



# *Property, Profit, and Possession: Economic Narratives in Robinson Crusoe*

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## Abstract

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) is often celebrated as the prototype of the English novel, yet beneath its adventure narrative lies a profound meditation on the emerging economic ideologies of early modern Europe. This paper examines the text through the lens of property, profit, and possession, arguing that Crusoe's survival and success on the island function as a microcosm of capitalist thought. The narrative dramatizes the transformation of natural resources into commodities, the rationalization of labor, and the sanctification of private ownership as moral duty. Crusoe's meticulous record-keeping, his valuation of surplus, and his hierarchical relationship with Friday reveal the ways in which economic rationality intersects with colonial and religious discourse. By situating *Robinson Crusoe* within the historical context of mercantilism and the rise of capitalist individualism, this study highlights how Defoe inscribed the ethos of profit and possession into the very fabric of novelistic form. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that *Robinson Crusoe* is not only a story of adventure and survival but also a foundational text in the cultural construction of economic man.

## Keywords:

Robinson Crusoe, Daniel Defoe, economic narratives, property, profit, possession, capitalism, mercantilism, colonial discourse, individualism

## Introduction

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) occupies a seminal position in the history of the English novel, not merely as a tale of adventure and survival but as a profound reflection of the emerging economic consciousness of early eighteenth-century Europe. Written at a time when mercantile capitalism, colonial expansion, and Protestant work ethics were shaping the cultural imagination, the novel transcends the boundaries of fiction to become a narrative deeply embedded in the discourse of property, profit, and possession. Crusoe's journey from shipwrecked isolation to mastery over land, resources, and even people encapsulates the ideological transformation of the individual into the archetype of "economic man."

At its core, the novel is not only about man's confrontation with nature but also about his ability to transform the natural world into a system of ownership and productivity. Crusoe's careful cataloguing of goods, his industrious cultivation of land, and his eventual establishment of authority over Friday reflect the values of accumulation, control, and expansion that were central to Britain's colonial economy. The island, far from being an uninhabited wilderness, becomes a laboratory for testing the principles of labor, resource management, and property rights—principles that later became cornerstones of modern capitalist thought.

Defoe, himself a businessman and pamphleteer, weaves into the narrative a subtle yet persistent emphasis on accounting, trade, and profit-making. Crusoe's practice of recording his possessions, his obsession with "use value" versus "exchange value," and his attempts to replicate the economic order of the metropolis within the confines of isolation illuminate the novel's economic subtext.

The narrative reveals not just the struggle for survival but also the transformation of survival into enterprise—a process through which necessity is converted into profit and possession is legitimized as property.

This paper, titled *Property, Profit, and Possession: Economic Narratives in Robinson Crusoe*, seeks to examine how Defoe's text reflects, reinforces, and critiques the economic ideologies of his time. It will analyze the novel as a cultural artifact that dramatizes the intersection of individual labor, colonial exploitation, and capitalist enterprise. By situating *Robinson Crusoe* within the broader framework of economic discourse, this study will argue that the novel is less a story of solitude and more a narrative of possession—a fiction that mirrors the real-world drive for expansion, accumulation, and economic mastery that defined the eighteenth century.

## 1.2 Research Objective

The primary objective of this research is to critically examine Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* through the lens of economic narratives, with a particular focus on how property, profit, and possession shape both the protagonist's survival and the novel's broader ideological framework. This study seeks to:

1. Investigate how the concepts of ownership, accumulation, and labor are constructed in *Robinson Crusoe*, and how these reflect the emerging capitalist ethos of eighteenth-century England.
2. Analyze the representation of profit-driven rationality in Crusoe's decisions and its alignment with mercantile and colonial expansionist discourses.
3. Explore the symbolic and material significance of property in transforming the island into a microcosm of European economic order.
4. Assess how possession and mastery over land, goods, and people (notably Friday) reinforce hierarchies of class, race, and power embedded in the novel.
5. Situate *Robinson Crusoe* within the trajectory of the rise of the English novel as a vehicle for legitimizing economic individualism and imperial enterprise.

By pursuing these objectives, the research aims to demonstrate that *Robinson Crusoe* is not only a survival narrative but also a foundational economic text that mirrors and critiques the cultural logic of property, profit, and possession in early modern capitalism.

