

# ROBINSON CRUSOE THEMES

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Rose Marydas. B

# Christianity and Divine Providence

- As much as Defoe's novel is about [Robinson's](#) literal, physical journey, it is also about his more metaphorical, spiritual journey toward Christianity. In the beginning of the novel, Robinson disregards Christianity and leads a life that he later looks back on as wicked. He discounts his father's warning that God will not bless him if he goes to sea, and does not thank God when he is rescued from the storm on the way to London, or by the [Portuguese captain](#) off the coast of Africa. However, after he dreams one night of a strange figure scolding him for not repenting, Robinson turns to Christianity on the island and eagerly studies the Bible. With his newfound Christianity, Robinson is never entirely alone on his island, because he can converse with God through prayer. Moreover, Christianity offers Robinson a way to make sense of his life and its various twists and turns. He sees his rebelling against his father as his original sin, for which he was then punished by being taken as a slave and then by being shipwrecked. However, he was blessed and saved by God by being saved from drowning and ending up on the island with enough provisions to survive. After repenting, Robinson sees himself as further blessed by various miracles, whether the accidental growing of his first crops or the arrival of [Friday](#) and the [English captain](#). In addition, Robinson comes to see various unpredictable natural disasters like storms, hurricanes, and the earthquake that damages his island home as signs from God, instruments of his divine agency.

- As Christianity becomes more and more central to Robinson's life (and to Defoe's novel), one of the most important aspects of it is the idea of divine providence. Closely linked to ideas of fate, this is the idea that God has foresight of our fortunes and is looking out for us. Along this understanding, events that seem like coincidences or unexplainable surprises turn out to be part of God's wise plan. This is how Robinson ends up seeing his being shipwrecked. What seemed like a disaster at first turns out to be a blessing in disguise: Robinson grows to love the island, learns much from his experience there, and comes to Christianity as a result of his life there. When the English captain arrives on the island, Robinson sees this as further proof of divine providence, as someone has come to rescue him at last, while the captain sees Robinson as an instrument of God's providence for him: the captain thinks that Robinson was saved on the island precisely to help save him. These two characters have confidence in their belief in God's providence, that there is some overarching plan behind the unpredictable whims of fortune. And Defoe seems to share this conviction, as the fictional editor who introduces the novel claims that it is an illustration of "the wisdom of Providence in all the variety of our circumstances." The novel thus urges the reader to have faith in God's divine plan. Interestingly, the reader must place a similar kind of trust in Defoe, as he or she must trust that there is some overarching plan or purpose behind the meandering, wandering plot of the novel, that Defoe will deliver his reader to some kind of satisfactory conclusion or ending.

# Society, Individuality, and Isolation

- At the center of *Robinson Crusoe* is a tension between society and individuality. As the novel begins, [Robinson](#) breaks free of his family and the middle-class society in which they live in order to pursue his own life. If he were to stay at home, he would live a life already arranged for him by his father and by the constraints of English society. By setting out to sea, Robinson prioritizes his sense of individuality over his family and society at large. Robinson gets exactly what he asks for (and more than he bargained for) when he finds himself stranded alone on his island. There, he lives entirely as an individual apart from society and is forced to struggle against nature to survive. He becomes self-sufficient and learns how to make and do things himself, discovering ingenuity he didn't know he had. Thus, one could say that being separated from society leads to Robinson becoming a better person. Robinson himself seems to come to this conclusion, as he realizes that his experience brings him closer to God and that living alone on the island allows for a life largely without sin: he makes, harvests, and hunts only what he needs, so there is nothing for him to be covetous of or greedy for. And while he is alone, he does not suffer from lust or pride.

