

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Robinson Crusoe** (1954)

Luis Buñuel (1900-1983)

### OVERVIEW

**Auteur** Luis Buñuel is known as one of most influential surrealist filmmakers of the mid-twentieth century. Although he was born and raised near Zaragoza, Spain, he spent a large portion of his life and career as an exile in Paris and Mexico City. One of his earliest short films, *Le chien andalou* (1929), or the *Andalusian Dog*, became an iconic representation of eerie surrealist art in which Buñuel presented the audience with a series of unsettling, violent, and even erotic images plucked from a dream. Buñuel would continue in his surrealist style with such films as *L'Age D'or* (1930), or the *Age of Gold*. During his long exile in Mexico, Buñuel wrote and directed a handful of commercial films and hard-hitting dramas, including the featured English-language drama of this essay, *Robinson Crusoe* (1954). The middle period of Buñuel's career was also characterized by three satirical dramas loosely based on nineteenth-century Spanish novels: *Nazarín* (1959), *Viridiana* (1961), and *Tristana* (1970). In the 1970s, Buñuel returned to his hyper-erotic and surreal style in such films as *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977).

**Film** *Robinson Crusoe* (1954) is a technicolor adventure-drama set in an island in the Atlantic Ocean in the mid-seventeenth century. The plot involves a gentleman who attempts to sail to Africa in order to buy slaves, but who ends up surviving over twenty-eight years on an island. The film is an adaptation of Daniel Dafoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Buñuel cast the American Shakespearean actor Daniel O'Hirlihy in the title role, with Jaime Fernández (director Emilio Fernández's son) as Crusoe's right-hand man, Friday.

**Background** Buñuel shot the majority of the film on site in Mexico's Pacific Coast, including exterior shots in the town of Manzanilla in the Mexican state of Colima. However, *Robinson Crusoe* was unique in that the production was written, produced, cast and edited internationally. Buñuel uncharacteristically performed several re-writes during the filming, and multiple writers worked on the original script, including several black-listed screenwriters from Hollywood and Buñuel's long-time collaborator, Luis Alcoriza. In addition, the Canadian-Mexican cinematographer Alex Phillips used his own painterly sensibility when composing nature shots. Oscar Dancigers, the producer for Buñuel's French films in the 1950s, also produced *Crusoe* in conjunction with Mexican and U.S. distributors. The film received nominations for several international awards, including a best actor Oscar nomination for Daniel Herlihy as Robinson Crusoe.

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

<i>Robinson Crusoe</i>	shipwrecked slaver from Brazil
<i>Friday</i>	Crusoe's native companion and servant
<i>Sam</i>	Crusoe's cat that survives the shipwreck
<i>Rex</i>	Crusoe's dog that survives the shipwreck
<i>Polly</i>	Crusoe's domesticated parrot
<i>Captain Oberzo</i>	European ship captain and hostage of the mutineers

### SYNOPSIS

Robinson Crusoe is the third son in a British aristocratic family that owns a plantation in Brazil. When Crusoe tries to sail to Africa to buy slaves, a violent storm shipwrecks him in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. At first, Crusoe busies himself with immediate survival, which involves rescuing supplies and his cat from the wreckage. Then, he scouts the island for food, activities, and company.

As the years roll on, Crusoe continues to explore the island, hunt game, build structures, and domesticate the animals in the jungle. Despite his relative success in making a home on the island, he is consumed by extreme loneliness. His attempts to get off the island fail. After twelve years of solitude, Crusoe spots a group of cannibals performing a ceremony on the other side of the island. At first, he flees the scene in fear, but when the cannibals come again, he watches the preparations for the ritual. After one of the natives slated for sacrifice escapes and runs down the beach, Crusoe intervenes and kills the pursuing cannibals. He then invites the would-be victim to live with him.

Crusoe's roommate becomes his pupil, servant, and eventually, friend, whom he names Friday. The two work together to build a sturdier boat in order to escape the island. However, they are interrupted by a group of European mutineers who have taken their captain captive. Crusoe helps the captain recover his ship and asks him to transport him (and his man Friday) to England. The plan to overtake the mutineers is successful, and Crusoe leaves the island with Friday. As he sails away, Crusoe marvels that he lived over twenty-eight years on the island.

## SCENES

**Opening Credits: Telling the Story of the Shipwreck** A huge tome sits atop a map of the Atlantic Ocean as the opening credits roll. A hand picks up the book and displays an arm draped in a Neoclassical-style jacket with lace at the bottom of the sleeve. A male narrator explains, in first person, that he grew up as the third son in a prominent family. He did not have many prospects, so he decided to find his fortune at sea against his father's wishes. However, upon embarking from Brazil to Africa, a tornado blew the crew off course. The man's hands place a protractor on the map to show the latitude and longitude of the route of slave trade and the location of the shipwreck. There is a close-up of the map, which ripples as if it were turning into waves. The map fades into a shot of a ship's sails and masts being battered violently in a storm, then the waves of the ocean. There are pieces of floating wood, which includes the name plate for the ship--ARIEL in block letters.



