

Robinson Crusoe with his family of domesticated animals from a 1864 edition of Robinson Crusoe.



I. Defoe and the realist novel

Defoe's works are written in the form of fictional autobiography or diaries to make them more realistic. There is no real plot, just a chronological series of loosely connected episodes featuring a single protagonist. The protagonist, whether male or female, must struggle to overcome a series of misfortunes, using only his or her physical and mental resources. In Defoe's works there is virtually no psychological development of the characters, only in their external condition. Defoe's fictional autobiographies anticipate semi-autobiographical novels such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Dickens's *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*. This form is still used, although usually ironically, by many writers.

II. Swift and the literature of the fantastic

Swift is known principally as a journalist and satirist. His great novel *Gulliver's Travels* was conceived as a satire on the political situation in the England of his time. Yet it was initially received as a fable for children, and more recently has come to be recognised as one of the great novels of the fantastic, a precursor of the whole science-fiction genre. Indeed, *Gulliver's Travels* are travels through a surrealistic dream world, a world of giants and midgets, flying islands, mad scientists and talking horses that discuss ethics. Swift uses the properties of his fantastic worlds to explore complex philosophical problems. *Gulliver's Travels* has influenced a whole stream of writers from Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and Jules Verne, whose *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1871) has strong echoes of Gulliver's fantastic voyages, to Italo Calvino, whose *Le Città invisibili* (1972) follows an itinerary of imaginary cities each of which delineates a different philosophical and aesthetic territory.

III. Richardson and the bourgeois sentimental novel

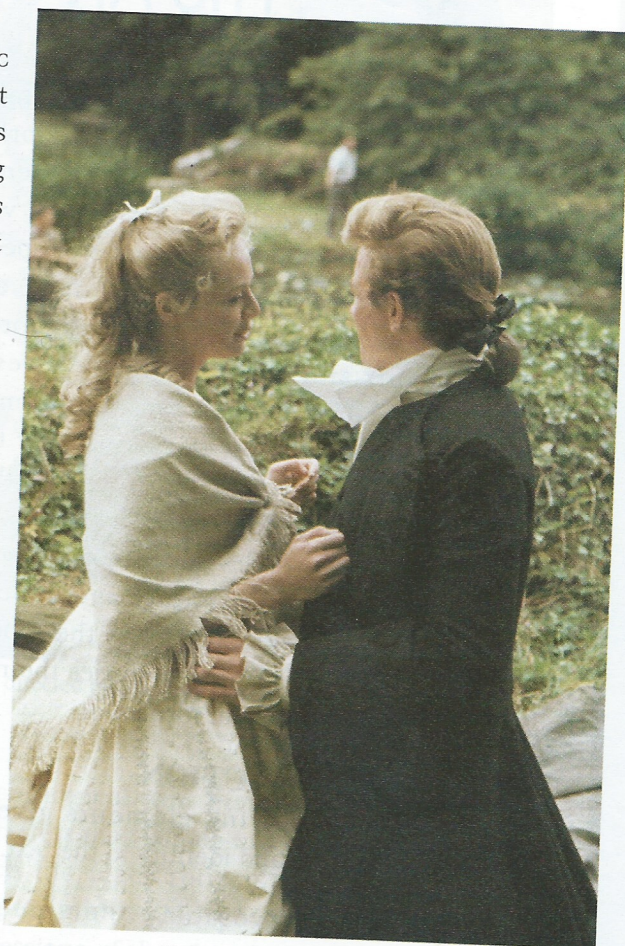
Richardson (1689-1761) wrote epistolary novels – novels in the form of letters. His novels, especially his masterpiece *Clarissa* (1747-9), are the first in history to have a domestic setting and characters who are ordinary middle-class people. He is the first novelist to write love stories, exploring the psychology of his characters and the inner world of their subjective experience, the world of passions and feelings. In this sense his novels represent the beginning of a debate about the roles of men and women in society which continues in the novels of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Gustave Flaubert, George Eliot and Henry James, to name just a few.

IV. Fielding and the comic novel

Fielding (1707-54) is the father of the English comic novel. His novels use a playful and ironic omniscient narrator who comments on and criticises his characters and who controls their destinies. Fielding was also innovative in several ways. In *Tom Jones* (1749) he invented an extremely complex plot involving many characters that went beyond the loose, episodic structure of previous novels. This enabled him to portray not just the lives of a few individuals but the life of society in all its variety. Fielding provides a model for social and comic novelists from Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray to contemporary figures such as Martin Amis and Jonathan Coe.

V. Sterne and the experimental novel

Sterne's main experimental novel, *Tristram Shandy*, was centuries ahead of its time, and has arguably had a more lasting influence than any other book of the 18th century, particularly on Modernist and postmodernist writers. *Tristram Shandy* is often referred to as an anti-novel because it ignores or subverts the realist conventions that the novel was developing in the 18th century. However, in reality Sterne is simply exploring other possibilities that were inherent in the novel. Sterne's manipulation of time anticipates by almost two centuries the stream of consciousness experiments of Modernist writers like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. And the book's references to the processes of its construction as well as its use of encyclopaedic knowledge anticipates the sophisticated literary games of postmodern writers such as John Fowles, Thomas Pynchon, Italo Calvino and Milan Kundera.



Albert Finney and Susanna York
in Tony Richardson's 1963 film version of *Tom Jones*.

