

The Economies of the Self: Puritan Symbolism and Bourgeois Individualism in Defoe's Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Daniel Defoe's celebrated novels, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722), use a complex system of Puritan-derived symbolism to morally and spiritually validate the radical bourgeois individualism of the protagonists. This analysis reveals how the author alters acts deemed improper by society, such as Crusoe's colonialist greed and Moll's criminality, into stories of spiritual trial and redemption. By closely analyzing key symbolic elements, this paper argues that Defoe's novels construct a new archetype of the self. With this framework, economic priorities are framed as sacred through a symbolic structure that aligns Puritan introspection with the emerging capitalist ethos of eighteenth-century England. This produces a powerful and enduring myth of the self-made individual whose material pursuits are evidence of divine providence.

1.1 Defoeian Paradox:

Robinson Crusoe and *Moll Flanders* are considered milestones in Defoe's works, as they continue to attract the attention of many readers around the world for various reasons. These reasons include the vivid descriptions of early novels of English literature and their advocacy of moral discipline while reveling in self-serving and, at times, immoral actions. *Robinson Crusoe's* story is portrayed as

Crusoe ignoring his father's wishes and participating in the slave trade and building a monopoly, but the original plot is a form of spiritual quest. *Moll's* story showcases a self-reforming repentant who gains attention after retelling her immoral life, which consists of theft and prostitution. Many scholars, including Starr in 1965, have acknowledged the narrative duality. They emphasize Defoe's Puritan realism and the structure of sin and redemption embodied in the novels while ignoring the paradox of narrative wholeness in analyzing the "rise of the economic individual" proposed by Watt in 1957. This article, however, adopts a Defoeian paradox approach, which assumes that critique is waged by the form and mythology of the narrative, while the individualistic impulses it seeks to question are rendered sanctified through its skillful, paradoxical symbolism deployment.

Defoe, a nonconformist individual of his society, is concerned about the social and economic troubles of early eighteenth-century England. His unique position allows him to reflect these worldviews. Scholars like Eagleton (2005) and Novak (2000) note that his personal experience with bankruptcy, imprisonment, and political persecution affected his writing deeply, providing him with a personal understanding of uncertainty and the relentless drive for self-preservation.

This paper will build on these biographical insights to explore the literary mechanism through which this synthesis is achieved. This study argues that Defoe modifies the bourgeois individual's search for security and social standing into a contemporary pilgrimage through a deeply Puritan-inspired spiritual narrative, along with elements of economic literature and the culture of his time. This thematic symbolism is common and is reflected mainly in the following three domains:

1. The symbolic estate: the spaces that the protagonist controls (Crusoe's island, Moll's hoarded wealth) are symbolic domains that physically mark the construction and realization of the autonomous self.

2. The symbolic ledger: the prevalent use of accounting language, lists, and contracts that symbolically represent the governance of the soul as a blend of spiritual and economic evaluation.

3. The symbolic performance: the way clothing, names, and titles denote identity construction in a new social order where the self must be fashioned rather than inherited.

Through the analysis of these symbolic modes in both novels, the paper will highlight Defoe's work as not a mere reflection of the rise of individualism, but as playing a direct role in shaping its ideology. It provides a narrative and symbolic framework that makes bourgeois ambition spiritually legitimate and narratively persuasive.

1.2 The Author and His World: The Crucible of Individualism

An author's life representation is built around intentions, ideas, perceptions, and values. The subject matter they choose to explore in their work is the defining factor of the author's style, influenced by the surrounding environment. This is because language, too, can be shaped by the environment (Aras 251). Katherine Frank wrote in her book, highlighting Defoe's way of writing and the type of his readers, saying, "Defoe wrote for different readerships, in different formats and genres, on opposite sides of issues, using different personae" (Frank, 17).