**Surveying the Jungle on the Island** From the waves, a man swims to shore. He breathes heavily on the beach as he looks out at the vestiges of the shipwreck. Robinson Crusoe walks unsteadily through a dense jungle. When he hears snarling sounds, he takes out a knife from his breeches. It is his sole weapon, as the narrator explains. He climbs a wide tree and sits on a branch, looking out over the jungle. He wakes up refreshed, yet "half perished with hunger." He sees a nest nearby and grabs an egg. However, there is a fully developed chick inside when he cracks it open. From atop the hill, he spots vestiges of his ship cast against a rocky island that is under a mile away.



**Surveying the Pieces of the Ship** Crusoe jumps in the ocean and swims to the rock. We see him climbing up the rock from the inside of the ship—and through half-open, latticed windows. There are two rats gnawing at some fabric. Crusoe climbs through the windows. He runs through the ship calling out for survivors. Crusoe tries to drink from a barrel, but it is mostly empty. He spots crackers floating in water, but eventually finds and eats one dry piece. Crusoe hears meowing and pulls Sam, his cat, out from under the wreckage. The boat creaks and slides down the rock. The first-person narrator (the elder Crusoe from the opening scene) comments that he will have to build a raft in order to rescue supplies from the ship. There is a cut to Crusoe unloading chests on the other shore. He picks up Sam and throws the cat onto the beach. The narrator explains that he managed to salvage gunpowder, tallow, tools, and the only other survivor, the cat.

**Crusoe Salvages and Collects Materials** Back at the ship, Crusoe looks through bureau drawers. He finds gold coins, but he (the narrator) remarks that gold is of little use. However, he decides to take a few sacks of coins with him. He also finds a flinty stone and realizes that he can use it to start a fire. Upon returning to the island, Crusoe tries several times to light a fire, remarking that he had never done it, but he saw his servants do it multiple times. When he hears a noise, Crusoe takes out two rifles to defend himself. A dog runs out and over to him. Crusoe embraces him and declares: "Rex! You are alive, too!"

**The Vestiges of the Ship Sink into the Ocean** When Crusoe hears a big crash, he runs out and looks at the rock. He realizes that the ship has finally sunk. He also sees the two rats from the ship climbing on an oar (which is resting on the sandy beach). He remarks that they were the one thing that he did not want to retrieve from the ship.

**Building Shelter and Shooting Game** Crusoe uses the supplies from his trunk to build a make-shift fence and a tent. The narrator remarks that the building was slow going due to his lack of skills. When it starts raining, Crusoe sleeps under the tent with Sam and Rex alongside him. There is a montage of Crusoe shooting birds and drinking coconut milk, followed by him making notations in his diary. The narrator explains that he became a skilled hunter as the anniversary of his first year on the island approached.

**Sick with Fever** One day, Crusoe notices that he has a fever and feels dizzy. He spends several days in his cot. Amidst a delirium, he calls out for help. Rex approaches him, concerned. One day, he has a nightmare in which his father is filling a well with buckets of water and pouring them onto a sheep. Crusoe begs him for water, but his father ignores him and continues to preach about the family's aristocratic lifestyle and high station. The father chides Crusoe for wasting the luxuries of his station, then admonishes his son for not obeying their mandates. The father knocks over the bucket and leaves, laughing. He warns Crusoe that while his parents forgive him, God will not. Crusoe gets up to strike him with an axe as the dream sequence dissolves. He murmurs that he will die, and he collapses on his cot.

**Recovery** Crusoe wakes from his fever thirsty but clear-headed. He takes a barrel to the river and drinks the water eagerly. When he returns to his constructed lean-to and cave, he looks through his chest for more supplies. Crusoe realizes that pirates mix tobacco and rum to avoid diseases, so he pours himself a shot of rum from a surviving barrel and mixes in a couple of tobacco leaves. He also takes out a copy of *The Bible* and reads it for comfort. When he surveys the supply of crackers, he notices that there are only a few left. Just outside his lodging, Crusoe realizes that stalks of wheat are growing in a patch. He sees that some of the seeds from the ship washed ashore, and he might be able to grow a crop with God's help.



**New Flora and Fauna** Crusoe explores the jungle further and realizes that there are banana, orange, and cacao trees. He also makes note of giant turtles, octopuses, and a great variety of colorful birds. Crusoe collects turtle eggs but does not attack the two adult turtles that are making their way back to the ocean. He happens upon a herd of goats and brings back one on his shoulders. The narrator notes that there were many animals that he did not recognize.



**Plan to Sail to Another Island** Crusoe spots another island through his telescope and decides to try to sail there. He hollows out a canoe and sets off. However, a big wave capsizes his canoe. The narrator remarks that he was lucky just to get back to shore.

**Crusoe as Shepherd** Crusoe manages to build a circular pen and raise some of the wild goats. He milks one of the females. Inside, he has captured a parrot and tries to teach it to say: "Here, Rex!" When he goes out to check the yard area, he sees Sam with a litter of black kittens, all of whom are nursing. Crusoe asks Rex if he knows whence the father came. The narrator quips that *that* mystery was the only one he didn't solve in all his years on the island.