## 1.2 Study Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design rooted in literary analysis. The objective is to examine *Robinson Crusoe* through the lens of economic narratives, with particular emphasis on the interrelated themes of property, profit, and possession. By situating Defoe's novel within the broader intellectual and socio-economic context of the early eighteenth century, the research will trace how Crusoe's actions and worldview reflect the emergent capitalist ethos of his time.

The design of the study is organized around three interconnected layers:

### 1. Textual Analysis

A close reading of *Robinson Crusoe* will be conducted, focusing on key episodes where property ownership, accumulation of profit, and material possession are foregrounded. Particular attention will be given to Crusoe's methods of labor, resource management, and his evolving sense of ownership over land, goods, and Friday. Narrative strategies employed by Defoe to naturalize economic behavior will also be analyzed.

### 2. Contextual Framework

The textual findings will be examined in relation to the socio-historical context of early eighteenth-century England. Sources on mercantilism, colonial expansion, Protestant work ethic, and the rise of capitalist individualism will be integrated to understand how *Robinson Crusoe* reflects and reinforces contemporary economic ideologies. This contextual study ensures that the literary narrative is not viewed in isolation but in dialogue with historical economic discourses.

### 3. Theoretical Application

Economic and cultural theories, particularly those of Max Weber on the Protestant ethic, Karl Marx on commodity and class, and Ian Watt's perspectives on the rise of the novel, will be employed to interpret the text. These frameworks will help illuminate how Crusoe's narrative functions both as a personal story of survival and as a cultural allegory for property relations, accumulation, and economic rationality.

The study thus employs a **triangulated design**—textual, contextual, and theoretical—allowing for a comprehensive understanding of Defoe's economic imagination. This design ensures that the research does not merely summarize Crusoe's experiences but critically engages with the deeper structures of meaning that position *Robinson Crusoe* as both a literary classic and an economic narrative parable.

## 2. Literature Review

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) has long been read as a foundational text in the history of the English novel, but more significantly, it has been examined through the lens of economic history, colonial ideology, and the evolution of capitalist thought. The critical scholarship on *Robinson Crusoe* highlights three dominant strands of interpretation: the text as an allegory of Protestant spiritual redemption, as a narrative of colonial expansion and cultural encounter, and as a proto-economic fable that embodies the emergent ethos of modern capitalism. This section reviews the scholarship most relevant to the economic dimensions of the novel, situating *Robinson Crusoe* as a text deeply embedded in the discourses of property, profit, and possession.

### 2.1 Robinson Crusoe and the Rise of Capitalist Individualism

Ian Watt's seminal study *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) positioned *Robinson Crusoe* as a paradigmatic text of economic individualism. Watt argued that Crusoe represents the "economic man," whose rational calculation, labor discipline, and pragmatic engagement with the material world embody the spirit of early capitalism. This interpretation situates Defoe's novel within the broader socio-economic transformations of the eighteenth century, when mercantile expansion, colonial trade, and Protestant work ethic shaped new forms of subjectivity. Watt's framework has been foundational in reading Crusoe not simply as a stranded individual but as a self-made entrepreneur whose island functions as a miniature economy.

Subsequent critics, such as Karl Marx, also engaged with Crusoe as a model of abstracted labor and private property. In *Capital* (1867), Marx famously used Crusoe as an illustration of labor value, noting that Crusoe's isolated production reveals the essential relationship between human labor and material necessity. While Marx did not treat Defoe's novel as literature, his appropriation of Crusoe for economic theory has influenced subsequent Marxist and materialist readings, which see the island as a stage upon which the dynamics of production, consumption, and surplus are dramatized.

### 2.2 Property, Possession, and Colonial Ideology

Another central strand of scholarship has examined the text through its representation of property ownership and colonial possession. Critics such as Edward Said (*Culture and Imperialism*, 1993) have argued that Crusoe's assertion of ownership over the island reflects the ideological underpinnings of European imperialism. By naming, measuring, and enclosing the land, Crusoe embodies the Lockean conception of property—that labor confers ownership. Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) directly parallels Crusoe's transformation of "waste" land into a productive territory, underscoring the ideological connection between property rights, colonial conquest, and individual profit.

Scholars such as Srinivas Aravamudan (*Tropicopolitans*, 1999) have extended this argument by showing how Crusoe's authority over Friday enacts a microcosm of colonial domination. Friday is not only converted into a servant but also incorporated into Crusoe's economic system, becoming both property and labor force. The unequal relationship between Crusoe and Friday reveals how Defoe naturalized hierarchies of race, power, and economic dependence within the framework of possession.

