Crusoe in England

SUMMARY

The newspapers say another volcanic eruption just took place. Last week, they reported that a ship's crew saw an eruption create a whole new island. First they noticed a plume of smoke ten miles in the distance, then the first mate, watching through binoculars, saw a black, fly-like speck—probably made of the volcanic rock called basalt—form and harden on the horizon. The crew named the new island. But the sad little island I lived on still hasn't been found again or named again. All of the books about my experience have told the story wrong.

My island contained 52 pathetic little volcanoes, which I could scale with a few long, agile steps—volcanoes that were totally inactive, like piles of soot. I used to perch on the crater-rim of the tallest volcano and tally up the others, which rose like bare, gray bodies whose heads had exploded. I'd muse that if they were as big as I expected volcanoes to be, I must have turned into a giant. And if I had, I didn't dare work out how big the island's goats and turtles were, or the seagulls, or the waves that rolled in one on top of another—gleaming rollers surrounding the six-sided island, bearing down but never quite reaching the shore intact, gleaming even though the weather was generally cloudy.

The island was like a dumping ground for the rest of the region's spare clouds, which gathered above the volcano tops. Those dry craters were still very hot. Did their heat cause the island's frequent rain? Were they the source of the island's hissing noises? Turtles with huge shells waddled past, hissing like kettles of tea on the stove. (Obviously, I would've shortened my life, or a few others' lives, in exchange for any kind of *real* kettle.) The volcanic lava seemed to hiss as it spilled toward the ocean, but I'd turn around and find the noise was coming from the turtles again. The beaches were entirely made of motley-colored lava; their streaks of black, red, white, and gray looked picturesque. There were also waterspouts (tornado-like storms at sea). I'd see about six at a time in the distance—passing, approaching, receding, stretching from the clouds down to dingy white patches moving along the water. They looked like glassy, snaking, tapering smokestacks, like priestly creatures. I stared as they sucked up water in a mist of spray. They were lovely, sure, but they didn't provide companionship.

I frequently felt sorry for myself. I'd think: "Do I deserve this fate? I guess so, otherwise I wouldn't have ended up here. Did I *choose* this fate at some point? Not that I recall, but it's possible." Besides, where's the harm in self-pity? Perched as usual with my legs hanging over a volcano, I told myself that pity should start with oneself. So the sorrier I felt for myself, the more I felt like myself.

The setting sun dipped below the water. The same weird sun rose out of the water. Each of us was unique in that place. There was only one species of everything on the island. A single type of blue-purple, thin-shelled tree-snail crawled over everything—including the single species of tree, which was scrubby and dirty. The snail shells collected under the trees, and from far away, they looked for all the world like iris beds. There was one species of berry, which was crimson, and which I ate carefully—trying one berry at a time, with hours in between. It was slightly acidic, decent-tasting, and non-toxic, so I fermented it into liquor. I would drink that harsh, disgusting, bubbly brew (which got me drunk immediately); pipe the flute I'd made (it played the strangest notes ever); and with my head reeling, yell and dance around the goats. Aren't we all quirky do-it-yourself projects, like that flute? I was very fond of even the humblest thing I created on the island. Or not quite, since the humblest was a pathetic philosophy.

My knowledge was just too limited. Why wasn't I an expert in anything—ancient Greek theater, say, or the stars? My recollection of every book I'd read was patchy. As for poems, I tried to recite Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" to the iris-like snail shells, but couldn't remember what came after "the bliss." I looked it up almost as soon as I returned home.

The whole island smelled like goats and seagull droppings. Both the goats and seagulls were white, and seemed too docile—or maybe they assumed *I* was a goat or seagull. They were constantly bleating and shrieking: their noises are still ringing in my ears. The uncertain-sounding shrieks and baa's, the landscape of hissing rain and hissing, roaming turtles—all of it annoyed me. When the gulls rose in a flock, they sounded like a big wind in the leaves of a tall tree. I'd close my eyes and dream of a tree, like an oak that cast a deep patch of shade. I'd heard that island life could mess with the minds of cattle; I suspected it had messed with the minds of the goats. One of the goats, standing on the slopes of the volcano I called either *Mont d'Espoir* (French for "Mount Hope") or *Mount Despair* (I had plenty of time to make puns like that), would baa and baa, and smell the wind. I'd seize his chin hairs and stare at him. His pupils turned to horizontal slits, showing no emotion, or maybe some resentment. Even the colors on the island got boring! Once, I dyed a little goat berry-red, just for variety's sake, and his mom refused to acknowledge him.