**Challenges to Planting** We see Crusoe's hands opening his diary and writing down plans for his wheat plot. The narrator continues to describe the farming challenges he experienced, including multiple birds pilfering the seeds. Crusoe shoots his rifle at a swarm of birds descending on the plot. The narrator remarks that he protected the wheat as he would protect his life. We see Crusoe creating a scarecrow out of a woman's dress on posts. When he looks at his work, he approaches the scarecrow and strokes the sleeve of the dress wistfully.



**Five Year Anniversary** Crusoe looks at the post where he has been marking the days, and he realizes that exactly five years have passed since his shipwreck. He declares that there must be a celebration. That night, Crusoe gets drunk on rum and carries the parrot's cage outside his dwelling. After drunkenly chatting at the parrot, he hears a chorus of men singing a sea shanty. He goes inside and shouts "My friends!" and starts to sing with them. Eventually, Crusoe sits down and the mirage of companionship fades. Realizing he is truly alone, Crusoe starts weeping and bows his head.

**Harvesting the Wheat** We see several stalks of wheat as the narrator describes the first harvest. The narrator declares: "I truly worked for my bread." We see a montage of Crusoe making dough and baking the bread over a fire. Rex and Polly bark and squawk at the prospect of bread, and Crusoe waits eagerly for it to be done. When he takes the bread out of the fire, he eats it. The narrator remarks that it was coarse and burnt, but the best bread he had ever tasted.

**Tasks and Loneliness** Crusoe busies himself with making jugs at a pottery wheel and mending his shirts. The narrator reports that although he kept himself preoccupied with chores, an immense loneliness would break upon him like a storm. The narrator asserted that he was desperate to leave this "tomb," this "prison," despite the danger. Crusoe gazes longingly at the waves breaking on the sand. The narrator describes how several more years passed and he gave up trying to spot ships on the horizon. He also reports that Rex was aging and all of the cats had become wild.

**Rex Dies** One day on a hunt, Rex cannot follow Crusoe into the jungle. Crusoe walks back and finds him lying on the ground, dying. Back at the shelter, Crusoe makes Rex a mush with bread and water. When the dog won't eat it, Crusoe goes out to find a bird's egg for the dog. He returns in a rain storm and finds Rex dead in the wet mud outside. Crusoe buries Rex and goes about his chores. However, when the parrot squawks, "Here, Rex!", Crusoe rattles his cage in anger and falls onto a ladder, sobbing. The narrator explains that he resolved once again to hear another human voice. He climbs up to a high hill and recites the Lord's Prayer in a booming voice. The echo returns to him.



**Holding on to Sanity** Crusoe tries to read *The Bible* in order to stay sane, but he becomes more and more agitated. One night, he runs out to the ocean with a torch and screams: "Help!" The action jumps ahead a few years to Crusoe's eighteenth year on the island. We see him walking through the jungle wearing multiple skins and furs as if he were a mountain man. The narrator comments that anyone who saw him during this period would either be afraid or laugh hysterically. Crusoe spots two tiny antlions (or small beetles) burrowing in the sand. He picks them up and calls them his friends, then places them back in the sand. Crusoe declares that he will find them food, and he picks up an ant and watches as the beetles eat it.



**Spotting the Cannibals** Crusoe spots a footprint in the sand right along the beach. He looks around, wild-eyed. When he places his foot in the print, he realizes that the man to whom it belongs has a slightly longer foot. Crusoe runs away back to his dwelling and proceeds to free the goats in his pen. He also hides Polly and puts out a fire. The narrator comments that men are dominated by fear and that Crusoe was crazy with worry at being discovered. Later that night, Crusoe watches a group of cannibals on the beach from his perch on a mountaintop. The narrator explains that this tribe must be similar to ones he would have encountered in Africa. He goes on to say that he watched the "gruesome spectacle" through his telescope.



**Reacting to the Cannibals** In the morning, Crusoe watches the cannibals leave and wonders how many times they have visited the island without him knowing. When he descends to the beach, he sees human remains—including a severed head. The narrator describes his months-long obsession about the cannibals and his plan to ambush them on their next visit. Crusoe builds a "bomb" with gun powder and experiences violent visions and fearful nightmares. We see his imagined murder of the tribe, who gather around a pyre and are blown up when they light it. The narrator describes how despite his crazy obsession, he eventually realized that it was not his place to be judge and executioner. He decides to leave the cannibals' fate to God.

**Friday Escapes Ritual Execution** When the cannibals return, Crusoe watches their ritual killings from above. He notices that one of the victims is strung up, but the other manages to run away. Crusoe sees the escapee running along the shore with two cannibals in pursuit. He descends to try and help the victim escape. Crusoe motions for the victim to follow him, but the victim continues running away. Crusoe hits one cannibal on the head with the butt of his rifle and shoots the other one. The victim, now watching from a few feet away, flings himself at Crusoe's feet in gratitude. When the struck cannibal starts to get up, the victim grabs Crusoe's knife and stabs the cannibal in the chest. Crusoe looks back at the ritual and notices that the others have not noticed the escape and pursuit. Crusoe tells the victim (with gestures) to bury the dead cannibals in the sand. The surviving native does not understand at first, but he starts digging eventually.



