

Robinson Crusoe – Text 1 p.9-11 « The Sixth Day of our being at Sea... it was a great while before I came to my self.»

Very early on the novel. After confessing to his parents that he did not wish to attend to any “business”, RC was given the opportunity to leave his family and embark on a ship, which had been his dearest wish for a year. The excerpt is set during his first voyage out when he goes through two storms in a row. The passage is the account of the second storm and of RC’s reactions as well as the crew’s who are all struggling for survival. A tale of adventures, a story of survival, narrated with a certain Christian purpose as the passage is both a rewriting of the tempest in the book of Jonah and a Christian allegory telling of spiritual death and of possible Puritan resurrection.

I. A tale of adventures and an efficient narration.

A) A detailed and realistic account of a sea-journey and a storm narrated by an eager but not always succeeding narrator

The novel is barely started when RC, who has just left his parents in London without their consent, is aboard a ship, experiencing a sea journey and the second storm of his long 37-year voyage. Told in the first-person, the account is precise and detailed, with great emphasis on realistic elements borrowed from the sea journeys: topography, technical terms, and precision of technical activities done by the seamen, which sometimes gives the readers the impression of reading a report (§1, end of §2) narrated a by a witness and participant who takes great pains to be as precise as possible (18-20), and tries hard to find the exact accurate word or phrase: “the wind continuing contrary, viz. at Southwest, “four of five days”, “seven or eight days”... Thus he seems eager to present himself as a good “witness”: “I began to see” (22), “I could hear him softly to himself say” (25-26).

However the recurrent use of the conjunction “or” also makes it clear that his narration is not that precise, which is later confirmed by “I can by no Words describe it” (58), or “Cannot describe my Temper” (29). He is a rather humble narrator who is not averse to showing his inadequacy at telling his story or understanding exactly the situation he is in, with the noteworthy “It was my advantage... that I did not know what they meant by Founder” (63) whereas the verb “founder” had already been used several times previously. This impression is reinforced later on when he candidly adds that “I who knew nothing what that meant” It might be possible to read irony there, which the telling I is using to comment on the experiencing I. But anyway the effect is to generate a sense of authenticity and reliability, which is also reinforced by the sense that the telling I is there to support the experiencing I. It creates a kind of reading pact between reader and narrator: this narrator is reliable, and the reader is asked to help and fill some of the gaps...

B) A well-ordered narration which nevertheless generates tension and accentuates the narrator's perilous situation

What is furthermore interesting in the analysis of the narration is the emphasis on time with significant use of time-markers as a way to generate a strong sense of tempo and a dynamic pace which heightens tension and fear for the narrator's and the ship's survival...

The narration is indeed chronological, and starts with a moment of calm and respite (after a first heavy storm on the previous page) which morphs into another heavy storm, the tension of which is accentuated by the narrowing of time, as "days" of waiting and lying turn into a very specific morning (l. 14) and climaxes with the adverb "now" l. 22 combined with the appearance for the first time in the passage of the pronoun "I" (before there was only "we") which makes the readers enter the "terrible storm" itself through the direct perspective of the "I". To this is added a large use of adjectives which are aimed at creating a sense of tension, first, and then of fear. The wind "blew hard", is turned then into a "terrible Storm" (with capital letter) and the narrator and protagonist RC becomes "dreadfully frightened" (adv + adj to emphasize RC's feeling). Then emphasis is on RC's sense of growing terror: frightened (33) transformed into emphatic "such a Fright" (with capital Letter) and hyperbolic "in tenfold more Horror of Mind" (51-53) leading him to eventually feel his heart "dying" (71) before actually fainting (81). Also note that drama is intensified as we move from morning to evening to end "in the middle of the night": darkness only intensifies the terror the reader might feel along with RC, all the more as it is associated with epic features found in Homer's Iliad for instance: the "furies" (Greek mythology the erinies as images of divine retribution for those who are guilty of wrongdoing).

C) The story of an individual and collective survival...

Eventually this story is the story of a common struggle: man vs elements where man is struggling for his survival. This universality is emphasized by the use of the pronoun "we", which stands for the ship's crew "our men, all hands, the seamen" and also by the references to the many ships around the protagonist's ship. Ships have come here in droves (5) the storm surrounds a great number of ships "two ships" (37), another "ship" l.38, "two more ships" l. 39 and an unidentified number of "light ships" l. 41.