The worst part of the island were the dreams I'd have. Obviously, some were about food and romance, and those were enjoyable. But I'd also have nightmares where, for instance, I'd accidentally cut a human baby's throat instead of a baby goat. I dreamed about islands multiplying endlessly into the distance, breeding other islands as if laying eggs that hatched into tadpoles. In those nightmares, I was doomed to inhabit each

island for eons, recording its plants, animals, and terrain.

Just when I felt like I was about to lose my mind, the young man named Friday arrived. (Previous versions of my story have distorted this part completely.) Friday was a good man. He was a good man, and we were close. I wished he were female! I wanted to have kids, and I think he did, too, the poor guy. Sometimes he'd caress the little goats, run around with them, or cradle them. It was an attractive thing to see; he had a nice physique.

Then, suddenly, our rescuers came.

Now I'm back in England, which is also an island—one wouldn't think so, but who defines these things? My body and mind were obsessed with islands; they seemed to spawn islands. But the islands have died off now. I'm elderly, and life is boring: I drink normal tea in a home made of dull wood. That knife over on the shelf used to radiate significance, like a figure of Jesus on the cross. It seemed alive. For years, I used to plead with it to stay intact. I memorized every flaw in it, the blue-gray color of its blade, its chipped point, the pattern of its wooden handle. Now it seems to avoid my eyes. It looks dead and soulless. I glance at it, then glance away.

A museum around here has asked me to will them all my island possessions: flute, knife, shrunken shoes, goatskin pants (which are moth-eaten and falling apart), and the sun-umbrella that took so long to make, since I couldn't remember how to construct the ribs. It's still functional, but when it's closed up, it resembles a scrawny, featherless bird. Who would care about that kind of stuff? And this March, my beloved Friday, who died from a measles infection, will have been gone for seventeen years.

THEMES

ISOLATION, DISPLACEMENT, AND CONNECTION

"Crusoe in England" is a dramatic monologue in the voice of Robinson Crusoe, the hero of Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel of the same name. Crusoe lives alone for many years as a castaway on a desert island, but the poem picks up after he has returned to England—that is, after his adventure is over. As Crusoe reflects on his island experience and what it all meant, he stresses not how physically grueling or frightening it was but how *lonely* it was. He recalls it as a deepening "nightmare[]" of isolation and boredom, interrupted only by the arrival of Friday, the young man who becomes his companion. Ultimately, the poem illustrates how even the most outwardly self-reliant person retains a deep need for human connection. Without such connection, even adventurous lives feel empty.

Though Crusoe faces physical hardships on his island, what really gets to him is the *psychological* hardship of loneliness. He gets terribly bored seeing the same scenery every day; he once dyes a goat red "Just to see something a little different." Rather than providing companionship, the island's animals just "g[et] on [his] nerves"; he's decidedly not "a goat" or a "gull" (despite what the animals seem to think), and this island isn't his natural habitat. His musings about feeling like a "giant" further convey how out of place he feels. Even the "Beautiful" sea storms are "not much company." There's no *person* to talk to on the island, no one to share the experience with.

The longer Crusoe is stranded, the more tormenting his loneliness becomes. He "dream[s] of [...] love" and has "nightmares of other islands [...] spawning" more islands, suggesting a fear of permanent isolation. He also confesses that he "often gave way to self-pity," or felt sorry for himself (a desperate way of simulating companionship, because it involves viewing his self almost as a separate person!). He has plenty of time to name things, count things, and appreciate his surroundings, but none of this feels satisfying without companionship.

Only the arrival of Friday—the spark of human connection—makes the island tolerable. This second man comes into Crusoe's life "Just when [Crusoe] thought [he] couldn't stand it / another minute longer." With great understatement, Crusoe reports that "Friday was nice, and we were friends." It's implied that they were also lovers, or at least that Crusoe was in love with him (attracted to his "pretty body"). Crusoe was about to go over the psychological edge without human company, but the bond between the two men is what makes the island, if not Crusoe's whole life, truly meaningful.