**Naming and Getting to Know Friday** Back at the shelter, the victim looks around at Crusoe's belongings and animals. He gets excited when he sees the parrot. Crusoe asks him his name, and when he does not respond, Crusoe decides to name him Friday after the day of the week of his escape. Crusoe teaches him the words "Friday" and "Master" by slapping his chest a la Tarzan and Jane. He then offers Friday bread and water. Friday drinks eagerly but spits out the bread. He gestures that he would like to dig up the dead cannibals and eat them, but Crusoe yells "No!" at him forcefully. Crusoe sits down with the bread and blocks the door. The narrator explains that he did not trust Friday and he was worried that Friday might attack him. The next morning, the narrator reports that the cannibals left without searching for their fallen comrades.



**Hunting with and Teaching Friday** The narrator describes his tutelage of Friday but also remarks that he (Crusoe) wanted to instill fear in the native. The narrator explains that he did not allow Friday to handle weapons and that he discharged his musket on hunts just to startle Friday. He also says that he constructed a heavy door to the cave so that Friday could not sneak up on him. Crusoe realizes that Friday probably still has a craving for human flesh.

**Friday as Servant and Pupil** As the two spend more time together, Crusoe teaches Friday how to grind the wheat and make bread. The narrator remarks that he greatly enjoyed having a servant again. At the dinner table, Crusoe quizzes Friday on English vocabulary and table manners. When they go out to survey the ocean, Crusoe lets Friday look at his native land through the telescope. Friday, in broken English, expresses his desire to return to his homeland. Crusoe says he understands, but the narrator describes his worry that the cannibals could have returned and made him (Crusoe) their next victim. Worried, Crusoe packs up his rifles. After falling asleep, Friday sneaks into the cave and lifts an axe. When Crusoe wakes up and catches him, Friday claims that he wanted to try smoking. The narrator wonders about Friday's true motivations. Crusoe decides to use his slave shackles on Friday, who protests vigorously when he realizes he cannot move freely.



**Friday Assures Crusoe** The next morning, Friday shows Crusoe his injured foot. Crusoe explains that he worries about the cannibals attacking him. Friday claims that he would return to his island with Crusoe and tell his countrymen that Crusoe is a friend. Crusoe retorts that they would probably still kill him, but Friday declares that he has influence over the other cannibals and that he will always love master. Friday grabs the rifle and kneels before Crusoe, prompting his master to kill him. Crusoe asks why, and Friday asserts that he would rather die than be sent away. Crusoe, relieved, promises Friday that he will let him leave and he will never abandon him.



**Crusoe and Friday as a Team** The two hunt a wild hog together and roam the beach. The narrator comments that he appreciated Friday's skills and that they accomplished much more as a team than separately. Back at the "house," Friday rummages through Crusoe's trunks and finds the gold coins that Crusoe had salvaged in the first days after his shipwreck. Friday is entranced by their beauty and asks Crusoe if he can have 1, 2, or 3 of them. Crusoe replies that he can take them all, then cast them into the sea if he becomes bored. A few minutes later, Friday comes out wearing a woman's dress and a necklace he fashioned from the coins. He declares that it is a beautiful fighting cloth and mimics a duel

with a stick. Crusoe glowers at him and demands that he take off the dress. Friday is taken aback but obeys.

**Shaving and Religious Debate** Later, Friday shaves Crusoe while he sits; then, Crusoe returns the favor. The two sit down together and smoke a pipe. Crusoe explains to Friday how the devil uses tricks to sabotage Christians and defy God. Friday asks why God does not kill the devil, especially since he is much stronger than the demon. Crusoe explains that the devil exists to tempt man so that he can choose the righteous path. Friday retorts that God shouldn't be upset when man sins, if he allows the devil to tempt us. Crusoe paces around, realizing that Friday has made a good point for which he doesn't have a retort. Crusoe asks the parrot: "You understand, don't you, Poll?" Friday smiles mischievously and keeps smoking.

**Another Escape Attempt** The narrator explains that after twelve years on the island, Crusoe still longed to escape. Crusoe and Friday look at trees and start to cut down an especially wide trunk. The narrator explains that the two of them decided to build a boat and sail north to a "Spanish territory." The narrator comments that he thought this plan would be his last chance to see his native England.

**Preparing to Fight the Pirates** As Friday starts to chop down the tree, he hears someone sneaking up behind him. He runs out to alert Crusoe, who says it is likely that there is more than one man—and they should hide. Two natives emerge, and Friday and Crusoe shoot at them from behind dense foliage. One man falls down, dead, and the other native runs away. Friday pursues him, wrestles him to the ground, and kills him with several blows to the neck. Crusoe and Friday creep up to the shoreline and notice a group of what appear to be white pirates on the beach. They run back to the house and form a plan of attack. Crusoe calls out cues as they practice shooting and throwing a grenade. In the midst of the rehearsal, Crusoe and Friday hear real shots coming from the beach.