Defoe lived during a transformative time in European history, witnessing the rise of capitalism, mercantilism, and the merging of the middle class. The socio-economic changes promoted values such as self-awareness, where individuals were encouraged to achieve personal advancement and economic independence. Defoe was deeply interested in these changes, and he reflected this in his early works in terms of entrepreneurial spirit, self-reliance, and moral ambiguity that showed the new social order (Lawrence 427). His writings emerge from the intersection of Dissenting Protestantism, with its focus on individual conscience and worldly asceticism, and a burgeoning capitalist spirit that valued ambitions, commerce, and material achievement. "Some of his writings show Defoe to have been a most progressive thinker for his time" (Drew 27). He wrote

to appeal to the public interest, blending realism and moral reflection, which were influenced by his personal hardships, especially imprisonment (Lawrence 428). His works, such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders*, established the genre by using first-person narratives to explore themes of individualism, morality, survival, and social mobility (Eagleton 22). His experience in many jobs and encounters with different kinds of prisoners in jail is implied in *Moll's* character when she was put in situations where she became a thief to survive. He presented the characters as individuals who had to endure harsh circumstances, exploring themes of religion, morality, social mobility, and the human condition (Drew 26-30).

The connection between character and society in Defoe's work illustrates how literature serves as a mirror of its times. By engaging with literary works like Defoe's, readers are motivated to experience positive impacts, as these works provide cultural insights from a variety of sociocultural backgrounds. Literature continues to evolve, and with it, academic interest and research expand (Arafah et al., 2023).

2. Theoretical Framework: Individualism and Symbolic Legitimation

2.1 Individualism:

Individualism, as presented in this context, is more than a feeling of isolation. It represents a socio-political and psychological philosophy that emphasizes personal autonomy and self-reliance. It values the independence of thought and action and prioritizes personal goals over collective interests, making it a defining feature of modern societies (Realo et al., 2002). It is the condition or characteristic of an individual that highlights personal freedom, autonomy, and independence (McKeon 473). It provides interesting subject matter in literature that contributes to the pursuit of human dignity. This philosophical idea connects with various elements of existence, including society, lifestyle, and artwork, highlighting its impact on human life (Realo et al., 2002). This philosophical attitude emphasizes the innate significance given to personal freedom, the capacity to make individual choices, and the ability to depend on

oneself for different aspects of life. Individualism shows the importance of personal choice and the pursuit of personal objectives and ambitions (Murwantono, 2022).

Individualism is demonstrated through various forms. Economic individualism fosters the limitation of the government in achieving utmost economic independence (Murwantono, 2022). Utilitarian individualism highlights personal interests, and romantic individualism focuses on personal value and uniqueness. Most of Defoe's characters blend economic and utilitarian individualism, but they often show a need for romantic and ethical self-justification. They reflect the belief that autonomy, individuality, and personal accountability together shape the essence of the self, promoting a strong sense of individualism (Realo et al., 2002).

2.2 Symbolism:

Defoe uses symbolism as a literary device that allows him to navigate these competing individualistic impulses. The word symbolism originated from the Greek word "symballein," which means to combine or to match, reflecting the idea of joining two meanings, one literal and one figurative. Additionally, it has two meanings, one literal and one suggestive. The figurative meaning refers to what is beyond the idea or object presented in a work, a meaning that is linked to spiritual or hidden aspects of life. Here, the term 'symbolism' is used in a literary context (Sharma 2). Defoe's symbolism focuses on materialistic objects and spaces, footprints, a ledger, a goatskin cap, and a stolen watch, which all have layered meaning. They are presented within the plot while reflecting the psychological state, spiritual conditions, and ideological conflicts. This paper will examine how Defoe utilizes symbolism to show that actions deemed unacceptable can appear acceptable within a worldview blending Puritanism and capitalism (Benedict, 2020).

3. Robinson Crusoe:

Robinson Crusoe is considered a representation of Daniel Defoe's political philosophy. The novel foregrounds the theme of individuality before expanding its focus to encompass political society and Crusoe's religious identity. The novel highlights Defoe's skill as a pioneer in the use of realistic details and a journalistic style to create believable fictional worlds. It portrays a man's survival for 28 years on a deserted island. To endure such a situation, the world naturally offers resources that humans can use for survival (Siwi et al., 2022). Robinson's character depicts human nature perfectly through his fears and doubts. He is a character who is seeking his freedom, but he realizes that he needs the company of others. Yet he still thinks of his pride and personal gain. The aim of seeking individuality is shown from the early passages of the novel when Crusoe states, "I should certainly run away from my master before my time was out and go to the sea..." (Defoe 6). He always thinks of going abroad and of expanding his business. He also uses the first-person pronoun "I," referring to the approach of individualism. Robinson's story is based on the real story of Alexander Selkirk, who was a sailor trapped on an island for a very long time. The story drew the attention of many critics, including the feminist and postcolonial schools (Stephen 189).