In other words, this singular story is in fact a story of collective and group survival. Although the narrator first stands out, he is eventually going to fit in, and to "work" just as the others. And it is thanks to this collective "work" that they eventually manage to go through the storm relatively unscathed "all safe on Shore" as indicated p. 12 (§1). Even though RC does not "work" until the end (he faints and takes a long time to "come to his self") this is a first experience of how "work" can be a path to redemption, and paves the way for what he is about to experience in the central part of the novel while

on the island and for his being reborn as a “common man”... (Puritan program and work ethic=

III. A Christian allegory of spiritual death: RC in the heart of spiritual darkness...

What is quite striking in this realistic account is the introduction of biblical intertextuality and resonance which actually transforms this realistic account into a Christian allegory of sin and retribution.

A) Christian and religious features. A rewriting of the Book of Jonah.

First of all, it is noteworthy that this story seems to be borrowed from the Bible, namely the Book of Jonah. Jonah the prophet embarked on a ship and defied God’s order. As a retribution for his sin a “mighty tempest” struck the ship.

Jonah 1:4-6 “But the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship was like to be broken. Then the mariners were afraid; and every man cried out to his God and threw the cargo... to lighten the load. But Jonah had God done... had laid down and fast asleep”.

Later on, the crew finally realized that the storm was due to Jonas’s disobedience, and Jonah told them to cast him at sea. When they do so, the storm abates, the ship and the crew are saved.

The situation of the passage is similar as Jonah/RC has disobeyed his father, equated with God two pages before. [P. 7 “without asking God’s blessing or My Father’s”]. His sin is not of disobedience, per se, but his sinful nature is nevertheless prevalent, as is made manifest line 56 with the use of the adverb “wickedly”. He is aware of this “second sin” (l. 29-32) and feels quite alone in his near-death experience (“everybody had his own life to think of, no body minded me”)... Also note that the seamen are just as afraid as in the *Book of Jonah* l. 23, and just like Jonah, RC is lying on his bed while all around the storm is fiercer and fiercer.

B) Protestant allegory of sin and retribution/punishment in a symbolic confrontation between Man and God (wind)

Thus the situation seems to allegorically call forth the question of sin and its retribution. RC has sinned against his father and God, not just once but twice: first when disobeying his father’s command, second in the first storm when he promised God to go back home if he survived the storm and when he reconsidered his promise: l. 8-9. The idea that God is truly involved in the storm is indicated right from the beginning with the mention of the “wind”: as “wind” is often and traditionally associated to the “holy spirit”, which here blows so hard that it morphs into a terrible storm, Jonah’s “mighty tempest”, which is further confirmed by the Master’s own words l. 26-27

As for man's sinful nature, it is allegorically represented by the ship itself. The ship is indeed "deep laden" 61, which is both factual information but should also be regarded allegorically as a representation of "sin" itself, of man's spiritual burden. The deep load of the ship is noted to be the very reason why the ship is to "founder" whereas by contrast, l. 41, it is indicated that "light ships fared the best". The more load, the more sinful, the more sinful, the more punished... And it is only when making "a clear Deck" l. 50 that you can hope for redemption (with a hint at Locke's idea of *tabula rasa*...)

C) Spiritual death and initiation rite

This leads RC to enter a sort of spiritual death: "my Heart, as I thought, died within me". The account of the narrator's experience through the storm may be read as some first steps into his spiritual initiation rite and spiritual awakening. Unable to confront the heavy spiritual "load", he dies metaphorically to himself and to the others, only to be reborn a great while later "it was a great while before I came to myself". Two interpretations should be combined when reading that final sentence: it is thanks to that experience and inner moral conflict that he may be "roused" to be a better (i.e. more moral) man who learns to separate good from evil (as he will do once on the island p. 49). But it also suggests that his "coming to himself" is not going to start right away, as is indeed the case. It will be a "great while" indeed before he realizes his spiritual emptiness, and decides to remedy it by reading the bible and becoming a more moral man and an emblem of Puritanism. Indeed, at this point in the novel, he is far from being the Puritan hero he is about to be transformed into. This symbolical death is a sign of his spiritual immaturity, and yet shows that there are hopes for him to be "able" to see God and pray to him, like the other seamen, which might be read in the polyptoton used in the last §. His "heart" "died within" him... and yet he is very rapidly after able to work "very heartily". As always it is the heart that matters in matters of faith and it is by following the heart that redemption is possible...