**Watching the Sailors** Crusoe and Friday return to the beach and watch the supposed pirates unload their boats. They notice that the pirates have two captives, both of whom are tied up with ropes. Friday asks if the pirates are friends and if they will eat the captives. Crusoe replies no to both questions, but he warns Friday that they are murderers. When the pirates leave the captives tied up at the edge of the jungle, Crusoe creeps up and cuts the ropes that bind them. One freed man looks at Crusoe, astonished. Crusoe bows and assures him that he is a man—even if he looks like a wild animal. The captive bows back and introduces himself as Captain Oberzo.



**Crusoe Brokers a Deal with Captain Oberzo** Once freed, the captain and his men explain that they were victims of a mutiny. They further describe how the majority took control of the ship's armory and tied them up. Crusoe offers to help them fight the renegades and take back the ship, but on two conditions: that the captain act according to his command while on the island, and that he and his crew take Crusoe and Friday to England. Captain Oberzo agrees passionately, saying he would take Crusoe all the way to China, if we wanted. The two embrace.

**Trapping the Mutineers** The mutineers load up the ship as if to disembark. Crusoe and the Captain watch from the foliage, then send out Friday with a tray of bananas. Friday approaches them and pretends to be subservient. One of the mutineers knocks the tray out of his hands and threatens to slice his throat. Before anyone can kill Friday, however, the leader of the mutineers notices Friday's gold coin necklace and tells the others not to harm him. They decide to follow Friday into the jungle to find more gold. Friday leads them across the river and towards the house. They climb up the fence and start ransacking the place. One mutineer opens a chest only to find a snake, which he shoots. Friday turns back and meets up with Crusoe and the Captain's men—all of whom approach from behind. They trap the mutineers inside the outer residence by surrounding the fence and aiming their rifles at them.

**Crusoe Advises the Mutineers** A few days later, Crusoe, now shaved with quaffed hair, puts on an elegant Neoclassical jacket. He looks at himself in a mirror and sees his younger self, marveling at how long ago he arrived. Friday appears in breeches and a turban-like hat, and he tells Crusoe that the boat is waiting. Crusoe collects a few souvenirs, then looks wistfully around his dwelling. The mutineers greet him as he leaves, and one asks him whether Crusoe recommended that they be executed. Crusoe replies that he suggested that the mutineers remain on the island as its new residents. Crusoe hands them a series of maps and instructions that delineate where to hunt, where the cannibals land, etc. He remarks that they will have the advantage of his experience and the one thing for which his soul yearned: company.



**Goodbye to the Island** Friday carries his trunk onto the boat that will take them towards the ship. Crusoe asks Friday whether he is afraid of European civilization, and Friday replies that as long as Master is not, he is not. As they row out to the ship, Crusoe looks back and hears Rex's plaintive barks. He turns and looks ahead. The narrator explains that he had spent twenty-eight years and several months on the island. There is a panoramic shot of the Atlantic Ocean with the ship on the horizon.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### ROBINSON CRUSOE

As a shipwrecked noble, Robinson Crusoe must grapple with not only survival, but a new identity in a new world. Although he does not have experience with hard labor or chores, Crusoe teaches himself skills and preserves through challenges—he is very persistent and resourceful. The long years of loneliness provoke an overwhelming yearning in him, and when he finally meets other humans on the island, he is both fearful and paranoid about their intentions.

*Resourceful* From the very first moment he swims to shore after the shipwreck, Robinson Crusoe shows a great resourcefulness and persistence. He immediately recovers supplies from his ship (and rescues Sam the cat) before it sinks. Later, he learns how to forage, hunt, and build lasting shelters. Crusoe also teaches himself how to start a fire, harvest wheat, sew, and even create a clay pot. He continually scouts the island for food, people, and a possible escape route, which eventually leads to his interactions with Friday and Captain Oberzo.

*Yearning* As soon as Crusoe realizes he can survive on the island, he yearns for company, spiritual fulfillment, and emotional comfort. He relies on his domesticated pets and wild animals for entertainment and company, but he craves human contact to the point of weeping helplessly and having feverish mirages of old friends. Crusoe also searches for the meaning of his isolated existence by studying *The Bible*.

*Fearful / Paranoid* When Crusoe first watches the cannibals' violent ritual, he is struck by fear and panic. Rather than try to interact with them, he flees that side of the island and plans an ambush for months. Later, after rescuing Friday, Crusoe is convinced that his newfound pupil-servant will attack him, eat him, rob him, or give him over to the cannibals. It is not until Friday offers up his life to Crusoe that the Englishman trusts him.

### FRIDAY

Friday is the English name bequeathed to the indigenous man whom Crusoe rescues from the cannibalistic ritual. Friday is a fierce warrior when needed, but he also proves himself a loyal servant to Crusoe. As a clever pupil and friend to his "Master," Friday is a quick study and good at finding solutions to problems.

*Loyal* Once Crusoe saves Friday from the cannibalistic ritual, his newfound "servant" pledges loyalty to him. Initially, Friday bows to Crusoe and obeys his orders. Then, he agrees to learn English and act as Crusoe's servant. Friday also becomes a vital hunting partner and guard for Crusoe. Finally, Friday shows the ultimate loyalty by handing Crusoe his knife (and offering to die for him). Later, he agrees to accompany his master half-way around the world.