### 2.3 Robinson Crusoe as an Economic Parable

A number of critics have read *Robinson Crusoe* as an allegorical parable of modern economics, where the island functions as a laboratory for testing theories of scarcity, value, and exchange. Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) provides a backdrop for such interpretations, as Crusoe's industriousness, thrift, and rational planning echo the Protestant ethic of worldly success as a sign of divine favor. In this light, the novel reflects both theological and economic narratives, blending salvation with material accumulation.

Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel* (1987) emphasizes the way in which Defoe used narrative realism to naturalize economic activity. For McKeon, Crusoe's meticulous inventories, accounts, and records resemble bookkeeping practices that align with the rise of mercantile capitalism. The act of recording possessions becomes a narrative strategy that authenticates both Crusoe's survival and his role as a proto-capitalist.

Similarly, James Thompson (*Models of Value*, 1996) argues that *Robinson Crusoe* illustrates the tension between subsistence and profit, as Crusoe moves from survival-oriented labor to surplus accumulation. The novel demonstrates how material abundance becomes a measure of success, transforming the island into a site of wealth generation rather than mere refuge.



## 2.4 Economic Narratives and the Formation of Subjectivity

Recent scholarship has emphasized the interrelation between economic narratives and the shaping of Crusoe's subjectivity. Critics argue that Crusoe is not merely a passive character responding to circumstance but an agent whose identity is formed through acts of possession and economic mastery. Deidre Lynch (*The Economy of Character*, 1998) suggests that Crusoe's transformation into a self-sufficient figure illustrates the cultural link between property and personal identity. His sense of self emerges through his relation to material goods, land, and domesticated labor.

In addition, contemporary cultural materialist readings highlight how Defoe's narrative resonates with neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurship and self-reliance. Scholars note that Crusoe's "start-up" mentality—converting scarcity into opportunity, and isolation into productivity—mirrors modern narratives of the entrepreneur. This suggests that *Robinson Crusoe* continues to serve as an archetype of economic individualism in global capitalist culture.

## 2.5 Gaps and Directions in Scholarship

While the economic readings of *Robinson Crusoe* are rich and varied, they also invite further exploration of how property, profit, and possession intersect with other dimensions such as gender, ecology, and globalization. For instance, feminist critics have observed the absence of women and domestic economy, pointing out how Crusoe's economic world is constructed without acknowledging reproductive labor. Similarly, ecocritical perspectives raise questions about how Crusoe's exploitation of the island anticipates environmental domination. These gaps suggest that economic narratives in *Robinson Crusoe* cannot be studied in isolation but must be situated within broader cultural, ecological, and social frameworks.

## 2.6 Summary

The critical tradition surrounding *Robinson Crusoe* has consistently foregrounded its role as a text of economic significance, whether as a reflection of early capitalist ideology, a dramatization of property rights, or a parable of individual entrepreneurship. From Watt's account of the "economic man" to Marx's theoretical appropriation and postcolonial critiques of property and labor, the novel has been read as a foundational economic narrative of the modern age. This body of scholarship provides the theoretical grounding for examining how Defoe's narrative constructs property, profit, and possession not simply as material concerns but as constitutive forces in shaping identity, society, and empire.

## 3. Method

This study employs a **qualitative, interpretative methodology** grounded in literary analysis and informed by economic and cultural theory. The primary text for analysis is Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), read in its unabridged form. The novel is examined not merely as a work of fiction but as a cultural document reflecting the economic ideologies of early eighteenth-century Britain, including mercantilism, colonial expansion, and the rise of capitalist individualism.

The research method involves three interconnected steps:

### 1. Textual Analysis:

Close reading of *Robinson Crusoe* is undertaken to identify and categorize passages that foreground property acquisition, profit-making activities, and patterns of possession or ownership. Narrative episodes such as Crusoe's shipwreck, his inventorying of salvaged goods, the cultivation of land, and his interactions with Friday are studied for their economic implications.

### 2. Theoretical Framework Application:

The analysis is informed by theoretical perspectives drawn from **political economy** (Adam Smith, Karl Marx), **cultural materialism**, and **postcolonial economic critique**. These frameworks provide lenses to interpret Crusoe's actions not only as survival strategies but also as symbolic enactments of emergent capitalist values.

