

The Hypocrisy of the Elite Class in Anglo-American Literature: A Case Study of *Robinson Crusoe*

Xue lv, Chi Huang*

Chengdu University of Information Technology, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

Robinson Crusoe is a classic work in British and American literature. The protagonist, Robinson Crusoe, survived on the deserted island with his indomitable will and became the owner, ruler, and lawmaker of the island, presenting an ideal image of diligence and integrity. However, when he returned to the civilized society, his image was completely different from that of the “sincere laborer” on the island, revealing his greedy pursuit of wealth and status. This article analyzes the manifestations and causes of this hypocrisy at the interpersonal interaction and value level from multiple dimensions, combined with the historical background of the rise of British capitalism and colonial expansion in the 18th century, to explore the social roots of this phenomenon. Through this mirror of literature to examine reality, this article also provides a new perspective for understanding similar phenomena in contemporary society.

Keywords

Robinson Crusoe; Anglo-American Literature; Hypocrisy; Colonialism; Capitalism.

1. Introduction

“Hypocrisy” is a common social phenomenon in daily life and also an important theme repeatedly explored in Anglo-American Literature. *Robinson Crusoe* is a classic work of Anglo-American Literature, providing an excellent sample for analyzing this phenomenon. The protagonist in the book, Robinson Crusoe, has an image full of contradictions: on the deserted island, he demonstrates diligence and integrity in the guise of self-redemption; but once he returns to the civilized society, his words and deeds completely change, revealing his greedy pursuit of wealth and status. This contrast between the two situations precisely constitutes the most profound revelation of “hypocrisy”.

In response to this phenomenon, this study will approach the issue from the following new perspectives: Firstly, the research perspective will be diversified, not only focusing on the intentional satirical criticism by the author, but also exploring the deeper meanings that the author may not have expressed intentionally but can be discerned in light of the historical context; Secondly, a cross-work comprehensive analysis will be conducted, not only concentrating on *Robinson Crusoe*, but also comparing other Anglo-American literary works from different periods to identify the commonalities and differences of “elitist hypocrisy” in different eras; Thirdly, a deep interpretation based on social background will be carried out, using Marxist class theory and other sociological perspectives, placing the characters back into the historical context of 18th-century Britain to see how the rise of capitalism and colonial expansion shaped this contradictory personality; Fourthly, using historical perspective to reflect on the present reality, reading the literary works to extract insights into the current society and reflecting on the similar problems that still exist today. Through the combination of these four innovative points, this article hopes to provide a new perspective for the study of

Anglo-American Literature and open a window for understanding the phenomenon of hypocrisy in the real society.

2. The Display of Hypocrisy in *Robinson Crusoe*

2.1. Robinson's Hypocrisy: The Dual Aspects from the Island of Desolation to Society

Robinson's hypocrisy is first manifested in his glorification of his own image. When he first arrived on the deserted island, he began to keep a diary, portraying himself as someone who remained orderly and devoutly grateful even in difficult circumstances. He erected a cross, inscribed with the date, and wrote: "I came on shore here on the 30th September 1659." (Defoe, 2024: 88)[1]. This seemingly simple statement actually contains profound meaning - he had already psychologically positioned himself as the "owner" of this land. In his diary, he detailed his labor and inventions, but rarely recorded his inner fears and loneliness. This selective writing itself is a form of self-glorification.

But Robinson's most typical hypocrisy was manifested in his attitude towards "Friday". He saved Friday, which was indeed a kind act. However, his motivation for saving this person was not pure. The first word he taught Friday to say was "master". In the book, Robinson himself admitted: "I was greatly delighted with my new companion, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy, and helpful." (Defoe, 2024: 264)[1]. The key words in this passage are "useful" - in Robinson's eyes, Friday's value first lies in his ability to work and help.

What is even more ironic is that while Robinson was turning Friday into his servant, he was also using religion and civilization to "transform" him. He dressed Friday in clothes, taught him English, and even tried to make him abandon his original beliefs and convert to Christianity. Once Friday asked him, "If God much strong, much might as the Devil, why God no kill the Devil, so make him no more do wicked?" (Defoe, 2024: 280)[1]. Robinson was immediately stumped and couldn't come up with an answer. This kind of cultural arrogance and indoctrination is actually a more covert form of hypocrisy. Some scholars have pointed out that Defoe, when creating the image of the foreigner, was using the label of "man-eater" to provide legitimacy for Robinson's violent behavior - because the other party was defined as "savages", they could be ruled and transformed.

When Robinson returned to England, his hypocrisy became even more obvious. On the deserted island, he had said to the gold coins he had salvaged from the shipwreck: "Oh, drug! ... What art thou good for? You are not worthy of me, no, not even if you could rise from the ground." (Defoe, 2024: 93)[1]. But once he returned to the civilized society, he immediately went to Brazil to reclaim his plantation, sold it for a large sum of money, and became rich. The first thing he did was to get married and have children, and then he began to plan his next voyage - not for survival, but for more wealth. His desires returned.

