Robinson Crusoe Crusades Against Traditional Ideas of Heroism

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In Daniel Defoe’s 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*, the eponymous character is shipwrecked on an isolated island for 28 years. While on the island, Crusoe farms on unfamiliar terrain, interacts with cannibals, allies himself with prisoners of uncertain loyalties, and confronts other harrowing obstacles to survive. Yet Crusoe is an ordinary man—he is not a superhero, he is not a god, and he does not have special powers. Could Crusoe still be considered heroic for braving obstacles on the island? Or is he simply an ordinary man? The question of Crusoe’s heroism, as well as heroism in general, has historically been a subject of debate. In western literature, heroism and ordinariness have historically been in tension with one another, for the male heroes of western literature were intentionally meant to be elevated above the ‘ordinary’ state of man. Heroes were fictionalized, idealistic, and fantastical; ordinary people, on the other hand, were real, lowly, and common.

In determining whether the character Crusoe is a hero or not, it is important to first consider what ‘heroism’ and its opposite, ‘ordinariness,’ even are. *The Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature* defines a hero as an “ideal person (usually male),” who holds extraordinary qualities “meant to be admired and imitated, such as courage, leadership, noble sentiments, self-sacrifice, bravery, and strength” (Mercadal). When examining classic male heroes in western literature, the answer to the question of Crusoe’s heroism
(or lack thereof) is not necessarily answered. For instance, within the *Labors of Hercules* and *The Iliad*, the main heroes, Hercules and Achilles, respectively, both display the heroic qualities of strength and bravery (Bernard 51; Homer 655). Additionally, both are made of extraordinary stock, for they are demigods (Bernard 17; Homer 903). As Hercules and Achilles demonstrate, a hero must have heroic qualities and come from divine or royal stock (Mercadal). Crusoe does not fit the classical understanding of heroism because he does not come from extraordinary stock.

Nonetheless, I assert that Crusoe is a hero. Crusoe shows that, when prompted, ordinary people can rise to the occasion and display heroic qualities. Suggesting that an ordinary person could be a hero was a radical departure from the thinking of the time. According to Elizabeth K. Leverington, during the early eighteenth-century historical heroes were seen as laughingstocks, and they were frequently the object of ridicule in western literature because they threatened the ideals of middle-class culture. At the time, there was a greater interest in characters within literature who reflected the British middle-class values of prudence, order, and careful management (48). Conversely, characters who displayed traits associated with historical heroes, such as ambition, pride, and a desire to fight/conquer, were less appealing to British readers. In fact, in early eighteenth-century Britain, the exaggerated, hyper-masculinized historical hero was more than just a joke—the hero was seen as harmful to the very core of British society itself (147–48).

This negative view of heroism was even seen in the works of eighteenth-century writers. For example, English poet and satirist Alexander
Pope criticized the historical male hero archetype in his 1733 *Essay on Man* by warning readers of the dangers that exist in trying to rise above or below one’s station in life (lines 128-131). Sticking to the ‘middle state’ of life (which I interpret as referring to the middle-class) was seen as preferable to the “low ambition” of the lower state and the “pride of kings” of the higher state (lines 1-2). Another popular writer, English novelist Henry Fielding, satirized the historical male hero archetype in his 1743 novel *The Life of Mr. Jonathan Wild the Great*. Jonathan Wild was a criminal who led a variety of thieves and extortionists, yet Fielding referred to Wild as an admirable “hero” in the novel (4). *Robinson Crusoe* made the hero a common, ordinary person, in sharp contrast to the typical depiction of heroes in British literature.

With texts such as *Robinson Crusoe*, the idea of heroism began to evolve during the eighteenth-century to include the ordinary man as a part of its new definition. Here, I am defining “ordinary” based on what it meant to the readers of *Robinson Crusoe*. To these readers, being ordinary meant to be English, male, and middle-class (Leverington 59-60). At the same time, the British reading public was rapidly expanding to include people who weren’t just upper-class. This expansion was the result of a growing print culture (Downing 53); thus, literature needed to evolve to appeal to a growing middle-class readership. Crusoe filled in this gap through displaying middle-class values and through being an ordinary man. Crusoe was not the classic traditional hero of ancient western mythology, which would not have been well-received in eighteenth-century Britain. Crusoe showed that heroism could be found within ordinariness by illustrating who can be
Who can be a hero?

