

British Masterpiece



Daniel Defoe



READING 5C Compare and contrast the effects of different forms of narration across various genres of fiction.

from *Robinson Crusoe*

Novel by Daniel Defoe

BACKGROUND You are the sole survivor of a shipwreck. You are alive, but you are alone on a deserted island far from home. How can you survive, not just physically, but emotionally? What if you are never rescued? What if you never see another human being again? Robinson Crusoe must face this dilemma head-on. Published in 1719, *Robinson Crusoe* is often considered the first English novel. In writing this tale, Daniel Defoe could draw on his own experiences traveling. Before he became a writer, Defoe was a merchant who traveled widely in Europe. He never traveled as far as the New World, but he did read about—and possibly meet—Alexander Selkirk, a Scottish sailor who survived several years on an uninhabited island near Chile before returning to tell of his adventures. Drawing on Selkirk's experiences as well as on his own travels, Defoe produced *Robinson Crusoe*, a pioneering work of realistic fiction that continues to inspire tales of castaways, from the novel *The Swiss Family Robinson* to the television series *Survivor* and *Lost*.

LITERARY ANALYSIS Defoe wanted to make Crusoe's story as realistic as possible. He could have used **third-person point of view**, in which a voice outside events narrates the story using pronouns like *he*, *she*, and *they*. Instead, the author uses the **first-person point of view**, in which Crusoe tells his story in his own words using the pronoun *I*. First-person narration emphasizes Crusoe's isolation: he has only his own thoughts to keep him company and must draw on his own mental resources to survive. First-person narration also allows us to experience what goes on in Crusoe's mind, as we follow the trials he undergoes. As he struggles to deal with his situation, we experience Crusoe's moments of desolation and triumph, such as Crusoe's conversation with himself about the positive, as well as negative, sides of his situation that he records in the following excerpt.

WRITE If *Robinson Crusoe* had been narrated from a third-person point of view instead of a first-person point of view, it would be a very different work. With a classmate, rewrite the excerpt from *Robinson Crusoe* from a third-person point of view, including Crusoe's list of the pros and cons of his situation. Discuss what kinds of changes you made and how you think your revision alters the effect of Crusoe's story on readers.

I now began to consider seriously my Condition, and the Circumstance I was reduc'd to, and I drew up the State of my Affairs in Writing, not so much to leave them to any that were to come after me, for I was like to have but few Heirs, as to deliver my Thoughts from daily poring upon them, and afflicting my Mind; and as my Reason began now to master my Despondency, I began to comfort my self as well as I could, and to set the good against the Evil, that I might have something to distinguish my Case from worse, and I stated it very impartially, like Debtor and Creditor, the Comforts I enjoy'd, against the Miseries I suffer'd, Thus,

Evil.

I am cast upon a horrible desolate Island, void of all hope of Recovery.

I am singl'd out and separated, as it were, from all the World to be miserable.

I am divided from Mankind, a Solitaire, one banish'd from humane Society.

I have not Clothes to cover me.

I am without any Defence or Means to resist any Violence of Man or Beast.

I have no Soul to speak to, or relieve me.

Good.

But I am alive, and not drown'd as all my Ship's Company was.

But I am singl'd out too from all the Ship's Crew to be spar'd from Death; and he that miraculously sav'd me from Death, can deliver me from this Condition.

But I am not starv'd and perishing on a barren Place, affording no Sustenance.

But I am in a hot Climate, where if I had Clothes I could hardly wear them.

But I am cast on an Island, where I see no wild Beasts to hurt me, as I saw on the Coast of Africa: And what if I had been Shipwreck'd there?

But God wonderfully sent the Ship in near enough to the Shore, that I have gotten out so many necessary things as will either supply my Wants, or enable me to supply my self even as long as I live.