# Advice, Mistakes, and Hindsight

- [Robinson Crusoe](#) is constantly disregarding prudent advice. He begins the novel by discounting his parents' advice not to go to sea, disregards the shipmaster's advice to go home after the storm on the way to London, and goes against his own better judgment in trying to voyage from Brazil to Africa. Even at the end of the novel, he disregards the widow's advice in setting out on yet another sea voyage. Each time, Robinson later realizes that he should have listened to the advice he ignored—most especially that of his parents, who were right about the dangers of a seafaring life. Robinson's double-position as both protagonist and narrator of his story means that he is often in this position of looking back on his life. With this hindsight, Robinson's retrospective narration often foreshadows the misfortunes that will befall him. However, this hindsight is only gained by making mistakes and learning from them. As Robinson's experiences on his island exemplify, knowledge in the novel is gained through experience: Robinson learns how to tame goats, cure grapes, build walls, and do all sorts of other things by trying to do these things and learning along the way (rather than following someone else's instructions). Similarly, throughout the entire novel Robinson must learn from his own experiences rather than relying on other characters' warnings. Somewhat paradoxically, Robinson must discount good advice in order to learn from his experiences and realize his mistakes; only then is he in a position to see how good such advice was. With the benefit of hindsight, Robinson often draws lessons from his own experiences for the reader and gives the reader advice—about obeying God or trusting in providence, for example. This may be precisely what the anonymous editor who introduces the novel in the preface has in mind, when he says that Robinson's story is more than just entertaining; it's educational. But, it is unclear whether we readers should really follow Robinson's advice to the letter or whether, much like Robinson himself might do, we must make our own mistakes.

# Ambition

- Robinson leaves home at the beginning of the novel because he is not content with a comfortable, middle-class existence. In England, his [father](#) can provide for him and help him establish a life. He tells Robinson that their middle station in life is the most comfortable: it is free from the anxieties of power or privilege and from the suffering of poverty. But Robinson cannot stay content with mere comfort. He has ambition and desire for a greater, more interesting life, which leads him to the sea. In fact, this rejection of comfort is a repeated pattern. The entire plot of the novel can be seen as an alternation between Robinson's contentment with what he has and his desire for something more. Not content at home, he goes to sea. Then, while happy in Brazil, he becomes overly ambitious and voyages to get slaves from Africa. Just when he is finally learning to enjoy life on his island by himself, he rescues [Friday](#). He leads a rather comfortable life with Friday on the island, but then desires to escape. And, finally, when Robinson is at last re-established in England, he is once more not content to stay still, and joins another voyage.

# Strangers, Savages, and the Unknown

- Throughout his wandering journeys, [Robinson](#) continually encounters the unknown in a variety of forms. He visits unknown lands, sees strange plants and animals, and encounters foreign peoples. His first response to such experiences with various "others" is usually fear. He is especially frightened by the strange beasts he sees in Africa and on his island, as well as by the African natives he sees and the Caribbean "savages," who come to his island. Stemming in part from this fear, Robinson continually shows a prejudice against non-European peoples, whom he automatically refers to as "savages." Over time, Robinson at least becomes fond of [Friday](#), but his relationship with Friday is still unequal. Friday acts as his servant, and Robinson is constantly condescending toward him. Although at times Robinson respects the cultural difference between him and the Caribbean people he sees (as when he decides not to involve himself in their cannibal rituals), he does not hesitate to teach Friday Christianity, not considering what beliefs of his own Friday might have. Moreover, Robinson does not allow Friday to try to translate or share his own name but instead decides on his name. It is telling that one of the first words Robinson teaches Friday is "master": despite any friendship between Friday and Robinson, their relationship is, at its core, one between a master and his servant. Beyond Friday, Robinson also has no qualms participating in the trans-Atlantic slave trade, as he leaves Brazil to gather slaves from Africa. While he is not as cruel as the Spanish colonists whom he criticizes for murdering natives, Robinson repeatedly establishes an unequal hierarchy between Europeans and natives of other lands. Such an attitude can even be seen in how Robinson approaches foreign lands: he buys land for a plantation in Brazil, regardless of any indigenous peoples, and claims ownership over "his" island. Robinson sees wild nature as something to be owned or tamed, much as he sees indigenous or foreign people as inferiors to be used or employed.