Defoe's strategic use of accessible language allowed his narratives to resonate with a broad readership. During his time, technological developments led people to rely on machines for daily tasks, which influenced how Defoe depicted daily life in his narratives. He made his characters reflect this style of life through their daily activities. He described Crusoe making bread, which would have been unremarkable in the medieval period, but gained significance in the eighteenth century due to new technologies. Ian Watt states that "Robinson Crusoe is certainly the first novel in the sense that it is the fictional narrative in which an ordinary person's daily activities are the center of continuous literary attention" (Watt 74-76).

Defoe explored "the nature of psychology" and revealed psychological truths through the consciousness of his characters. Though he was certainly

focused on depicting the social and political environments of his characters, "he was more intrigued by what transpired in his characters' minds" (Novak, 2000). He knew how to make his characters represent the economic situations of his time. Robinson Crusoe left his family behind him and set out on an adventure, which Defoe intended to describe the new orientation towards life of individuality and freedom from societal constraints. Those adventures also show how such voyagers, throughout their discoveries, have brought money, gold, and slaves, which helped in the expansion of trade and set the stage for the development of the colonies (Watt 69).

The most effective symbol of Defoeian individualism is the private, regulated space that functions as the protagonist's own territory. This is exemplified in Robinson's declaration: "... this was all my own; that I was king and lord of all this Country Indefeasibly and had a right of possession and if I could convey it, I might have it in Inheritance as completely as any Lord of a Manor in England" (Defoe 118). This quotation shows the possessiveness of Robinson as well as his aim of gaining his own independence. His character is able to combine both intellectual action and ethical reflection due to his isolation, where he has to work to provide himself with the essentials of life and has a lot of time to pray and meditate as well. Being a practical character allows him to make use of all available resources to his advantage, which is a reflection of Defoe's other characters as well (Eagleton 30).

Crusoe can be regarded as a modern cultural hero because he uses his surroundings for his own benefit, reflecting the emerging spirit of economic individualism in Defoe's time. His character embodies the rational self-interest and industriousness associated with early capitalist thought (Watt 90). This aligns with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion that man should be allowed to live as an independent being. Crusoe's actions reflect a practical form of social contract as he organizes the people he meets into social functional groups. However, he fails to establish his personal individuality (Armstrong 36). He never cares for personal ties unless they are associated with money:

"In this he resembles his author, who seems to have made as few concessions to such distractions as anyone. The fewness of Defoe's literary friendship has been commented on, and he is perhaps a unique example of a great writer who was very little interested in literature and says nothing of interest about it as literature" (Watt 72).

The isolation is not a mere symbol of Crusoe's original sin, but rather a form of divine mercy. Removed from society, he is able to communicate with God directly, free from the interference of church or community, which reframes his earlier rebellion as a justified pursuit of spiritual clarity. The island turns into a Puritan land where productivity is linked with acts of faith. The symbolic reading reshapes the religious themes of the novel. As J.A. Downie argues, the narrative follows a spiritual journey from sin, conversion, to ultimately a life of piety. The island serves as both a testing ground and a place of spiritual growth, where actions reflect inner transformation. His true nature emerges when Crusoe meets Friday. He treats Friday as a servant rather than as an equal, even though they are stranded together. He mentions in several passages "my Man Friday" referring to his love of possessing authority over others and wanting to be superior to them. He orders Man Friday to act first in dangerous situations to maintain his safety (Watt 30).

The island is used by Defoe to show that the word "gentleman" is a reference to moral behavior rather than a mere term. This demonstrates the influence of colonialism and exploitation, showing how Crusoe uses his surroundings to assert control over land (Watt 30). It is a powerful representation of the colonialist and capitalist imagination. His declaration, "I was king and lord of all this country indefeasibly, and had a right of possession" (Defoe 118), symbolizes more than just survival but a deep sense of ownership. It reflects the core of Lockean political philosophy, which justifies ownership through labor and improvement. Each task, building fences, planting, and domesticating goats, represents labor as a kind of prayer and possession as a natural right. This sense of ownership and authority, embedded in the colonial

and capitalist ideology, goes further than land and labor. It reflects how Crusoe builds his relationships with others. He depends on an informal social contract by trying to force order, putting people into different categories such as their practicality, status, or threat to his authority.

