The Inclusion of Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*: An Exertion of European Dominance

Slavery has long been both the subject of writings and a topic of debate for hundreds of years; while the actual merits behind slavery have been hotly contested, the fact remains that slavery has proved itself to be an imperative historical topic that reaches a wide audience. The novel *Robinson Crusoe*, by Daniel Defoe, centers on a man who becomes stranded on an island, which becomes his own domain. Most of the novel takes place with Crusoe alone on the island, but his entire way of life is altered when the author introduces a cannibal into the novel, which Crusoe quickly brands as his slave. Based on various criticisms of the novel, it is widely debated whether the character of Robinson Crusoe (and, in effect, Daniel Defoe himself) supported the use of slavery. Throughout the novel, Crusoe treats his servant with respect, even admitting to the reader that he loves him, which showcases a rare admission of respect for a lower class. However, regardless of the treatment of his servants, Crusoe still employs the use of slaves, seemingly gaining pleasure from his supremacy over them. This, in turn, sheds light on the common European views at the time regarding colonialism: that many nations, including England, desired to forcefully colonize nations inhabited with natives in order to both spread their Christian morals and to gain more power through territorial acquisitions. The entrance of Crusoe's slave Friday into the novel shifts the novel from being about Crusoe's dominance over territory to being about his supremacy over a human, which also signifies the European desires to conquer uncharted lands and their natives.

In order to gain a full perspective on Crusoe's view of slavery, the reader must closely examine his actions prior to his time stranded on the island. At the beginning of the novel, when Crusoe is actually forced into slavery himself, he effectively conveys his feelings on being enslaved; he feels that he suddenly changes from a "Merchant into a miserable slave," (Defoe

15) already providing the reader with his hatred of being a slave. It's fairly obvious that Crusoe wants to be in a position of power; it's a completely different ideology for Crusoe himself to become a slave, and he makes his frustration extremely clear to the reader. Later, Crusoe meets Xury, an African boy with who he escapes the clutches of slavery. However, when both Crusoe and Xury find themselves on a Portuguese ship, the captain of the ship offers to buy Xury from Crusoe. Crusoe struggles with the decision, due to the boy's aid to him while they were both trapped as slaves earlier.

Ultimately, Crusoe decides to sell his friend to the Portuguese man for personal gain: "…he offer'd me also 60 pieces of Eight more for my Boy Xury, which I was loathe to take, not that I was not willing to let the Captain have him, but I was very loath to sell the poor Boy's Liberty…he would give the Boy an Obligation to set him free in ten Years, if he turn'd Christian; upon this, and Xury saying he was willing to go to him, I let the Captain have him" (26). Here, Crusoe displays the real value that he places on slaves like Xury; though he has doubts about selling him, he eventually decides to sell the boy back into slavery, setting up a harsh and unforgiving future for the young boy. Crusoe justifies the sale by explaining that after ten years go by, the boy will be let free; ten years in slavery is an incredibly lengthy time period, and the boy surely must have agreed to the sale simply to please Crusoe. Additionally, the boy will be forced to convert to Christianity, which accurately depicts the European colonialist attitude at the time; the Europeans desire not only to enslave people but to also teach them the ways of the "white man," essentially forcing their philosophies and beliefs on people who come from various backgrounds.

The literary critic Ian Watt superbly conveys why Crusoe sold Xury into slavery:

> Crusoe treats his personal relationships in terms of their commodity value. The Moorish boy, Xury, for example, helps him to escape from slavery, and on

> another occasion offers to prove his devotion by sacrificing his own life. Crusoe very properly resolves 'to love him ever after,' and promises 'to make him a great man.' But when chance leads them to the Portuguese trader, and its captain offers Crusoe sixty pieces of eight – twice Judas' figure – he cannot resist the bargain and sells Xury into slavery…Remorse later supervenes, but only when the tasks of his island existence renew his need for a slave. (Watt 302)

Watt describes the aspect of Crusoe's personality that lies at the heart of who he actually is: Crusoe views everything as a commodity, even people. His needs and wants are based on his ever-changing atmospheres; as Watt illustrates, Crusoe only shows guilt for selling Xury when he needs a slave on the island. Crusoe jumps at the chance to claim anything, and Xury is no exception; when Crusoe is offered money for his dear friend, he frets over the offer but ultimately accepts due to his want of material goods. In Crusoe's eyes, money outweighs the value of the life of Xury, so he sells him to a Portuguese trader he doesn't even know. Who knows what kind of experiences Xury will have to endure with the Portuguese? Furthermore, the Portuguese trader could easily renege on his deal and hold Xury captive for the rest of his life. In short, Crusoe pushes Xury into a life of uncertainty for extra money which he doesn't even need, simultaneously signifying his seemingly authoritarian dominance over slaves and his willingness to view people as commodities, meant to be traded or sold.