*Robinson Crusoe* was able to undermine contemporary, negative thinking about heroism by showing that anyone can be a hero, regardless of one’s background. Crusoe dispels the traditional notion that a hero has to come from extraordinary stock. He grows up with middle-class, ‘ordinary’ parents and lives in the “middle state” of life (Defoe 7). Crusoe does not display extraordinary intelligence or an extraordinary aptitude for anything. He instead has merely a “competent share of learning” (7) and is not trained in any particular field. Crusoe is a regular man, not particularly outstanding or special at anything. Crusoe even takes care to emphasize his innate Englishness—any parts of his identity that could potentially suggest a non-English link are dropped. For example, Crusoe tells the reader that his family’s name used to be Kreutznaer, but “by the usual corruption of words in England,” the name evolved to become Crusoe (7). Crusoe’s surname has been anglicized, making him even more of an ‘ordinary’ Englishman. Thus, Crusoe dispels the traditional idea of heroes being aristocratic, mythological, and highly skilled.

Crusoe also shows that anyone can be a hero, regardless of one’s gender. Crusoe uses femininity to cut through the classical idea that a hero has to be male. To curate specific definitions for terms such as masculinity and femininity, I have drawn inspiration from Toril Moi’s essay, “Feminist, Female, Feminine,” in which Moi defines femininity as “a set of cultur-
ally defined characteristics” (117). When I use the terms ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity,’ then, I am referring to the culturally defined characteristics that were applied to males and females in eighteenth-century Britain. At that time, tasks outside of the home, such as farming, harvesting, and so on, were considered masculine tasks. Tasks inside the home, such as cooking, organizing food, and cleaning, were considered feminine tasks. Essentially, it was “women’s responsibility for housewifery and men’s for husbandry” (Harvey 529). The physical boundary of the home served both as a physical divider for gendered tasks and as a metaphorical divider between the genders.

By taking on traditional female behaviors, Crusoe is not only able to undermine eighteenth-century thinking of heroes as hyper-masculine, but also to demonstrate heroism itself. While on the island, Crusoe develops the habit of organizing and storing food for the future, a task that was traditionally feminine for the time (Leverington 156). While organizing and storing food, Crusoe demonstrates the heroic qualities of strength and perseverance when he decides to save his rice and barley crop for the future so that he can achieve the more long-term goal of providing for himself. Accordingly, Crusoe demonstrates that one doesn’t have to engage in extremely masculine behaviors to be heroic; one can adopt traditionally feminine behaviors and still be a hero.

Yet Crusoe doesn’t just take on traditionally feminine behaviors—he also takes on traditionally masculine behaviors. For example, when Xury (Crusoe’s fellow slave at the beginning of the novel) and Crusoe are under attack, the pair rely upon traditionally masculine tasks to help them
survive—namely, shooting and skinning (Harvey 529). Facing off against dangerous animals, Crusoe displays great bravery and strength as he musters up the courage to shoot and kill (Defoe 28). George E. Haggerty argues that it is Xury’s unwavering faith in Crusoe’s ability to succeed that allows Crusoe to “assume the masculine role to which he aspires” (79). Yet Xury’s faith in Crusoe not only helps Crusoe assert his masculinity—Xury’s faith also allows Crusoe to become braver and stronger. With the aid of a fellow slave and by taking on behaviors traditional to both males and females, Crusoe shows that heroism can be performed by slaves and by taking on behaviors traditional to both males and females. Thus, Crusoe shows that heroism is not the exclusive domain of aristocrats, free persons, or those of a specific gender; anyone can be a hero.

**When can a person be heroic?**

In addition to establishing that anyone can be a hero, Crusoe demonstrates that a person has the potential to be heroic when they are alone. Ancient mythological heroes such as Hercules typically displayed heroism with the help of others—either people/gods/animals would prompt Hercules to perform heroic deeds (Bernard 23-24, 36), or people/creatures would help Hercules overcome his obstacles with bravery and strength (Bernard 29, 55). Crusoe, on the other hand, demonstrates heroism on the island in complete solitude. Food storage and organization, for instance, is done in isolation with no one around; however, Crusoe still displays the heroic quality of strength (Defoe 118). Crusoe’s solitary heroism shows that being a hero is not conditional on other people being present, and shows that any
ordinary person can display heroism on their own.