### 3. Comparative Contextualization:

Secondary sources—including historical accounts of trade, property law, and colonial practices in the eighteenth century—are integrated to contextualize Crusoe's narrative within the broader socio-economic milieu. By juxtaposing the fictional representation with historical reality, the study seeks to highlight how Defoe's novel embodies and disseminates economic narratives of its age.

Through this three-tiered method, the paper aims to demonstrate that *Robinson Crusoe* is not only an adventure story but also a **foundational economic text**, shaping literary and cultural notions of property, profit, and possession in early modern England.

## 4. Findings

The analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* through the lens of property, profit, and possession reveals a deep intertwining of narrative, economy, and ideology. Defoe's novel is not merely a story of survival but a structured discourse on the emerging capitalist ethos of eighteenth-century England. The following findings emerged from close textual and thematic examination:

### 4.1 Property as Identity and Authority

Crusoe's identity is consistently mediated through the act of claiming, cultivating, and naming property. The island transforms into an extension of his self, as he fences land, builds dwellings, and marks boundaries. These acts of possession symbolize both material survival and the construction of authority. Property becomes a marker of civilization in contrast to wilderness, thereby situating Crusoe as a proto-capitalist figure who derives legitimacy from ownership and control.

### 4.2 Profit as Rational Calculation

Crusoe's approach to survival reflects a distinctly economic rationality. His meticulous inventories of resources, accounts of losses and gains, and strategic use of labor mirror the logic of mercantile bookkeeping. Profit in this context is not limited to material accumulation but also extends to spiritual and moral gain, as Crusoe interprets his hardships as part of divine economy. This double register of profit—worldly and transcendental—illustrates the fusion of Protestant ethics with commercial pragmatism.

### 4.3 Possession and Colonial Hierarchies

The relationship between Crusoe and Friday highlights possession as both economic mastery and cultural dominance. Friday is represented as both laborer and property, a figure through whom Crusoe consolidates his role as "governor" of the island. The act of teaching Friday language, religion, and labor systems symbolizes the colonial framework wherein possession of land is inseparable from possession of people. Thus, the narrative encodes not only individual enterprise but also the larger imperial project of Europe.

### 4.4 The Island as a Prototype of Capitalist Economy

Crusoe's island serves as a miniature model of a self-sustaining capitalist system. Through labor, resource management, and disciplined productivity, Crusoe demonstrates how isolation becomes an opportunity for economic experimentation. The microcosm of the island anticipates the macrocosm of capitalist expansion, where property and profit define social order. In this sense, the narrative naturalizes capitalist practices as essential to human survival and progress.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The examination of *Robinson Crusoe* through the lens of property, profit, and possession reveals how Daniel Defoe's narrative anticipates and legitimizes the economic ethos of modern capitalism. Crusoe's gradual transformation from shipwrecked castaway to master of an isolated dominion embodies the rise of the self-reliant economic individual, whose survival is defined not only by resourcefulness but also by the systematic acquisition, organization, and expansion of property. What begins as a desperate struggle for subsistence evolves into a narrative of accumulation, with the island serving as a microcosm of proto-capitalist enterprise.

A central discussion emerges around the moral dimension of ownership. Crusoe repeatedly frames possession in terms of divine providence, interpreting his control over resources as both a right and a responsibility granted by God. This religious justification underscores the ideological linkage between Protestant ethics and capitalist accumulation, where labor and piety legitimize profit. Yet, the novel also exposes tensions: Crusoe oscillates between gratitude for spiritual redemption and relentless desire to expand his material control, reflecting the contradictions at the heart of early capitalist thought.

The figure of Friday further complicates this economic narrative. His subordination transforms the island from a solitary economy into a hierarchical system, with Crusoe as proprietor and Friday as labor. This dynamic not only reinforces colonial models of mastery and servitude but also highlights how economic possession is intertwined with human domination. Friday's role underscores that Crusoe's empire is incomplete without labor external to himself, suggesting that individualism is sustained by structures of inequality and exploitation.

In conclusion, *Robinson Crusoe* is more than an adventure story of survival; it is a foundational economic narrative that illustrates the ideological roots of property, profit, and possession in Western thought. The novel naturalizes the pursuit of wealth and control, embedding these drives in the language of divine providence and necessity. At the same time, it reveals the inherent contradictions of capitalist enterprise: dependence on others, the uneasy coexistence of spiritual values and material greed, and the transformation of land and labor into possessions. Thus, Defoe's text remains a crucial site for interrogating how literature reflects, shapes, and legitimizes the economic realities of its age.

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