**Fierce** Although he is never violent with Crusoe, Friday is a fierce warrior with regard to interlopers or fellow natives. He stabs two other natives on the island, then attacks another during the scuffle with the mutineers. He also shows a passionate dedication to Crusoe.

**Clever** Despite Crusoe's initial characterization of the native as vicious or naïve, Friday is revealed to be quite intelligent. He learns English quickly, and he also learns how to perform his new servant tasks—such as grinding the wheat for bread. He also comes up with helpful strategies for hunting and leaving the island. For example, it is Friday's idea to sail northward towards the "Spanish territory." Finally, Friday bests Crusoe in their debate about the nature of the devil.

## **(MOTHER) NATURE**

Because Robinson Crusoe is the sole character in the story for more than half of the film, his interaction with nature becomes the key relationship and source of conflict in the plot. As in many tales of adventure or horror, the land or the creatures within (or both) become characters themselves. In this case, Nature acts as both a bountiful friend and as an unforgiving enemy to Crusoe.

**Bountiful** Despite the isolated area of the island, the nature around Crusoe actually provides him with several means of survival. He quickly realizes that he can use coconut and orange trees to sustain him, and there is a wealth of game for hunting. In addition, nature provides him with intellectual stimulation and beauty, from the brightly-colored cockatoos to the mystery of Sam's jet-black kittens. Unlike the forbidding jungle in *Diamond Hunters* (1956), nature in the island often facilitates life—including that of Crusoe himself.

**Unforgiving** Although nature provides Crusoe with sustenance, it is also the Englishman's enemy. The violent winds of the storm cause the initial shipwreck, and the nature of the waves prevents him from leaving the island. Early in his visit, Crusoe falls ill with a fever and barely recovers. When Crusoe tries to grow wheat, he continually has to fight off birds.

## THEMES

### **SOCIETY**

**Race** Because *Robinson Crusoe* is based on a European Baroque novel, the colonial racial hierarchy is in place from the very first moments of the novel and of the film. The impetus of Crusoe's journey, in fact, is to purchase African slaves in order to perpetuate the family's wealth and status. As British oligarchs living in Brazil, the implication is that the Crusoes had already colonized their plantation in the New World and sought to pass down their Anglo dominance across the generations. Even during years of solitude, Crusoe's visions often expound on family legacy and his racial and class superiority. Crusoe mentions depending on servants several times, and it is likely that those who served him "back home" were slaves, indigenous captives, or mestizos (mixed-race latinos). When Crusoe meets Friday, his initial reaction is fear—he is convinced that the native will attack him or eat him. This scary or wild portrayal of the natives is emphasized with heavy makeup: Fernández (the Mexican actor who played Friday) wore an extremely dark foundation (almost akin to blackface of minstrel shows). Gradually, Crusoe takes on a paternal role with Friday as he teaches him the English language and British customs. As Friday learns, he transitions into Crusoe's servant. In Crusoe's mind, then, Friday exemplifies either a violent creature or a noble savage who needs to be taken under his wing. In the last scenes of the film, Friday remains the humble servant and is dressed accordingly.

### *Illustrative Moment: Crusoe Observes the “Savage” Natives*

Crusoe watches a group of cannibals on the beach from his perch on a mountaintop. The narrator explains that this tribe must be similar to ones he would have encountered in Africa. He goes on to say that he watched the “gruesome spectacle” through his telescope. Although Crusoe is understandably paranoid about being eaten, his reaction to the cannibals underscores his colonial worldview towards the Other. He is both fascinated by and fearful of them; shortly after this scene, he builds a bomb to exterminate them. In his narration, Crusoe equates the cannibals with black African slaves, which further suggests that he places himself (and white Europeans) high above the animalized subjects.



**Science (Nature)** In order to survive, Crusoe must apply European science, techniques, and inventions to his pursuits on the island. He uses his telescope and muskets every day to track animals and interlopers, and he manages to build or engineer certain tools or structures to accomplish various tasks. He even builds a pottery wheel to entertain himself. Even though the narrator admits that he never had to do chores himself, Crusoe does seem to have some training in architecture, farming, and engineering. He also understands that he must anesthetize himself to avoid getting perpetual fevers, so he drinks rum. These attempts to dominate or at least, handle, his environment, juxtaposes Baroque European civilization with the beauty and power of nature. Buñuel takes advantage of the visual nature of film in order to capture a multitude of flora and fauna. Herlihy (as Crusoe), interacts with multiple pets whom he domesticates, including a snake, Polly the parrot, a possum, and his herd of goats. Each hunting or jungle scene provides the opportunity to focus on a new creature of the jungle, from tiny beetles to huge turtles laying eggs in the sand. In this way, Buñuel indulges in his love of animals and forests, and he also uses his training in agronomy and entomology to add color and flavor to the montages in the first half of the film.