Not only does Crusoe show that heroism can be displayed alone, he shows that heroism can be displayed internally, that a hero can face and overcome internal challenges. For instance, when Crusoe spots an English ship, the descriptive language of the novel allows him to articulate the nuanced complexity of his emotions: “I cannot express the confusion I was in, though the joy of seeing a ship, and one […] manned by my own countrymen, and consequently friends […] yet I had some secret doubts hung about me […] bidding me keep upon my guard” (Defoe 212). Crusoe is simultaneously excited to see fellow Englishmen and fearful of the English ship because England didn’t conduct trade in the part of the world Crusoe is in. This moment of emotional confusion shows the reader that there can be times when a hero feels lost and unsure what to do; in essence, Crusoe shows that a hero can display the fears and worries of ordinariness at times. A hero does not have to be courageous and strong all of the time in order to be a hero. Instead, a hero can feel afraid and worried. The idea of a hero displaying confusion runs counter to the classical idea of heroism, which was founded upon the idea of always knowing exactly what to do—Goethals and Allison, for instance, describe the opposite of heroism with words such as mystery, the unknown, and incompleteness (8). Crusoe occupies a role of the unknown, showing that a hero does not have to be heroic all of the time—a person can experience the confusion and hesitation of ordinariness at times and still be a hero.

Crusoe is ultimately able to overcome his internal emotional struggle upon seeing the English ship by deciding to let his moral compass deter-
mine his actions. When the English ship lands on the island, Crusoe decides to launch a rescue mission to save a group of Englishmen imprisoned on the ship. Crusoe feels compassion for the prisoners and articulates his empathy when recalling his own frightening first day on the island: “This put me in mind of the first time when I came on shore […] what dreadful apprehensions I had; and how I lodged in the tree all night for fear of being devoured by wild beasts” (Defoe 213). Crusoe remembers his own intense fear upon arriving at the island, and by extension feels pity and understanding for the English prisoners. By following his moral compass, Crusoe successfully overcomes his fears and saves his fellow Englishmen. Crusoe demonstrates to readers that it is possible to display heroism, even when one is confused and lost. In fact, Crusoe reveals that heroism can be displayed through being unsure and scared—Crusoe conquers his fear to exhibit great bravery.

When saving the prisoners, Crusoe displays heroism both externally and internally. Heroism was typically displayed externally in western literature—Hercules and Achilles, for example, both display heroism in very external ways. Crusoe externally organizes an attack on the prisoners’ captors and helps the prisoners fight by providing them with weapons. Conversely, heroism was not displayed internally in the literary western tradition. Yet Crusoe internally overcomes his fears by following his moral compass, feeling pity and compassion, and mustering up the courage to save the prisoners (Defoe 217, 215). Through showing heroism both externally and internally, Crusoe demonstrates the temporal fluidity of heroism: heroism can occur with and also without people, heroism can occur with and also without emotional turmoil, and heroism can occur with and also
How can a person be a hero?

Crusoe offers a nuanced guide to heroism for readers to follow when making difficult, emotionally confusing decisions, such as when Crusoe sees the English ship. When faced with situations that demand great bravery in choosing whether or not to save other people’s lives, Crusoe suggests that following one’s moral compass should be the appropriate strategy to use—this is seen when Crusoe makes the decision to save the English prisoners. On the other hand, with situations that demand great strength in choosing whether or not to kill people, Crusoe shows that following one’s sense of logic and reason rather than one’s moral compass should be the appropriate strategy. Crusoe illustrates a nuanced understanding of heroism when it comes to using one’s logic and reason; there are some instances when Crusoe decides to kill and other instances when he decides it is better not to kill. Thus, Crusoe demonstrates that a strategy of pure violence, commonly seen with traditional heroes, is not the only way to display heroism (Sugg 126-27).