2.2. The Hypocrisy of Other Characters in the Book

Robinson was not the only hypocrite in the book. On the British ship he later boarded, there was a mutiny among the crew. Those mutinous sailors pretended to be respectful to the captain on the surface, but secretly imprisoned him and planned to rob him and kill him. Later, when these people met Robinson, they immediately showed obedience and loyalty, but it was all a pretense. Such deception and betrayal between people precisely reflect the cold and hypocritical atmosphere of that society at that time.

From these analyses, it can be seen that Robinson's hypocrisy ran through his entire journey from the isolated island to reintegration into society: on the island, he meticulously crafted his own image and exerted covert control over Friday; upon returning to society, he rekindled his

desire for wealth. So, is this duality a flaw of Robinson's personal nature, or a reflection of a common problem of that era? To answer this, we need to discuss the social background of that time.

3. Social Roots of Hypocrisy: Capitalism and Colonialism

This duality of Robinson's is not just a problem of him alone; it is a reflection of the entire era. To understand this, we need to draw on some sociological theories to deepen our understanding.

3.1. The Rise of Capitalism and Class Division

When criticizing capitalism, Marx pointed out that the bourgeoisie often uses the banner of "universal happiness", but in reality, they are safeguarding their own class interests. He believed that in a capitalist society, "capital is not concerned with the health and longevity of workers at all, unless society forces it to do so" (Marx,1990: 381).[5] This institutionalized indifference is the deep-rooted source of hypocrisy - on the surface, they advocate freedom, equality and fraternity, but in reality, they treat laborers as tools for creating surplus value.

Robinson's life path precisely confirms this point. His father had advised him to lead a contented middle-class life, saying it was "the best state in the world" (Defoe ,2024: 10)[1], but Robinson simply wouldn't listen. What he truly desired was "raising my fortune by application and industry" (Defoe ,2024: 26)[1]. This longing for wealth is precisely a reflection of the mentality of the emerging capitalist society.

According to historical data, the wealth gap in 18th-century Britain was indeed widening. Studies have shown that by the end of the 18th century, the household income of ordinary workers was generally in deficit. In some areas, the average deficit reached between 2 pounds 15 shillings 4 pence and 22 pounds 3 shillings 6.5 pence. That is to say, workers who worked for a full year might not even be able to maintain their basic livelihood.(Phelps Brown and Hopkins,1956: 302)[3] At the same time, plantation owners like Robinson accumulated huge wealth. This polarization is the true picture of capitalist development.

3.2. Violence and Hypocrisy in Colonial Expansion

The "business trip" that Robinson took to Africa was actually to "how easy it was to purchase upon the coast, for trifles... not only gold dust, Guinea grains, elephants' teeth, etc., but negroes, for the service of the Brazils, in great numbers" (Defoe ,2024: 57)[1]. This was the real history of that time - the slave trade brought huge profits to the colonizers.

Specifically, the British colonial expansion was particularly prominent in the Caribbean region. Take Barbados as an example. After introducing sugar cane from Dutch Brazil in 1640, this place gradually developed into the world's largest sugar production area. To obtain a large number of laborers needed for sugar cane cultivation, the colonists brought in a large number of black slaves from Africa. In 1644, only 800 out of the 30,000 people on the island were black slaves; by 1724, the total population had grown to over 70,000, of which more than 50,000 were black slaves.(Beckles,2006: 50-70) [6]This means that in just 80 years, the number of black slaves increased by more than 60 times. These slaves engaged in the most arduous labor in the sugar cane plantations, while their labor products - sugar and rum - brought abundant wealth to the colonists.

What is even more ironic is that while the colonizers were engaged in such cruel acts, they still claimed to be spreading civilization and bringing the gospel of God. Just as some scholars have pointed out, Defoe in his novel precisely used the portrayal of African and American natives as "man-eaters" and "savages" to give a legal veneer to Robinson's colonial actions. This contradiction between the "mission of civilization" and the "barbaric acts" is precisely the greatest hypocrisy.

It can be said that the profit-driven nature of capitalism and the cruel reality of colonial expansion jointly shaped the “hypocrisy” of that era. Robinson Crusoe was merely a typical representative of this social atmosphere - he was a hardworking laborer on the deserted island, but became a greedy capitalist when he returned to society; his treatment of Friday was both superficial kindness and actual control. The emergence of this literary image also had a considerable influence on later generations.