### *Illustrative Moment: Crusoe as Zoologist and Biologist*

Crusoe manages to build a circular pen and raise some of the wild goats. He milks one of the females. Inside, he has captured a parrot and tries to teach it to say: “Here, Rex!” When he goes out to check the yard area, he sees Sam with a litter of black kittens, all of whom are nursing. Crusoe asks Rex if he knows whence the father came. The narrator quips that *that* mystery was the only one he didn’t solve in all his years on the island. While Crusoe spends much of his day finding and collecting food, he also applies a scientific method and curiosity to his scouting. Rather than merely slaughtering a goat on occasion, Crusoe builds a circular pen and raises them with shepherding techniques. He also tracks the mating, pregnancies, and nesting methods of all of the animals under his care or in the vicinity.



**Religion** When Crusoe suffers from extreme loneliness and despair, he frequently leans on his copy of the Bible and his faith in order to persevere. *The Bible* is the one book that survives the shipwreck, and Crusoe counts it as one of his prized possessions. Crusoe recites the Lord’s Prayer on several occasions: in one recitation, he emphasizes “green pastures” and decides to pray for the success of his wheat crop. The prayer succeeds in that the wheat does grow (albeit with several obstacles to harvesting it). On another occasion, Crusoe shouts the Lord’s Prayer from a mountaintop so that he can hear the echo of his own voice. The resounding “my soul” reverberates multiple times. When Crusoe sees the cannibals for the first time, he descends into a prolonged session of obsession and madness, which includes building a bomb to blow them up on the beach. Eventually, Crusoe remembers Jesus’s maxims about judgement, and he realizes he does not have the right to play executioner. After taking in Friday, Crusoe tries to teach his servant the gospel, yet has difficulty in defending the Christian doctrine (see below). Although Crusoe is not necessarily a deeply religious person, his faith does sustain him and prevents him from going mad.

### *Illustrative Moment: Praying for a Wheat Harvest*

Crusoe takes out a copy of *The Bible* and reads it for comfort. When he surveys the supply of crackers, he notices that there are only a few left. Just outside his lodging, Crusoe sees that stalks of wheat are growing in a patch. He realizes that some of the seeds from the ship washed ashore, and he might be able to grow a crop with God's help. In this moment, Crusoe's faith sustains him and propels him forward in his plan. In addition, the eventual success of the wheat crop confirms Crusoe's hope that God is on his side and will help him walk through his own "green pastures"—the phrase to which Crusoe clings as he repeatedly recites the Lord's Prayer.



## RELATIONSHIP

**Friendship** Along with occasional bouts of religious fervor, Crusoe manages to survive emotionally and psychologically through his friendship with animals, and later, Friday. Crusoe rescues the cat Sam from the wreckage and snuggles with her every night until she has kittens. Rex is Crusoe's faithful companion, guard dog, and hunting partner. Polly's ability to mimic Crusoe's voice allows the Englishman to imagine he is dialoguing with a friend. When Crusoe is drunk or delirious, he relives jovial moments with his friends, then breaks down as reality resurfaces. When Friday arrives, Crusoe considers him a friend, a son, a pupil, and a servant. Although Crusoe maintains dominance over Friday, he also recognizes the native's skill and tenacity. Friday shows a fierce loyalty that earns him a spot as Crusoe's friend. As film critic Amparo Martínez Herranz asserts, the two characters' relationship evolves from "slavery to fraternity" and "imperialism to postcolonialism." Beyond Crusoe's interactions on the island, Buñuel alludes to the importance of camaraderie—especially on a perilous journey.

### *Illustrative Moment: Crusoe Lets Friday Smoke and Argue Christian Doctrine*

Later, Friday shaves Crusoe while he sits; then, Crusoe returns the favor. The two sit down together and smoke a pipe. Crusoe explains to Friday how the devil uses tricks to sabotage Christians and defy God. Friday asks why God does not kill the devil, especially since he is much stronger than the demon. Crusoe explains that the devil exists to tempt man so that he can choose the righteous path. Friday retorts that God shouldn't be upset when man sins, if he allows the devil to tempt us. Crusoe paces around, realizing that Friday has made a good point for which he doesn't have a reply. Crusoe asks the parrot: "You understand, don't you, Poll?" Friday smiles mischievously and keeps smoking. This short scene serves several purposes in the greater context of Crusoe and Friday's relationship. Although Crusoe considers Friday his servant and not his equal, he engages with the native more as a friend in this moment. Rather than make Friday serve him, Crusoe shaves Friday and chats with him at the table. Friday's ability to dissect the gospel with logic suggests that Crusoe realizes that his characterization of the native as a "noble savage" does not encapsulate Friday the man.



## PYSCHOLOGY

**Isolation and Loneliness** For more than half of the time Crusoe is on the island, he exists without any human contact or help. His loneliness is assuaged somewhat with Sam and Rex (and the other animals that he domesticates over time). The animals leave him one by one, which heightens Crusoe's yearning for contact with other living beings. The narrator describes the waves of loneliness as all-consuming, and Crusoe suffers from multiple bouts of depression, anxiety, and even hallucinations. The location of the island, as the narrator explains in the early scenes of the film, is one which does not lie within trade routes. As a result, Crusoe does not see a European ship until the encounter with the mutineers. In addition, he cannot escape despite his efforts to construct a durable vessel. His observance of the cannibals only serves to isolate him further in that he retreats to his side of the island to defend himself. It is only with the tutelage of Friday that Crusoe enjoys company and help.