In societies where social rules are fluid and not fixed, identity becomes a kind of performance. Defoe explores the idea of self-fashioned individualism through the symbolism of clothing. Crusoe's change of attire to a goatskin suit marks a key transformation as he leaves behind his civilized European style in the pursuit of a new self-fashioned identity. The clothing illustrates the change in his position from a powerless bystander, a victim of circumstances, to the "governor" of his island. Additionally, his act of clothing Friday is part of the white man's burden ideology. Crusoe always believed there was a higher power that was helping him, especially after he encountered death several times. After each challenge, he seeks advice by reading from the Bible and reflecting on it in his daily life (Frank 27). Moralization is evident in Defoe's writings, but the characters are trapped and controlled by the capitalist world. For instance, Robinson Crusoe can be considered a Christ-like figure because he tried to help Man Friday. He teaches Friday reading, writing, and converts him to Christianity, but his desire for authority sometimes contradicts Christ-like behavior. (Eagleton 29).

"Defoe was rationalist in some respects, but he also had a typically puritan sense of the depravity of human nature and the consequent fragility of reason" (Eagleton 31). The language of economics is implied in Defoe's work due to his background as a merchant. It is used as a tool to align material ambition with spiritual anxiety. Crusoe uses a journal, which represents his thoughts and virtues. He records all of his materialistic and spiritual achievements, making a comparison between the "Evil" and "Good," which makes him control his individualism. What saves him is the practical and cold calculating account, which is a virtue greatly appreciated by Defoe's market readers. This is in line with what G.A. Starr referred to as the root of the novel in Puritan devotional literature, where self-exploration was routinely done as a ritual. The novel as a

whole, with its structure, in which the protagonist goes through a change of circumstances, is merely a spiritual evolution. Defoe mixes this tradition with the spirit of capitalism, linking spiritual growth to a business (Downie 116).

4. Moll Flanders:

Moll Flanders was far removed from Romance. Defoe focused on narrating the histories of individuals whose identities often remained private. He minimized his appearance in the novel and let his character narrate her story. Consequently, he limited his appearance by adjusting the language and made sure that people would not make use of such stories to commit crimes. Defoe begins Moll's narrative by stating, "I was born in Newgate, and my parents were of the lower sort" (Defoe 3), immediately establishing her social context and setting up a moral frame for the story. The structure of the novel is eventful and full of adventures that convey moral lessons, as eighteenth-century readers valued the lessons implied in the text more than the story itself (11).

In the preface to *Moll Flanders*, Defoe asserts that the events Moll experiences are historically accurate and urges readers to focus on the moral lessons presented in the novel. Yet, some critics voice their concern about this declaration, saying that such events that describe a woman involved in the world of thieves and robbery might have a negative influence on the readers, especially those who come from the middle class. However, Defoe sought to reflect his own experiences through Moll, drawing on his multiple imprisonments. These personal experiences likely shaped his understanding of the complexities of individual agency and the challenges faced by individuals navigating a society that often constrained social mobility and individual freedom. This understanding is reflected in his portrayal of Moll Flanders, who embodies both the resilience and the moral ambiguities of individuals striving for social and economic stability (Baines 11). She emphasizes her economic reasoning: "I was determined to gain money by my own hands, by fair means or foul, and to secure my own fortune" (Defoe, 47). Additionally, Defoe believed in gender equality, arguing that 'sexual inequalities' stemmed from cultural influences rather than

natural differences. Those qualities made characters like Moll be portrayed as a bad woman, which enables her character to be in control of her fate rather than to be controlled by a man. She resembles Crusoe in her control over her own fate (Eagleton 24).

