

# The Influence of Humanism on Robinson Crusoe

Maojiang Ji

Department of English, North China Electric Power University, Baoding 071003, Hebei, China

## Abstract

**In this article the author expounds the beginning, development and the gist of humanism and how it had a great influence on English literature. Then the author describes how Daniel Defoe was influenced by humanism and thus the hero Robinson Crusoe in his novel was influenced by humanism.**

## Keywords

humanism; religion; science; knowledge.

## 1. Introduction

As we all know, Robinson Crusoe is the first and the most famous novel of Daniel Defoe. With Defoe's wonderful imagination, he has presented an 18<sup>th</sup> century English adventurous hero with strong will and intelligence. It became an immediate success on its publication and had remained enduring popularity ever since. Charles Lamb's claimed that: "the narrative manner of Defoe has a naturalness about it beyond that of any other novel or romance writer."

Readers were attracted by the vivid description of Robinson Crusoe's exciting adventure, especially his living on the island. But Defoe did not just take it as an adventurous story. Robinson Crusoe was the embodiment of the rising bourgeoisie of the time. The novel was, in fact, a paean of human power and acknowledge of the importance or knowledge, which reflected the ideas of humanism.

## 2. Humanism

### 2.1. The Origin of Humanism

Humanism, which was originated in Italy, spread to England in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and had a great influence on English literature. Humanists regarded human values as making sense only in the context of human life rather than in the promise of a supposed life after death. Hence, humanists made a strong objection to the obsolete doctrine of the middle ages. Humanism was also a philosophy of reason and science in pursuit of knowledge. Therefore, when it came to the question of the most valid means for acquiring knowledge of the world, humanists rejected arbitrary faith, authority and altered states of consciousness. Francesco Petarch remarked that: I will pull myself together and collect my scattered wits, and make a great endeavor to possess my soul in patience. But even while we speak, a crowd of important affairs, though only of the world, is waiting my attention.

### 2.2. The Development and Influence of Humanism in England

When humanism arrived in England, it aroused great interests of the writers of the time. Chaucer was one of the earliest writers who expressed the ideas of humanism in his work. *The Canterbury Tales* was the masterpiece of Chaucer. In the prologue, Chaucer provided to us a vivid picture of typical medieval figures. In the tales, Chaucer praised man's energy, intellect, quick wit and love of life. But he was still in the later stages of the Middle Ages, economically and politically.

He is religious himself. There is nothing revolutionary in his writing, though he lived in a period of peasant rising. While rightly praising man's right to earthly happiness, he sometimes likes to crack a rough joke and paint naturalistic picture of sexual life.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was the growing interest in man and in their infinite capabilities against implicit faith in God. "For the first time, the Absolute state faced the Absolute individual." In England, we had names of Thomas More and Marlowe and Shakespeare.

These progressive writers, sometime known as humanists, at their best voiced the human aspirations for freedom and equality and against the tyranny of feudal rule and ecclesiastical domination...These humanists chiefly stood for the progressive thought of the rising bourgeoisie together with their inevitable bourgeoisie limitation.

Shakespeare in his masterpiece *Hamlet* reflected the ideals of humanism. Hamlet was a humanist who had an unbounded love for the world instead of heaven. He had a strong belief in man's power and was a man derived of prejudices and superstitions. He was also an intelligent man. Shakespeare enthusiastically sang high praise of human power, but he could not jump out of his social limitations. He had to realize the cruel fact of the social and political world. That was why he sighed: "Denmark is a prison" through the tongue of Hamlet.

England experienced great changes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The so-called "glorious revolution" overthrew the reactionary rule of the feudal monarch and established the "constitutional monarchy" in which the real authority was in the hands of parliament and of the cabinet responsible to parliament, henceforth capitalism made a great development and confirmed its status in social life gradually.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the main achievement of English literature was the rise and development of the realistic novel. Quite different from the literary works before, the novels paid more attention to the common people in daily lives. So, all these changes had great effects on English literature.

### **3. The Influence of Humanism on the Writer Daniel Defoe**

#### **3.1. How Daniel Defoe's thought was Influenced**

Daniel Defoe's novel seems to depend upon two important general conditions: the society must value every individual highly enough and there must be enough variety of belief and action among ordinary people for a detailed account of them to be of interest to other ordinary people, the readers of the novels.

Robinson Crusoe's experiences showed the human spirit at the time. Crusoe came from a middle-class family, which could help him lead a much more comfortable life, but he refused to accept the assignment of his father. Robinson Crusoe's father represented the old doctrine and absolute religions; while on the other side, Robinson was the new generation of the society who emphasized man's independence and ability in the society, in the world.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, science and technology were highly developed, the insistent demands of the changing condition of life made it necessary for people to take a new attitude toward life. They were eager to know more about the outside world and paid much more attention to the mastering of knowledge. Francis Bacon stressed that: "knowledge is power". More and more people accepted science as a power of productivity.

Daniel Defoe used the hero in the story to glorify the bourgeoisie of the time, who was yet a rising and more energetic class in its historical development. Their courage and will to face hardships and their ingenuity and determination to struggle against nature were what humanist always advocated. People at the time were making good use of knowledge they had master, but would never be the crazy one as Doctor Faustus. They would like to persevere to his own ideals, no matter what kind of difficulties they had to come up with.

In fact, Defoe just uses the character of Robinson to show the spirit of the bourgeoisie of the time. Crusoe is the embodiment of the rising bourgeoisie. With the discoveries of the new continent and the heliocentric theory of Copernicus, man's eyes have been greatly opened. They are very eager to know the outside world. Especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the industrial revolution further pushes forward the society and the invention of the powerful machine makes it possible to broaden their territory.

### 3.2. How Defoe Created the Hero Robinson Crusoe

Crusoe's father is one of them. He is very ancient as Crusoe described and looks upon Crusoe's desire for voyage as a foolish step. In order to persuade Robinson Crusoe, he lists the advantages of the middle-class life:

That the middle station of life was calculated for all kinds of virtues, and all kind of enjoyments; that peace and plenty were the handmaids of a middle fortune; that temperance, moderation, quietness, health, society, all agreeable diversions, and all desirable pleasures, were the blessings attending the middle station of life.

Robinson's father is the representative of the conservatives of the time and the middle-class life to them is like Garden of Eden. God is still the ruler of their mind. Anyone who dares to disobey the will and arrangement of God would be severely punished. When Crusoe's father knows his will for going to sea, he also regards it as a big mistake and promises that God would not bless him anymore. All of these could not prevent Robinson Crusoe's venture for the outside world.

In the literary works before Robinson Crusoe, humanists also have expressed their desires for changing the rigid social system, but they had never brought it into practice. Crusoe would not like to be the victim of the outdated social routine and his venture is the first attempt of the humanists to make a fearless revolt against the society.

Robinson Crusoe's 28 years on the island further explained the importance of knowledge and the grandness of human power. He had to fight with the barbarism and wildness of the island, at the same time he tried to reconstruct and create a new "civilized society" of himself. Robinson Crusoe succeeded in fighting for a living on the island, which implied man's great potential for conquering the world in reality.

Humanism is, in sum, a philosophy for those in love with life. Humanists take responsibility for their lives and relish the adventure of being part of new discoveries, seeking new knowledge, exploring new options.

Defoe's Robinson Crusoe was not a single adventure.

As Coleridge pointed out, he is essentially 'the universal representative, the person, for whom every reader could substitute himself...nothing is done, thought, suffered, or desired, but what every man can imagine himself doing, thinking, feeling, or wishing for.'

His exciting experiences were the practice of humanism in reality. He was the embodiment of people of the time.

### References

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