*Illustrative Moment: Crusoe Mourns Rex's Death and Shouts Into the Abyss*

One day on a hunt, Rex cannot follow Crusoe into the jungle. Crusoe walks back and finds him lying on the ground, dying. Back at the shelter, Crusoe makes Rex a mush with bread and water. When the dog won't eat it, Crusoe goes out to find a bird's egg for the dog. He returns in a rain storm and finds Rex dead in the wet mud outside. Crusoe buries Rex and goes about his chores. However, when the parrot squawks, "Here, Rex!", Crusoe rattles his cage in anger and falls onto a ladder, sobbing. The narrator explains that he resolved once again to hear another human voice. He climbs up to a high hill and recites the Lord's Prayer in a booming voice. The echo returns to him. Along with losing his best friend, Rex's death reminds Crusoe of the vast ocean of loneliness that awaits him. In an effort to trick himself into believing again, Crusoe "converses" with himself via the echo of the mountain.



**QUEST**

**Discovery** Unlike the protagonists in most other adventure novels or films, Robinson Crusoe never intended to explore a new territory or find adventure. His journey begins with a specific task—to purchase slaves and return to his family's plantation in Brazil. By virtue of the shipwreck, Crusoe turns into a rugged mountain-man and colonizer of this "undiscovered" territory. Initially, Crusoe depends on discovery in order to survive—that is, he "discovers" what to eat, where to hunt, and what flora and fauna exist in the jungle. This survival scouting gradually becomes an intellectual curiosity, as there are many scenes where Crusoe does not kill an animal for food; rather, he observes and studies the species. As the years pass, Crusoe also discovers himself: he learns how to cope with his loneliness and he finds out how much he can learn. His relationship with Friday becomes a metonym for the relationship between European colonizers and the native residents: Crusoe "saves," then educates and converts, his subject. The other natives end up dead or expelled from the island.

*Illustrative Moment: Crusoe Tracks the Sea Turtles*

Crusoe explores the jungle further and realizes that there are banana, orange, and cacao trees. He also makes note of giant turtles, octopuses, and a great variety of colorful birds. Crusoe collects turtle eggs but does not attack the two adult turtles that are making their way back to the ocean. He happens upon a herd of goats and brings back one on his shoulders. Crusoe (narrator) notes that there were many animals that he did not recognize. This scene emphasizes that while Crusoe is looking for food on his scouting trips, he is also observing and studying the world around him. He makes an effort to note the species that he does not yet know; in this way, he is discovering the ecological diversity of the island.



**Survival** Crusoe's survival constitutes the driving force of the film. Initially, survival entails staying alive and finding necessities. Despite his dire circumstances after the shipwreck, Buñuel implies that Crusoe will survive. In particular, the scene where he cracks an egg and a chick pops out lends a moment of whimsy and hope to the first few minutes of the film. Later, Crusoe worries about defending his person and supplies from the cannibals and the mutineers. As the years drag on, Crusoe must also find ways to survive emotionally and psychologically, which, in many respects, is the greatest challenge of all. Despite his terrible luck regarding the storm and the isolation of the island, Crusoe manages to survive in large part because of the bounty of the flora and fauna around him. He is also lucky in that he is able to recover or construct multiple tools and supplies. Although Crusoe grew up as a spoiled nobleman and colonizer, he shows a remarkable tenacity and perseverance, which saves him on multiple occasions. He also takes advantage of that which is available: the cave turns into his "interior" shelter, and the animals become food, clothing, entertainment, and companions.

*Illustrative Moment: Crusoe Thinks Fast and Collects Materials From the Wreckage*

Crusoe jumps in the ocean and swims to the rock. He runs through the ship calling out for survivors. Crusoe tries to drink from a barrel, but it is mostly



empty. He spots crackers floating in water, but eventually finds and eats one dry piece. Crusoe hears meowing and pulls Sam, his cat, out from under the wreckage. The boat creaks and slides down the rock. The narrator comments that he will have to build a raft in order to rescue supplies from the ship. There is a cut to Crusoe unloading chests on the other shore. He picks up Sam and throws the cat onto the beach. The narrator explains that he managed to salvage gunpowder, tallow, tools, and the only other survivor, the cat. This insistence on collecting supplies ensures Crusoe's survival after the first weeks of the shipwreck. He secures crackers, water, and rum for the short term, and multiple tools and supplies for the long term. It is also significant that Crusoe rescues Sam, as it provides him with hope and companionship.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does Robinson Crusoe's character change and evolve over the 28 years of isolation?
2. How does Buñuel subvert or criticize colonialism in this film?
3. Like in many of Buñuel's films, there are frequent appearances of indoor pets, livestock, insects, and wild animals in *Robinson Crusoe*. What is the purpose of including a plethora of animals in this film?
4. Robinson Crusoe is one of the few Buñuel films in color, and much of the coloring was done in Hollywood in post-production. Is it effective to have this particular story and film in color?