Introduction

Robinson Crusoe

Daniel Defoe

The story

Robinson Crusoe is born in 1632 in the north of England. His father wants him to get a sensible job but he dreams of adventure. In 1651 he goes to London, meets a ship’s captain and sails off to Africa. Near the Canary Islands Turkish pirates take Crusoe prisoner. The Turkish captain keeps Crusoe as his own slave and he spends two years in Turkey.

He eventually manages to escape in a boat with a boy called Xury. They head for the Canary Islands and sail along the coast of Africa. With little food or water on board, they stop off in various wild and dangerous places. Near the Cape Verde Islands they are found by a Portuguese captain who takes Crusoe to Brazil.

In Brazil, Crusoe makes his fortune but after a few years becomes bored and agrees to go to Africa with some friends on business. One night there is a terrible storm and the ship breaks up. Crusoe finds himself lying alone on a beach in a strange wild country. Fortunately he is able to rescue food, guns, ropes and sails from the wreck. After exploring, he finds he is on an island with two smaller islands nearby. He makes his home in a cave and constructs a tent in front of it with the ship’s sails. One night there is a terrible storm and the wrecked ship disappears.

Crusoe quickly learns to provide things for himself. He kills wild animals for food and uses the fat for lights and the skin for clothes. He finds some chicken feed from the ship, grows corn and makes bread. He dreams of escape and makes a canoe with his tools. However, it is too big to drag to the shore and he is bitterly disappointed. He makes a smaller canoe but it is too small for sea journeys.

One day he sees a footprint in the sand. Terrified, he lives quietly on the island for two years but never sees anybody. Then to his horror, he finds parts of men’s bodies scattered on the beach and realises that wild people from the other islands kill and cook their prisoners there. For several years he sees nothing until a group of wild men appear with two captives. Crusoe helps one of the prisoners to escape.

Crusoe names his new companion Man Friday and teaches him to speak English. They soon become good friends, living happily on the island for three years. Friday helps Crusoe build a new canoe and they plan to escape. However, one day a ship appears and some men come on shore. There has been a mutiny and the captain and two officers are prisoners. Crusoe helps them to escape and the captain promises to take Crusoe and Friday back to England. The remaining sailors will be left behind. After 27 years on the island Crusoe sets sail for England with Man Friday.

Back in England, he feels like a stranger, his parents and brothers are dead, leaving only two nephews alive. He marries and has three children, but his wife dies and he decides to sail off once more on adventures to distant countries.

Background to the story

Daniel Defoe based his story on the real life adventures of Alexander Selkirk, the son of a rich tanner in Scotland who ran away to sea in 1695. Selkirk later joined a pirate expedition to the Pacific which preyed on Spanish shipping. In 1704 after a quarrel with his captain, Selkirk asked to be put ashore on the uninhabited island of Juan Fernandez, about 600 kilometres west of the coast of Chile. He managed to survive alone until he was discovered in 1709 by Captain Woodes Rogers aboard the sailing ship Duke. Selkirk returned to Scotland but he became restless and he went back to sea again. He died and was buried at sea at the age of forty-five.
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Pre-reading activity

Match the words with the pictures

To the teacher

Aim: To familiarize students with the setting and characters
Time: 15 minutes
Organization: Give each student, or pair of students a copy of the worksheet. Ask them to match the words with the pictures.
When they have done this ask them the following questions:
1. When is the story set?
2. Can they find different pictures of Robinson Crusoe? How does his appearance change?
3. Which picture comes nearest the beginning of the story? Which picture comes nearest the end of the story?
4. What happens in the story?
It is not important for students to get the correct answers, only to discuss their ideas about the story.
Key: 1e, 2a, 3h, 4d, 5i, 6c, 7b, 8g, 9f

a) I fell on the wet sand.
b) ‘I’ll take you to the ends of the world!’ cried the captain.
c) It was a long hard fight.
d) I wanted adventure and an exciting life.
e) ‘There’s a great ship near the island!’
f) The fence round my tent was as strong as a stone wall.
g) I gave him my sword.
h) The wild men danced round the fire, singing and shouting.
i) It was a footprint!
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While reading activity

Word grid

Find the answers to the clues below and fill in the word grid. When you have finished you will find another word from the book, which runs down through the middle of all the words.

Clues
1. A person who belongs to a master and who is given no money for his work.
2. The ground where the land and sea meet.
3. A country where Robinson Crusoe makes a lot of money.
4. Robinson Crusoe finds this in the sand.
5. These men come to the island to kill their prisoners.
6. Very bad weather with strong winds and rain.
7. Robinson Crusoe makes his house here.
8. A type of long thin boat.
9. Robinson Crusoe gets this from the goats.

To the teacher

Where: At the end of chapter 6
Aim: To revise vocabulary and key events
Time: 20 minutes
Organization: Give each student, or pair of students a copy of the grid and look at the first example together as a class. Ask the students to read the clues and find the other missing words. When they have done all the questions they will find a word from the book which runs down through all the words (shipwreck). When everyone has finished, go through the answers as a class and ask students to comment on the words. For example: Who became a slave? (Crusoe) How? (He was captured by Turkish pirates)

Key: 1 slave, 2 shore, 3 Brazil, 4 footprint, 5 wild, 6 storm, 7 cave, 8 canoe, 9 milk
Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. Robinson Crusoe is a classic novel which is still exciting for people today.
2. Robinson Crusoe is unbelievable. Nobody could survive on a desert island for twenty-seven years.
3. Robinson Crusoe is a real boys’ adventure story. It isn’t interesting for female readers because there aren’t any women characters.
4. On the island Robinson Crusoe becomes very close to nature. In our society we are too distant from the natural world.
5. Robinson Crusoe sells Xury as a slave to the Brazilian captain. This is all right because he needs the money and he knows the captain will look after Xury.
6. Robinson Crusoe is a true friend to Man Friday because he looks after him and takes him back to England.
7. It is unbelievable that Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday are always good friends and never argue.
8. At the end of the book, Robinson Crusoe goes to sea again. I would like to read more stories about his adventures.

To the teacher

Aim: To generate discussion about different aspects of the book
Time: 30 minutes
Organization: Give each student a copy of the worksheet and check the meaning of any unknown words as a class. Then ask students to write individually A (agree) or D (disagree) next to each statement. When they have finished they can compare their answers with another student, or group of students and explain why they agree or disagree. When everybody has finished, go through the statements as a class and encourage students to express their opinions about the different sentences.