Crusoe’s decision to follow his personal sense of rationality and logic is seen when he views the aftermath of cannibalism for the first time on the island. Crusoe initially experiences great shock and horror (Defoe 142) and leans into his animalistic, natural instincts—Karen Downing would call such instincts Crusoe’s ‘explorer’ side, the side of Crusoe that represents the natural urges and dreams/aspirations of the middle-class Englishman (173). Crusoe is at first entirely focused on violence, strategizing
how he might “destroy some of the monsters in their cruel, bloody entertain-ment” (Defoe 144). However, as time progresses, Crusoe rationalizes the event and leans into his more practical, logical side—what Downing would call his ‘settler’ side (173)—“When I considered this a little, it followed necessarily that I was certainly in the wrong; that these people were not murderers [...] any more than those Christians were murderers who often put to death the prisoners taken in battle” (Defoe 147). Crusoe rationalizes and adjusts how he perceives the event, which allows him to make the decision to respect and leave the Indigenous people whom Crusoe assumes engaged in cannibalism alone. Therefore, Crusoe uses morality when deciding if he should save and rationality when deciding if he should kill.

Nonetheless, Crusoe’s choice to follow his sense of reason is complicated. Later in the novel, Crusoe does eventually kill some Indigenous people who are about to kill (and, assumedly, enact cannibalism) (Defoe 173). Even so, this situation is not a reversal for Crusoe; in this instance, Crusoe steps in to protect a young man, whom Crusoe comes to later call Friday, from being killed. If Crusoe had gone on a murderous rampage when he initially viewed the aftermath of cannibalism, there wasn’t anything he could have done. Those people were already dead. It would have been a case of outright revenge. When confronted with a situation where he has the ability to protect someone’s life, Crusoe steps in and acts accordingly. In this latter situation, Crusoe is not acting out of pure malice and revenge; rather, it is a desire to help and protect. In this fashion, Crusoe offers a nuanced understanding of heroism that there is not necessarily a one-size-fits-all approach. When Crusoe first views the aftermath of cannibalism, the more heroic
behavior is to leave the Native Americans alone. When Crusoe sees a young Indigenous man fleeing for his life, Crusoe steps in and saves him.

Crusoe also demonstrates heroism through his leadership, which is another quality identified as heroic (Mercadal). Crusoe’s approach to heroic leadership indicates that one does not have to know exactly what to do all the time—rather, heroism means being willing to listen to others so that one can make the best possible decision. When Crusoe is launching an attack on the mutineers, he listens to the Captain’s advice, which is that the group should not attack in small numbers because they would be overtaken by the mutineers. The Captain’s advice prompts Crusoe to lead his group in staying the mutineer’s boat, which weakens the mutineers’ ability to assist one another and allows Crusoe and his group to successfully fight the mutineers later in the novel. Further, when Crusoe wants to save the Spaniard’s shipmates, he listens to the Spaniard’s advice to wait half a year so that Crusoe and his companions can cultivate enough food for the increased number of people. However, Crusoe is not perfect at being a leader. For example, when the Captain disagrees with Crusoe’s decision in letting the mutineers stay on the island, Crusoe quickly reminds him that the prisoners are his, not the Captain’s (Defoe 207-32). Crusoe’s quick dismissal of the Captain’s concerns is not a very considerate and thoughtful way to listen to another’s opinion. Crusoe’s leadership is thus flawed—he is effective sometimes and ineffective at other times when it comes to leading.

In addition to demonstrating leadership through a willingness to hear different opinions, Crusoe demonstrates leadership through a willingness to concede power. Crusoe shows that heroic leadership means to
recognize other people’s talents and assign leadership positions accordingly. When fighting the mutineers, Crusoe dubs himself the “generalissimo” and Friday the “lieutenant-general” (Defoe 222), which speaks to Crusoe’s ability to grant others power. Further, after Crusoe has saved Friday’s father and the Spaniard, he decides to give each their own role in helping to run Crusoe’s home. Yet Crusoe does not always make the most logical decisions as a leader. When Crusoe places the Spaniard in charge of Friday and Friday’s father as they cut trees, it does not make the most logical sense. Crusoe knows Friday well and has reason to trust him. Making Friday the leader would make more sense. The Spaniard, on the other hand, is a stranger. It does not make sense to trust the Spaniard with such an important responsibility. Crusoe’s leadership in terms of giving others leadership roles, then, is also flawed—he makes logical decisions sometimes and illogical decisions at other times.