Crusoe ends the monologue by mourning Friday, who died in England "seventeen years ago come March." Though back in civilization, he now feels a different and perhaps greater loneliness than before. Indeed, he seems to be grieving the love of his life. He reports being "bored" and says that none of his island artifacts mean anything to him anymore (i.e., now that Friday is gone). These details reinforce the idea that connection is what gives life meaning; you don't have to be stuck on an island to feel lonely.

The bond between Crusoe and Friday offers the key to understanding Crusoe's experience. Only human drama and companionship relieve the boredom and frustrations of the wilderness. This poem about desert-island adventure turns out to illustrate the necessity of human connection.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-182

SUBJECTIVITY, INDIVIDUALITY, AND ARTISTIC CREATION

While on the island, the hero of "Crusoe in England" makes or invents various items, from a parasol to "a miserable philosophy." He observes with a mix of pride and shame how crudely "home-made" these things seem—but adds that "we all" are home-made in a deeper sense. Read symbolically, this statement suggests creating things—from inventions to philosophies—is a lonely and private process, requiring ingenuity and self-reliance. Moreover, all creations reflect their makers' eccentricities; they always remain partly individual rather than universal. The same goes for how those creations are *received*: Crusoe questions the authority of any given judgement ("who decides" what's meaningful, good, etc.). He's aware that island solitude has distorted his own perspective, but he suggests that all individual, and even cultural, perspectives are *relative*. The poem stresses that, whether we're castaways or citizens of an empire, our viewpoints are subjective and limited; the meanings we make *or* find in the world are fragile, individual, and dependent on context.

The poem stresses both the ingenuity and eccentricity of Crusoe's creations. As a maker and thinker, he's talented but limited by his circumstances:

- He describes various products of what he calls his "island industries," including a knife, parasol, flute, pair of trousers, and home-brew liquor. He acknowledges that these creations are crude and odd. For example, his flute has "the weirdest scale on earth," and his berry liquor tastes "awful." Still, he feels "affection" for all he makes, suggesting that importance is a matter of perspective; on a lonely island, a flute with "the weirdest scale on earth" might count as fine entertainment.
- The one thing that bothers him is his "miserable philosophy," which is sharply limited by his lack of access to people and books. He's frustrated that he doesn't "know enough" to understand his world better and that his "philosophy" is limited by his lack of reading material. Yet he also implies that *everything* humans think or do is similarly limited—whether the source is an isolated castaway or an entire culture.

After calling his creations "home-made," Crusoe adds, "But aren't we all?" This rhetorical question suggests that every individual is isolated to some degree, at least within their own mind. More broadly, they're bounded by family, social groups, etc. Every artist, thinker, or maker thus inhabits a metaphorical "island" of some kind—indeed, so does every culture. (As Crusoe points out, all of England is literally an island.) Creating *anything*, therefore, figuratively begins at "home." The poem suggests that this pressure on the individual is part of the challenge; without it, art diminishes in interest and importance.

Crusoe's question "But aren't we all [home-made]?" further suggests that there's no comprehensive, official standard by which to *measure* our thoughts, judgements, and creations. As someone who's lived both on a desert isle and the bustling "island" of the UK, Crusoe observes how the significance of things can vary radically, depending on context:

- Crusoe's carefully wrought tools and clothes seem boring once he's back in civilization and he marvels that a local museum wants his old island implements.
- Back in England, an island "that doesn't seem like one," he also questions "who decides" what defines an island—a gesture toward the tenuous, subjective nature of judgement. Crusoe's larger point seems to be that there is no such thing as a truly objective, godlike perspective. Each individual and culture is its own bounded "island" in the grander scheme of things.