Check what you know

- 1 What is the definition of the 'novel' according to *The Chambers Dictionary*?
- 2 List the three main reasons why 'real life' became the dominant concern of fiction.
- 3 Now concentrate on the new reading public and say:
 - a What led to its expansion.
 - b Who it included.
 - c What readers were interested in.
- 4 Why is Aphra Behn a crucial figure in the history of English literature?
- 5 Was there a dominant form in the development of the Augustan novel?
- 6 Discuss the main types of novel which emerged in the 18th century.

Daniel DEFOE (1660-1731)



Daniel Defoe (1706)
by Michiel van der Gucht
after Jeremiah Taverner.
National Portrait Gallery,
London.

Life and works

English novelist, pamphleteer, and journalist, Daniel Defoe was born in London in 1660. Along with Samuel Richardson, Defoe is considered the founder of the English novel. Defoe mainly wrote for the middle classes: traders, merchants, artisans and professional men.

Although his father wanted him to become a minister, Defoe worked in trade and politics. In fact in 1683 he began working as a merchant and travelled around Europe and in the meantime also became interested in politics. In 1702 he wrote his famous pamphlet *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*. Because of its irony towards Anglicans, he was arrested in May 1703 but was released in return for services as a pamphleteer and intelligence agent to the Tory party leader Robert Harley. However, after the Tories fell from power, Defoe continued to carry out intelligence work for the Whig government.

His most remarkable achievement in journalism was the periodical *The Review*, a precursor to the modern newspaper, which he founded in 1704 and wrote for until 1713. Defoe did not start writing prose fiction until 1719 when, at the age of sixty, he published *The Life and Strange Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner*, which was based partly on the memoirs of voyagers and castaways.

In his remaining years, Defoe concentrated on books rather than pamphlets and in 1722 he published *Moll Flanders*, the fictional autobiography of a prostitute, as well as *A Journal of the Plague Year*, an account of the plague which struck London in 1665. His last great work of fiction, *Roxana*, appeared in 1724. Daniel Defoe died in 1731.

Focus on the text: *Robinson Crusoe*

The plot

Robinson Crusoe is probably the most famous **adventure story** in English literature. Based on the experiences of Alexander Selkirk on the uninhabited island of Juan Fernandez, it tells the story of a man who is shipwrecked off a desert island, where he spends the next 28 years before being rescued. The story is divided into three parts.

In the **first part** we are told briefly about Crusoe's early life and about how he runs away from home to sea rather than accept the life of leisure his father promises him. After a series



Middle-class merchants in 18th-century London:
A Thames Wharf (c.1750) by Samuel Scott.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

of adventures Crusoe finds himself in Brazil, where he becomes a plantation owner, an occupation which he does not really like but which brings him prosperity. From there he sets off for Africa with some other plantation owners to procure slaves to work for them. It is on this journey that he is shipwrecked. Washed ashore on a desert island, **he is the only survivor**.

The **second part** of the book is in the form of a journal, in which Crusoe writes about life on the island; how he uses his strength and intelligence to overcome the difficulties of his situation and eventually become **master of the island**. It is in this part that he encounters a 'savage', whom he calls Friday and whom he resolves to convert to Christianity, **teaching him the rudiments of his language and culture**, including how to use a gun to hunt animals for food and later to defend themselves from attack.

The **third and final part** of the book tells of their rescue and of Crusoe's return to England with Friday as his servant and then of his eventual journey to Brazil.

Stylistic features

Like Defoe's other novels, *Robinson Crusoe* is written in the first-person in the form of an **autobiography**. As he does with *Moll Flanders*, Defoe adds a preface which states 'The editor believes this thing to be a just History of fact; neither is there any appearance of fiction in it! So we are led to believe that this is the story of a real man, and that Defoe is merely the editor.

The **style** of the narrative is very **matter of fact**, following the principles promoted by the Royal Society that prose writing should be plain. Moreover, the book has often been praised for its detailed verisimilitude, or resemblance to reality which made readers believe at first that it was an authentic account. We are given little access to Crusoe's inner thoughts or feelings; he generally tells us only about his actions and about what physically happens to him. Occasionally he reflects on religious questions. Indeed one of the themes of the book is the Puritan idea of man's redemption on earth. Another interesting feature is the organisation of the story: there is no real novelistic plot. Rather, Crusoe's journal merely recounts the things that happen to him in a **diary-like sequence**. *Robinson Crusoe*'s enduring popularity is undoubtedly due to the fact that, like all classics, in the words of Italo Calvino 'it has never finished saying what it has to say'. Here are three of the most common interpretations of the text.

Interpretations

1 A religious allegory

The book has been interpreted as a **religious allegory**, a Puritan tract about man's redemption from sin. The Puritans had a very uncomplicated view of religion. Their view was that man must save himself from original sin on Earth, **regaining the paradise he has lost** through his **labour** and **self-reliance**. The island on which Crusoe is shipwrecked is at first an 'island of despair'. But gradually, through his virtues of intelligence and hard work he gradually **transforms it into a paradise** of which he is master. As a Puritan, Crusoe's religious beliefs are very different from those of the Roman Catholic religion. He does not ask God for salvation but relies only upon his own labours.

2 An economic allegory

The book also functions as an **allegory of merchant capitalism**: the mini-civilisation, which Crusoe establishes on the island, is similar to the society from which he comes. After he has arrived on the island he begins to regard it as his **property**. He builds himself a house with a fence round it. He creates wealth in the form of stocks of food and supplies. He even gives himself an arduous work routine, although he has no employer. When he meets Friday he employs him as a servant. In this sense Crusoe embodies the values of the **self-made man**. He is like a businessman who, starting from nothing, slowly builds himself an empire.