An Account how he was at last as strangely delivered by PYRATES.

Written by Himself.

LONDON: Printed for W. TAYLOR at the Ship in Peter-Noster Row. MDCCXIX.
STRUCTURE OF THE NOVELS

- **series of episodes and adventures**
- held together by the **unifying presence of a single hero**
- **lack of a coherent plot**
- **main aim:** produce a large and **effective output** not primarily intended for a critical audience
NEW HERO

• ordinary middle-class man, with his virtues and defects
• first HOMO ECONOMICUS: he faces adventures because he is urged by the need of money
  ↓
  symbol of the successful self-made man
• no more idealized, blameless heroes, but PRUDENT and PRAGMATICAL heroes who believe in REASON
NEW HERO

• traits Robinson has in common with the classical heroes of travel literature:

  ➢ RESTLESSNESS

  ➢ THE SEARCH FOR HIS OWN IDENTITY
Exaltation of 18th-century England

- possible psychological damage caused by 28 years of isolation
  - absence of psychological change in him
    - make him a hardly credible person
      - despite his deeds are very realistically described

  BUT

  this is unimportant, not worth considering

  his intention was to glorify the achievements of individualism and disguise its risks
Exaltation of 18th-century England

IN HIS ISOLATION HE RECREATES THE WHOLE PATTERN OF MATERIAL AND MORAL CIVILIZATION HE HAD LEFT
Defoe’s novels embody the code of values typical of his age: **INDIVIDUALISM**

- Individual can mould his destiny through action
- Man can overcome any doubt
- Man can **MODIFY REALITY**

He applies a **rigorous method** to every situation (Galileo and Bacon)

- He always starts by **observing** the situation
- He makes a list of all **possible solutions**
- He considers the pros and cons and he **chooses** the best alternative

**Ideals of mobility**

**Material productiveness**

Main concern was with **everything that could alter one’s social status**
ROLE OF FATE

immobilizing force of the past
[stability and status quo represented by the landed gentry]

propelling force

a lucky destiny is assured
to those who are dynamic
THE COLONIZER

first COLONIZER, the prototype of the PIONEERING EXPLORER

a man able to move from a survival condition to the complex organization of a PRIMITIVE EMPIRE

his stay on the island is not a return to Nature: he exploits and dominates Nature (and Man)
THE ISLAND

the setting of the island is functional to its ideological meaning

It is the ideal place for Robinson to

◊ prove his qualities
◊ to demonstrate that he deserved to be saved by God's Providence
CONTRADICTIONS

• **Puritans** insisted on the **importance of moral rectitude**
• **economic prosperity** was a **sign of divine favour**

\[\uparrow\]

Defoe shares this ethic

**BUT**

he acknowledges that

\[\uparrow\]

“trade is almost universally founded on crime”

“nation’s prosperity is built on the ruins of the Nation’s morals”

\[\uparrow\]

this implies that **the more dishonestly a man behaved, the more successful** his business would be and **the more** he would seem **a favourite of Providence**
SOLUTIONS

Defoe finds solutions to avoid the terms of this circular reasoning (you need to act dishonestly in order to become prosperous)

- no chance to feel the temptation of luxury
- no competitors • no one to cheat
- no exploitation of workers
  - Robinson is the only worker and the only capitalist
  - FRIDAY?
COMFORTING MESSAGE

an average man can overcome any difficulty and become rich thanks to his own efforts, practical common sense, power of observation, use of reason, hard work, ingenuity, resourcefulness, CONSTANT FAITH IN GOD’S HELP: message of “reward (virtuous life) and punishment (sins)”

middle-class readers felt they had right to enjoy undisturbed the fruit of their success
SUMMING UP

• D. Defoe was very **successful** because he was the **SPOKESMAN OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS**:

• **PURITAN IDEALS REFLECTED IN ROBINSON CRUSOE**

• **ANSWER TO THE DOWN-TO-EARTH LITERARY TASTES OF THE MIDDLE CLASS**

• **SOLUTIONS FOR ANY PROBLEM OF CONSCIENCE: COMFORTING MESSAGE**

• **SOLITUDE TO MEDITATE**
SUMMING UP

Among the different new features we can see in Defoe’s work, there is also a **NEW WAY OF TELLING STORIES**:

- ROMANCE VS NOVEL
- CREDIBLE FICTIONAL WORLD:
- FICTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY
- TITLE PAGE
- PREFACE
- PLOT (SOURCES)
- USE OF TIME /PLACE
- STYLE
- CHARACTERIZATION
SUMMING UP

• Among the different new features we can see in Defoe’s work, there is also a new kind of HERO:
  – ORDINARY MIDDLE-CLASS MAN
  – HOMO ECONOMICUS
  – PRUDENTIAL
  – PRAGMATIC
  – PROTOTYPE OF COLONIZER
  – COMPARISON WITH OLD VISION OF HERO
SUMMING UP

• Robinson C. has been defined as THE FIRST COLONIZER OF ENGLISH LITERATURE:
  – BELIEF IN REASON
  – FAITH IN PROGRESS
  – FAITH IN GOD
  – MISSION: MAKE OTHER PEOPLE FOLLOW HIS EXAMPLE
  – SURVIVAL CONDITION → PRIMITIVE EMPIRE
  – RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE
  – RELATIONSHIP WITH FRIDAY
SUMMING UP

• **THE ISLAND** is a place functional to its ideological meaning:
  – ACT OF TRANSGRESSION
  – PLACE OF MEDITATION: FULFILL WHAT PURITAN GOD WANTS FROM MEN
  – PROVE MAN’S QUALITIES (+ FAITH)
  – SUCCESS = REWARD YOU DESERVE
  – ABILITY TO HIDE CONTRADICTIONS
SUMMING UP

- Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* has a **COMFORTING MESSAGE** for the readership.
- perseverance, firmness
- practical common sense
- power of observation
- use of reason
- hard work
- ingenuity
- resourcefulness
- **CONSTANT FAITH IN GOD’S HELP**
- reward (virtuous life)
  and punishment (sins)