As a reworking of the original *Robinson Crusoe*, Bishop's poem seems especially applicable to artists, and can even be read as a sort of allegory of her own career:

- For example, Crusoe's interest in "poems," combined with a "philosophy" that seems inadequate to them, might comment on Bishop's own experience as a reader and writer. The "weird[] scale" of Crusoe's flute might symbolize her idiosyncratic artistry, and so on.
- Bishop could also be riffing on a remark by W. H. Auden, a poet she admired: "The poet who writes free verse is like Robinson Crusoe on his desert island: he must do all his cooking, laundry and darning for himself." In other words, Bishop may be implying that *all* artists—not just free-verse poets—have to fend for themselves, even when working within a defined tradition. That's both their curse and their blessing.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-28
- Lines 55-64
- Lines 79-99
- Lines 115-120
- Lines 154-180

HUMANITY AND NATURE

Like all versions of the Crusoe story, Bishop's pits a single person against the forces of nature. In Bishop's telling, however, the island wilderness is quite tame—almost

"too tame." Crusoe finds his environment lonely and monotonous, if beautiful in some respects; in fact, it eats away at his sanity until a fellow human being (Friday) arrives. Overall, the poem conveys a sensitive, detailed knowledge of nature, but it's not a romantic or flattering portrayal. Rather than depicting a man in harmony with his environment, the poem imagines humanity as deeply alienated and unhappy in the wilderness.

Though Crusoe finds some beauty in his island, he is bored, unimpressed, and even repelled by it as a whole. He describes the island, unflatteringly, as "a sort of cloud-dump." It has "miserable, small volcanoes" that look like they have "their heads blown off" (perhaps an indirect hint of his own suicidal depression and boredom). The island's animals wear on his "nerves"; he finds their sounds maddening, even when remembering them all these years later. He repeatedly distances himself from the animals, pointing out that he's not a goat or a gull despite what they might think. Meanwhile, the weather disheartens him even when it's pleasant or exotic: he calls the distant waterspouts (tornado-like sea storms) "Beautiful, yes, but not much company."

He's starved not only for company but for variety, as the island has "only one kind of everything." He seems to find even the basic cycles of nature, such as sunrise and sunset, exasperatingly repetitive. All in all, the poem presents Crusoe as utterly out of place in nature; his nightmare involves having to "register[]" the flora, fauna, and geography of endless islands.

Notably, even before Friday arrives, his only true pleasures on the island are *human* pleasures. He takes a sad kind of pleasure in "self-pity," for example, and drinks home-brew liquor (a very human activity) to get outside his own head for a while. Unlike the flora and fauna, the tools he makes seem to have a "living soul"—he even talks to his knife! These objects are laden with "meaning" because they are props in a human drama, products of human hope and struggle. For the speaker, then, the only deep interest nature holds is *human* interest: the drama of human ingenuity, bonding, and survival in the wilderness.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-182

LOVE, GRIEF, AND GUILT

"Crusoe in England" explores the close bond between Crusoe and Friday, who joins him on the island midway through his exile. In Bishop's telling, their story is a kind of romance, though Crusoe doesn't explicitly describe it as such. It's also a tragic tale, since by the time Crusoe narrates the poem, his "dear Friday" has "died of measles / seventeen years ago come March." Indeed, the poem can be read as a symbolic statement about losing one's dearest friend or the love of one's life. This experience can *feel*, Bishop suggests, like losing one's only companion on a desert island: life afterward feels anticlimatic, hollow, and tinged with survivor's guilt.

Though Crusoe leaves many details unspoken, he implies that his bond with Friday is romantic. Crusoe claims that "Accounts of that have everything all wrong," implying that previous versions of his story have misunderstood or distorted his relationship with Friday. Crusoe's description of their meeting is a mix of joyous relief (Friday arrives "Just when I thought I couldn't stand it / another minute longer"), bashful understatement ("Friday was nice, and we were friends"), and homoeroticism ("Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body").

Crusoe laments, "If only he had been a woman!" and suggests that both he and Friday would have liked to meet and have children with a female partner. Yet he expresses attraction to Friday and hints that their desires, whatever they might have been otherwise, turned toward each other on the island. Their exact relationship is left to the imagination, but it's noticeably different than in Defoe's original, colonialist "Account[]," in which Crusoe makes Friday his servant, converts him to Christianity, etc. Bishop frames the story in simpler and more equal terms, as one of two men rescuing each other from loneliness.