It's clear throughout the novel that Crusoe badly desires his own slaves on the island that he lands on. He writes, "Besides, I fancied myself to manage One, nay, Two or Three Savages, if I had them, so as to make them entirely Slaves to me, to do whatever I direct them, and to prevent their being able at any time to do me any hurt" (145). Crusoe realizes that he needs manual labor to help him survive on the island, but more importantly, he desires his own slaves precisely because he wants to be in control. He has proclaimed the island to be his own; he repeatedly refers to places on the island as "his," showcasing his inherently possessive nature. Later, when he discovers Friday, he details his encounter: "…first I made him know his Name

should be *Friday*…I likewise taught him to say *Master*" (149). The mere fact that Crusoe brands his new acquaintance with his own name for him portrays the sense of superiority that Crusoe has over other races; he doesn't bother to inquire as to what the native's name is, but, like a teacher, instructs Friday to follow his decisions.

Not only does Crusoe enforce his own sense of control over Friday, but he actually tells himself that Friday enjoys it: Friday is "perfectly oblig'd and engag'd; his very Affections were ty'd to me, like those of a Child to a Father…" (151). Friday undoubtedly is gracious for Crusoe's saving of his life, but his "affection" for Crusoe isn't "like those of a Child to a Father" at all; later in the novel, when Friday and Crusoe come across the father of Friday, Friday embraces him with more emotion than he ever shows Crusoe. Crusoe simply assumes that Friday is a willing servant because of Crusoe's act of saving him from death, when the deed was performed so that Crusoe could obtain a servant. Various examples of Crusoe's tone suggest that Crusoe thinks of Friday as a savage, of sorts. He calls Friday "a poor Savage" on multiple occasions (159, 172), truly revealing to the reader that he still has bigoted feelings towards his own servant. By branding Friday as a "savage" that he attempts to control, it's easier for Crusoe to turn him into his servant; he forces Friday to be his slave while justifying it by teaching him the ways of the Bible and Christian ethics. Essentially, Crusoe still feels some sense of ownership over Friday, a sense that revisits his personality on various occasions.

Crusoe describes his island as solely his: "My island was now peopled, and I thought my self very rich in Subjects; and it was a merry Reflection which I frequently made, How like a King I look'd...My people were perfectly subjected: I was absolute Lord and Lawgiver…" (174). Here, Crusoe finally merges his notions of his own control over the island and his power over the *people* on his island, or rather, his subjects. He is "Lord," and no one can strip him of the title, at

least until he leaves the island. The presence of Friday (and, to an extent, the other cannibals) illustrates the state of mind of Crusoe during his tenure on the island; he takes his previous view of slaves as a commodity and applies it to his own dictatorship, forcing Friday to be his slave while justifying the slavery by saving Friday's life. He distinctly exerts his power and control over his island to expand over the island's inhabitants as well, portraying his true beliefs about slavery. Much like his description of the island (he writes of "*My* cave" on page 194), Friday is now *his*, bound by the constraints of both the circumstances in which he was obtained and by the governing rules that Crusoe has produced.

The dominance of Crusoe over Friday also comes to represent the feelings that Europeans had at the time regarding slavery of other races. As James Joyce explains, "The true symbol of the British conquest is Robinson Crusoe…he is the true prototype of the British colonist, as Friday…is the symbol of the subject races" (323). Crusoe proves himself to be a "Jack of All Trades" type of character, adapting into most situations with ease and comfort; Friday is made out to be hopeless and lost. Crusoe saves him from danger, enslaves him and teaches him the Bible, which epitomizes the European colonialist action all around the world around the time in which the novel was written. The novel doesn't explicitly condone slavery, but it makes it seem that without it, society couldn't function properly. Additionally, if Friday is a "symbol of the subject races," as Joyce proposes, his character probably serves to portray the "savages," or rather, all the non-European races, as needing to be taught Christian ways.

The issue of slavery in *Robinson Crusoe* can be interpreted in a variety of ways; Crusoe repeatedly desires to own his own slaves, and when he acquires them, he treats them with a level of respect. However, this respect constitutes of a feeling that other races are in need, and that they need to be enslaved for the good of both the Europeans and the non-Europeans. Crusoe is

hesitant in treating his slaves badly, and he even confesses to loving one of them, but his opinion is clear: that without slavery, society cannot function in an efficient manner. By including the character of Friday in the novel, Defoe makes it possible for Crusoe not only to exert his power over territory but also enables him to assert his dominance over the other races that he encounters. Crusoe's possessiveness is never more prevalent; he yearns for power and grabs hold of it through his island and through his enslavement of Friday.

Works Cited

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