4. The Cultural Impact and Practical Insights of Hypocrisy Phenomenon

4.1. Impact on Later Literature

The character portrayal of “superficially charming but inwardly hypocritical” in *Robinson Crusoe* was later adopted and developed by many writers. For instance, Hawthorne created those Puritan leaders in “The Scarlet Letter”, who appeared respectable on the surface but engaged in immoral activities behind the scenes. (Hawthorne, 2009: 45-48)[4] Another example is the later adventure novels and colonial literature, where similar characters like Crusoe could often be found - they claimed to be civilized disseminators but engaged in plundering and control. As Hert pointed out in his analysis of Bunyan and Puritan autobiographical works, the emphasis on self-examination in Protestantism often reveals the tension between external virtues and internal sins, thereby making people more acutely aware of their own hypocrisy (Hert, 2008: 197-221).[2]

4.2. Impact on Moral Concepts

The existence of hypocrisy forces people to reflect: What is right and what is wrong? How is the division between words and deeds caused? Marx and Engels' criticism of the bourgeois ideology precisely grasped this point - they exposed the falsity behind the bourgeois claims of “universal human rights” and the “economic man” assumption. (Marx, 2004: 163-177)[5] These issues drive the progress of moral and ethical concepts, making people start to think about how to establish a more just and reasonable moral system.

4.3. The Theme of Hypocrisy in Modern Culture

Interestingly, the theme of hypocrisy also frequently appears in modern film and television works. For instance, in the recent Spring Festival film *Speed Racer 3*, Sha Yi played the role of “Top 100 Leader”, who was a typical hypocritical character. He pretended to be a technical director who supported his subordinates, but in reality, he was manipulating things behind the scenes and tampering with data, treating grassroots racers as expendable pawns. Audience comments said that this character “appears to be generous on the surface but is actually very calculating”, precisely reflecting “the essence of a capitalist puppet”. There is also a film called *Ordinary Family*, which tells the story of two middle-class families' children who committed crimes. The parents initially wanted to resolve the matter peacefully, but later struggled between morality and interests. Film critics said that this film exposed “the hypocrisy of the refined selfishness of middle-class people”. You see, even after several hundred years, those flaws in *Robinson Crusoe's* character are still being repeated in today's society.

4.4. Implications for Contemporary Society

In the political realm, some politicians may speak eloquently on the stage, claiming things like “for the people” and “for the country”, but what they do behind the scenes is to benefit their own interest groups. This kind of behavior occurs frequently, and as a result, the common people no longer trust anyone, and the society becomes unstable.

In the economic field, some enterprises claim “the customer is God” on the surface, but in reality they engage in false advertising and cut corners. They treat honesty as a slogan and profit as the sole goal.

In social interactions, we sometimes come across such people who act one way in public but another way behind our backs. They present a glamorous image in their social circle but are actually cold and calculating in private.

So what should we do? On the one hand, we need to strengthen moral education, so that more people can understand that one should be sincere and have a moral bottom line. On the other hand, the “high-voltage line” of the law also needs to be tightened. For those hypocritical fraudulent acts, they must be severely punished and made to pay the price.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, through the previous analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

First, the phenomenon of hypocrisy is profoundly depicted in *Robinson Crusoe*. Robinson, who was a hardworking laborer on the deserted island, transformed into a greedy capitalist upon returning to society. His attitude towards Friday was initially one of rescue and enlightenment, but in reality it was one of control and exploitation. His diaries and self-descriptions on the island also constantly sought to beautify his image. All these manifestations reveal the complex and even somewhat dark corners of human nature.

Secondly, this hypocrisy did not arise out of thin air. When viewed within the historical context of 18th-century Britain, the rise of capitalism led people to consider profit-seeking as a matter of course. Colonial expansion cloaked exploitation and plundering in the guise of “civilization dissemination”. Marx's theory of class structure tells us that this systematic indifference and hypocrisy are actually manifestations of the inherent contradictions of capitalism. Historical data also show that the gap between the rich and the poor was indeed widening at that time, and the lives of ordinary workers were becoming increasingly difficult. The colonial history of the Caribbean region, in particular, proved with bloody facts that “civilization” was underpinned by savagery.

Thirdly, the phenomenon of hypocrisy has not disappeared even today. From politics to economy and even in daily interactions, we can still observe various “actions one way and intentions another” tricks. This indicates that certain flaws in human nature are persistent, and it also shows that relying solely on individual self-awareness is not enough; there needs to be institutional constraints as well.

So, when we read classic novels like *Robinson Crusoe*, we are not merely reading an adventure story; we are also looking into a mirror. Through Robinson Crusoe, we can see the complexity of human nature and also observe how society shapes individuals. Whether in 18th-century Britain or in today's world, truth and falsehood have always been in conflict. We hope that by learning more lessons from literary works, we can reduce hypocrisy and embrace more authenticity. Only in this way can there be greater harmony among people and between countries.

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