By the end, however, this story of love and friendship turns to one of grief and implied guilt. Crusoe ends his monologue by abruptly reporting: "—And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March." This detail breaks in seemingly out of nowhere, as if it's been in the back of Crusoe's mind the whole time and perhaps even motivated him to tell the story at all. It's clear that the loss of his companion still weighs on him after seventeen long years.

Even more tragically, it's implied that Crusoe, or at least the return to England, partly *caused* Friday's death. The Crusoe story (which dates from 1719) takes place in an age when many indigenous Americans had not yet been exposed to measles, and could easily die if infected. Friday's death, then, results from his bond with Crusoe (who encounters Europeans when "they came and took us off" the island, and who apparently accompanied Crusoe back to England, as in the novel).

Bishop uses the Crusoe story, then, as a kind of allegory for profound love and loss. Meeting and losing someone you love, the poem suggests, feels like suddenly gaining a friend on a desert island—then finding yourself alone again, feeling partly responsible for your own loneliness.

Bishop finished "Crusoe in England" after losing her longtime partner, the Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares, who died by suicide after Bishop moved back to the U.S. from Brazil. The poem is sometimes read as channeling her grief and guilt over that tragedy.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 129-131
- Lines 142-153
- Lines 181-182

PROCREATION AND LEGACY

"Crusoe in England" is full of imagery related to procreation, although (or perhaps because) it's a desert-island tale about two isolated men. Crusoe notes that both he and Friday wanted to have children but were unable to do so in their island solitude. He's also plagued by nightmares about babies, breeding, and barrenness. As the meditation of an elderly man, the poem seems to weigh the joys in Crusoe's life (Friday, his inventions, etc.) against his regrets, and to suggest that he wasn't able to have everything he might have desired. Read as an allegory about love and art, the poem might illustrate how a nontraditional romantic or creative life can come at the cost of a traditional family life.

Crusoe's monologue conveys anxiety and wistfulness regarding procreation and children:

- For example, he has nightmares about "slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it / for a baby goat." Together with later details, this nightmare might hint at a fear that, in his solitude, he's wasting his potential—metaphorically killing off the babies he *could* have. Or it might hint at secret fears surrounding parenthood itself.
- He also has nightmares of "islands spawning islands, / like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs / of islands." The language here (*spawning*, *eggs*) is ironic, since what he's describing is really the multiplication of barrenness or loneliness. (These imagined islands have "flora" and "fauna," but they seem empty of humans, just as his own island is.)
- On meeting Friday, he confesses, "I wanted to propagate my kind, / and so did he, I think, poor boy." But of course, having children is impossible for two men stranded on a desert island. Crusoe fondly recalls how Friday would "pet the baby goats" and play with them: another possible sign of both men's yearning to father babies of their own.

Now that he's grown too old to start a family, Crusoe ponders his legacy and seems to doubt whether his life was as fruitful and satisfying as it might have been. He reiterates that "my brain / bred islands," but adds that this process has "petered out" because he's "old." In his declining years, he feels he has lost even his *imaginative* fertility (so there's the suggestion that his sexual fertility is gone as well).

His anxiety around children and childlessness, though not directly invoked at the end, heightens the bittersweet mood as Crusoe contemplates what his life did and didn't offer. Looking back over the past, he implies that his adventures and inventions—which once felt deeply meaningful—no longer fully satisfy him. Along with his loss of Friday, his lack of other family seems to compound his loneliness and "bored[om]" in old age.

At the same time, he seems to have avoided fatherhood for all the years after Friday died, so maybe it wasn't just the island (or his romance with Friday) that stopped him from having kids. He may have felt a complex mix of attraction and aversion toward parenthood, with aversion winning out in the end. Ultimately, the act of writing (the monologue itself) becomes a way of "propagat[ing]" the Crusoe-Friday story. Writing leaves its own kind of legacy, even if it's not the kind Crusoe once dreamed about.

Again, this theme may have had some resonance in Bishop's own life. A lesbian in an era when queerness was heavily stigmatized, and queer couples were largely unable to become adoptive parents, Bishop wanted kids but remained childless like Crusoe. Through the persona of Crusoe, the poet may be contemplating her own creative and romantic life, the traditional family life she never had, and the legacy she'll leave behind.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 125-182

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

A new volcano ...
... like a fly.