In Defoe's works, reality serves as a vehicle for imparting moral fate. Moll's wealth symbolizes the freedom she gets through her criminal activities. Her criminality is her only economic security in a society that restricts women's opportunities to be economically independent. Through these acts, Defoe symbolically links economic survival with moral negotiation, showing how her pursuit of individualism operates within a system that both restricts and permits personal agency. Metaphorically, her robberies serve not merely as crimes but as steps in building her autonomy, "I robbed to live, and lived to rob, but never out of want" (Defoe, 102). Moll declares her self-domination when she claims that her domain is selfhood. Her hypocrisy emerges when she refers to thieves as "them," not "we" (Watt 118), highlighting a tension between her attempt of self-construction and moral ambiguity. Her self-justification is a valid reason to preserve self and accumulate estate.

Moll's use of an alias serves as a tool for establishing an identity within a patriarchal society. Furthermore, she uses clothing to transform her identity. Her changes in clothing and names, from gentlewoman to maid to widow to Mrs. Flanders, symbolize her attempt to secure an identity that serves her needs. Unlike Crusoe, who builds a single and stable identity on his island, Moll develops a flexible and adaptable persona. She argues that the only way a woman can survive in a world with a predicated denotation is by transforming herself to meet its expectations. Her final repentance and return to England as a respectable "gentlewoman" is her ultimate and most successful performance, symbolizing the triumphant culmination of her life's work: she has finally fashioned the stable, propertied identity she craved from the beginning. She has authored a social contract of her own, as Armstrong evokes regarding the 'logic of social contract' he attributes to Crusoe's case, but unlike Crusoe, Moll focuses on self-governance in perception.

Moll chooses a life outside societal expectations, discovering that criminality and immorality provide her with greater wealth, security, and respectability than any conventional occupation available to women. She states: "I saw the errors of my ways, yet understood that the world had given me few honest means to provide for myself" (Defoe, 226). All of this didn't prevent Moll from getting back to her origin. In Newgate prison, a symbol of patriarchal power and authority (Faller 5), a place where she will be forced again to be a woman and secure her social life, and when she saw her husband, she felt guilty and responsible for her past, saying that "It was now that, for the first time, I felt any real signs of Repentance; I now began to look back upon my past Life with abhorrence" (225). Newgate Prison symbolizes the estate as "the prison of the vice that the new world wiped the slate clean ..." (Faller, 5), reflecting societal attempts to crush the self-autonomously constructed self. This prison begins the self-redemption process, which symbolizes her first attempt at obtaining an individual economic dominion. Moll's statement that she was happy when she lost her children because she believed it would affect her financial independence indicates the freedom and individuality her character was seeking (Eagleton 23).

The golden watch she steals from a child is a metaphor for time. A time she has to secure herself as a woman in a society that offers no legitimate way for a woman to achieve it, "I took the watch, thinking it my due, and by it ensured a small independence" (Defoe, 150). This temporal symbol aligns with the ledger-like accounting of her life, emphasizing that her moral and financial calculations are inseparable in the pursuit of autonomy. The abandonment of her children represents a tragic necessity in a harsh economic system, as highlighted in the novel: "She was happy when she lost her children because, in her mind, it would help her gain financial freedom" (Eagleton, 2005). Defoe employs her character to evoke complex emotions in the reader to highlight the harsh realities that necessitate such reasoning. The final payment that settles her moral debt marks the last entry in her account, representing Defoe's portrayal of her ultimate remorse once her financial obligations are met (Lawrence 430).

5. Conclusion:

Robinson Crusoe and *Moll Flanders* reveal more than their symbolic frame and works of realism. They are advanced ideological projects that use a deeply rooted Puritan symbolic language to validate and canonize a new burgeoning bourgeois individualism. Defoe's distinctive biography and an opposing worldview allowed him to act as a pivotal integrator, translating the anxieties and ambitions of a new class into a compelling narrative form.

Through the symbols of the island and the hoard, Defoe creates domains where self-creation is the highest law. He creates a method for reconciling spiritual accounts with material ones by utilizing the symbolic performance of the journal and the calculated life with clothing and names. He explores the fluidity of identity in a society where the self is constructed rather than given.