As a hero, Crusoe shows that one must be nuanced. When it comes to morality and rationality, Crusoe shows that a hero must know whether to use one’s sense of logic or one’s morals depending on the situation: morality should be used when deciding to save people and rationality should be used when deciding to kill people. Every situation, Crusoe illustrates, demands a unique response. Crusoe’s interest in pivoting between different approaches applies to his leadership as well. Crusoe takes on a leadership role in *Robinson Crusoe* and wields his power in such a way that he at times listens to different people’s opinions and at other times gives different people leadership positions. Crusoe, nevertheless, is ultimately an imperfect leader, showing that he is an ordinary man *capable of* heroism. Crusoe does not dis-
play heroism all of the time—when Crusoe is overwhelmed by emotion or when he lacks thoughtfulness and tact, he does not act like a hero. Crusoe’s nuanced approach to heroism—that it differs depending on the situation—offers a more flexible understanding of how to be a hero.

Why is being a hero important?

Crusoe expresses multifaceted heroism by expanding upon who can be a hero, when a person can be a hero, and how a person can be a hero. Crusoe develops who can be a hero further by broadening the background of a hero: a hero neither needs to be aristocratic/god-like nor free nor only masculine. Crusoe also develops when a person can be a hero: in solitude or in their performance—for example, when Crusoe saves English prisoners, he externally organizes an attack and internally overcomes his emotional turmoil. Crusoe also expands how a person can be a hero: morality should be used when deciding to save others, rationality should be used when deciding to kill, and leadership can be displayed by listening to others and also by giving others leadership roles. Crusoe pushes against traditional notions of heroism in western mythology in terms of who, when, and how. This allows Crusoe to serve as a map for readers to follow, empowering readers to assume the role of hero in their own lives.

By broadening the traditional definition of heroism seen in western mythology, Crusoe effectively carves out a new role in society for heroes to occupy. This new role is the contentious middle state, which Crusoe’s father had encouraged him to occupy at the beginning of the novel. Crusoe applies his father’s idea of the middle state to heroism rather than wealth and illus-
trates to readers that the ideals of the heroic ‘higher state’ and ambitions of the ordinary ‘lower state’ can successfully come together as one, despite the pair being seen as conflicting ideals to eighteenth-century readers. A middle state, as Crusoe defines it, refers to a state of being in which one is ordinary at times (the ‘lower state’) and heroic at other times (the ‘higher state’).

Crusoe displays his newly-created middle state role of heroism through seemingly contradictory ideals: masculinity versus femininity, heroism occurring externally versus internally, heroism centering around morality versus rationality, and heroism occurring at some times and not at others. Crusoe displays heroism in all of the aforementioned ways, demonstrating that the middle state of heroism doesn’t result in a clash of competing ideals: rather, the middle state of heroism results in a co-existence, a concurrence, of competing ideals.

Crusoe makes the benefit of occupying such a middle state of heroism clear as the novel progresses. He starts to experience more and more peace as he displays more and more instances of heroism: “Thus I lived mighty comfortably, my mind being entirely composed” (Defoe 117). Crusoe is calmer and allows his ordinariness and heroism to work together, which lets Crusoe live up to his true potential. Crusoe empowers readers, making heroism less about power and exclusivity and more about ordinari-ness and inclusivity. Many of Crusoe’s eighteenth-century middle-class readers were experiencing a clash between their true, honest desires and what society expected of them (Downing 168). These readers were restless and sought solace in fiction. Through the form of fiction, Crusoe translates what was a primarily fictional, idealized hero archetype into a possible reality for
readers. Crusoe empowers and challenges his readers to carve out the role of the heroic middle state in their own lives. Such empowerment allows readers to align their ambitious desires with the rigid social expectations they face and live up to their true potential.

While heroism has expanded today to include people in real life (Harris 2) as well as people who do not fit the traditional, mythological trope of being straight, white men (Wendt 1), one important point Crusoe makes about heroism is largely forgotten today: there is a potential hero in all of us, in every single person. Today, while we have broadened who can be a hero in terms of race, sexuality, and gender (1), many people still only consider celebrities, major historical figures, and authority figures to be the ones capable of being real-life heroes. The idea that everyone has the potential to be heroic in their everyday life gets overlooked. If we were to think about this concept, that everyone has a potential hero inside them, people would be more encouraged to be kind, good, and heroic to one another. If everyone recognized their inner hero, the line between fiction and reality would become more blurred, allowing fictional concepts such as heroism to exist in everyday life. Perhaps one day, people will not need to turn to fiction to reconcile their own competing desires, as Crusoe’s readers did. Perhaps, one day, people will need to only look within.
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