As the title suggests, the speaker of "Crusoe in England" is the castaway Robinson Crusoe, from Daniel Defoe's famous 1719 novel of the same title. In other words, this poem is a dramatic monologue: it's spoken in the voice of a character who is not the poet. It's also a very loose adaptation of its source material: Bishop changes Crusoe's character, setting, and story in many key respects. The poem's opening lines start to establish *her* Crusoe: the original spin she will bring to this classic tale.

The title also makes clear that Crusoe is narrating this poem from back home "in England." In other words, he's no longer trapped on a desert island. He's re-immersed in civilization, even plugged in to the media landscape. In fact, he begins by mentioning some news he's recently read in "the papers." This news turns out to relate to his former island—which, in Bishop's version of the story, was volcanic.

First, Crusoe reports that "A new volcano has erupted" somewhere in the world. Then, he recounts that "last week I was reading / where some ship saw an island being born."

Evidently, this island was "born" from a separate, undersea volcanic eruption. (Islands formed in this way are known as *high islands* or *volcanic islands*.) Crusoe describes what the ship's crew witnessed: "first a breath of steam, ten miles away," followed by the appearance of a "black fleck," likely made of the volcanic rock called "basalt." (Basalt forms from cooling and hardening lava.) This fleck looked as small as a "fly" through the "binoculars" of the ship's "mate" (second-in-command) and seemed to catch "on the horizon" as if sticking to flypaper.

This striking imagery—including the vivid "fly" simile—immediately puts Crusoe's whole adventure into a broad perspective. As someone who lived on a volcanic island for many years, it's natural that Crusoe should follow news about volcanoes and islands. But what these "new" events seem to signify, on a symbolic level, is that the world has moved on from his ordeal. The metaphorical birth of the volcanic island is like the birth of a younger generation: a reminder of time's passage.

Moreover, the new island looks as puny as a fly from just ten miles' distance. This perspective suggests that Crusoe's great adventure—the whole drama he lived out on *his* island—might also be puny and trivial in the grander scheme of things. And the same might be true of anyone's solitary struggle, or anyone's whole existence. (Notice how the word "born" sets up an implied analogy between an island and an individual life.)

Before diving into his own tale, then, Crusoe seems to suggest that it's not really all that special. Islands come and go—and so do human struggles like his. On the geological timescale of the earth, these events are as ordinary and minuscule as the birth and death of flies.

LINES 8-10

They named it. ...
... got it right.

In lines 8-10, Crusoe segues from talking about the "new" island—the one he read about in the papers—to recalling his "old island[]," where he was stranded for years. This segue creates the poem's first juxtaposition:

> They named it. But my poor old island's still
> un-rediscovered, un-renamable.
> None of the books has ever got it right.

The crew of the ship that "saw [the new] island being born" took the liberty of "nam[ing]" that island, much as one might name a newborn baby. By contrast, according to Crusoe, *his* island is "un-renamable," because it's never been "rediscovered" since he left it. He implies that he gave it a name while he lived there, but he doesn't say what that name was, or make any attempt to identify its general region. Thus, unlike the island in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (identified as lying off the coast of "Guiana," or what is now the South American country of Guyana), the island in Bishop's poem remains something of a mystery. Its whereabouts are unknown, and "None of the books has ever got it right": in other words, it's never been described accurately, even in the original novel!

Through her speaker's declaration, the poet effectively gives herself license to rewrite Defoe's story entirely. She also invests Crusoe's island with a mythical, fantastical quality. Nameless and placeless, it sounds more like a symbolic or imaginary realm than a literal spot on the map.

Notice, too, that Crusoe describes it as "my poor old island[]." His tone here is affectionate, pitying, and possessive all at once. This isn't quite the tone one would expect: after all, he went through a terrible ordeal on that island! Yet it sounds as if he retains some fondness for it, maybe even misses it a little. His phrasing here is an early hint that he *identifies* with the island.