This symbolic strategy resolved the Defoeian paradox. It allowed him to narrate the stories of a colonialist and a criminal while maintaining a framework of moral and spiritual instruction. *Crusoe's* individualism is purified through the symbolic transformation of his island into a Puritan commonwealth where labor is worship. *Moll's* is sanctified through the symbolic reframing of her crimes as necessary transactions in an economy that offered women no honest path to autonomy. For both, spiritual reckoning is not a negation of their individualistic pursuits but their final, legitimizing chapter.

Defoe did not merely depict the modern self, but also supplied it with a powerful and enduring narrative about it. He created a myth by highlighting that materialistic pursuits could be more than just survival or greed. They could be a modern pilgrimage, evidence of our providence and the path to salvation. In doing so, he established not only the formal conventions of the novel but also one of its most enduring themes: the complex, often contradictory, journey of the individual in a world of their own making.

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ئابووری خو: په مزی بیوریتانی و فهره نسه ییته تی بورد ژواز له روبینسون کروسو و مول فلاندرزی دیفو

پوخته:

نهم توپژینه وهیبه پړومانی به ناوبانگی دانیال دیفو، پښتن کروسو (۱۷۱۹) و مول فلاندرز (۱۷۲۲) به کار دهیښت بولیکولینه وه له به کار هیښانی سیستمی نالوژی سیمبولیزمی وهرگیراو له پیوریتان بولونه وهی کردار و ژبانی که سایه تیبه کی بورژواز و تاکگری و هک شتیکی نه خلای و روحی په سهند بکات. له شیکاری نهم توپژینه وهیبه دا نه وه پیشان دهریت که نووسه چو نه و کرده وانه دهگوریت که کومه لگا به نابه جیی دهزانیت، و هک ته ماحی کولونیالیزمی کروزو و تاوانباری مول، بولچیروکی دادگاییکردن و پرگارکردنی پوچ. نهم توپژینه وهیبه نه وه دهرده خات

كه چۆن ديفو ئه و كارانهى كۆمه لگا به تاوان ده زانیت وهك ههزى زۆر و ده سترىژى كۆلۆنيا لىستى كروسو يان تاوانكارى مۆل ده گۆرپت بۆ چيرۆكى تاقىكرده وه و پرگار بوونى رووحي. به وردبىنى هيماكاني سهرهكى، ئه م تويزينه وه به باس له وه دهكات كه رۆمانه كاني ديفو مۆديليكي تازهى "خويهكى نوێ" دروست دهكهن. له م مۆديله دا، ئهرك و ئارهزووى دارايى و ژيانى ئابوورى وهك شتيكى پيرۆز نيشان دهدریت. ئه مهش به هوى يه كگرتنى بيرۆكهى دهروونى پيوريتان و ئايدياي سه رمايه دارى نوێ ئينگلته رهى سه دهى هه ژده هه م. ئه م هه ولانه ئه فسانه يه كى به هيزى تاكگه رى دروست دهكات كه هه وله مادديه كاني نيشانه يه كن بۆ خوداي بالاده ست.

اقتصاديات الذات: الرمزية البيوريتانية والفردية البرجوازية في روايتى روبنسون كروزو ومول فلاندرز لديفو

ملخص:

يجادل هذا المقال بأن روايات دانييل ديفو الشهيرة، روبنسون كروزو (1719) ومول فلاندرز (1722)، تستخدم نظامًا معقدًا من الرمزية المستمدة من البيوريتانية لتبرير الفردية البرجوازية الجذرية للأبطال على الصعيدين الأخلاقي والروحي. يكشف هذا التحليل كيف يقوم المؤلف بتحويل الأفعال التي تعتبر غير مقبولة اجتماعيًا، مثل جشع كروزو الاستعماري وإجرام مول، إلى قصص عن التجربة الروحية والخلاص. من خلال تحليل العناصر الرمزية الأساسية عن كثب، يجادل هذا المقال بأن روايات ديفو تبني نموذجًا جديدًا للذات. ضمن هذا الإطار، يتم تقديم الأولويات الاقتصادية على أنها مقدسة من خلال هيكل رمزي يوفق بين التأمل البيوريتاني وأخلاقيات الرأسمالية الناشئة في إنجلترا خلال القرن الثامن عشر، مما ينتج أسطورة قوية ودائمة للفرد المصنوع ذاتيًا، حيث تُعد السعي وراء المكاسب المادية دليلًا على العناية الإلهية.