As this first stanza ends, the poem's form starts to become clear. Though most lines in the stanza approximate iambic pentameter (five-beat lines with a da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm), others do not. As such, there's no consistent meter, and no rhyme scheme, either. "Crusoe in England" turns out to be a free verse poem—but one with *hints* of traditional meter, and occasional rhymes as well.

This blend of traditional and experimental, or formal and free verse, suits a poem that offers a modern take on an old literary classic. The rough, idiosyncratic form also fits Crusoe's story. He can't make smooth, shapely, flawless objects on his desert island; he just has to do the best he can with what he has.

LINES 11-17

Well, I had ...
... heads blown off.

In lines 11-17, Crusoe begins describing the island he lived on. (Again, he's attempting to set the record straight because "None of the books has ever got it right.")

From the start, he paints a pretty bleak picture: his island was dotted all over with "miserable, small volcanoes," which were no longer active but "dead as ash heaps." These volcanoes were so puny that he "could climb" them "with a few slithery strides"—that is, long, low strides (probably involving the use of hands as well as feet). He would "sit on the edge of the highest" volcano and "count the others," which looked "naked" and "leaden" (heavy, gray). Since they had craters instead of peaks, they looked like "standing" figures "with their heads blown off."

This last description involves personification, but it compares the volcanoes to *dead* people. Throughout the poem, Crusoe's personifications have this unsettling quality; they actually make his surroundings sound lonelier, as opposed to more crowded, vibrant, etc. They underline the fact that he's the only *actual* person around. The image of volcanoes "with their heads blown off" might also reflect some macabre or violent element in Crusoe's psyche. Later in the poem, he implies that loneliness

nearly drove him over the psychological edge, so this disturbing phrase might hint that he entertained suicidal fantasies.

Already, the poem's setting differs sharply from the island described in Daniel Defoe's original novel. The novel never mentions volcanoes at all, but "Crusoe in England" mentions them repeatedly. In the poem, they seem to symbolize a mix of creative fertility (islands are "born" from them) and sterility (those islands are *desert* islands, and Crusoe's volcanoes have gone "dead as ash heaps"). In other words, the poem's symbolism seems to link them with disappointment and unfulfilled potential—perhaps including Crusoe's disappointment at never having kids (see lines 148-149: "I wanted to propagate my kind, / and so did he, I think, poor boy.").

LINES 18-24

I'd think that ...
... or the gulls,

Like the earlier image of the island seen through "binoculars," lines 18-24 play with size and perspective. Crusoe notes that the undersized volcanoes on his island made him feel like a "giant" by comparison. Rather than amusing or appealing to him, this thought disturbs him, because it implies that the other creatures on the island—"goats," "turtles," and "gulls"—must be giants as well. (They seem normal-sized compared to him, but equally oversized compared to the volcanoes.) He can't "bear" to contemplate this idea, perhaps because it would make him feel even more displaced and disoriented than he already does.

The distorted perspective here calls to mind fantasy tales of humans becoming "giant[s]," such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (whose normal-sized hero visits the land of the miniature Lilliputians) and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (whose heroine eats a magic cake that makes her grow taller). Once again, there seems to be something fantastical about Crusoe's island, as if it existed in the mind rather than on the map. (Bishop based the volcanoes on the actual topography of Aruba, which she visited in 1957, but her descriptions make the landscape sound as trippy and otherworldly as possible.) Crusoe's language indicates that, from the start, he had trouble "bear[ing]" or tolerating this bizarre, cramped island. It felt not only like an inhospitable wilderness but a separate reality.

LINES 24-28

or the overlapping ...
... was mostly overcast.

Lines 24-28 finish the thought begun in line 21. If Crusoe has become a "giant," he reasons, the "rollers" (long, curled waves) around the island must be gigantic as well, since they look normal-sized to him.

He plays with this idea in a passage full of repetition:

> [...] or the overlapping **rollers**
> —a **glittering** hexagon of **rollers**
> **closing** and **closing** in, but never quite,
> **glittering** and **glittering**, though the sky
> was mostly overcast.

The repetition mirrors the endless motion of the waves as they approach, but "never quite" reach, Crusoe. These "glittering" rollers always break on shore before they can "clos[e] in" on him completely. Still, the way they seem to be "closing and closing in" reflects his growing sense of claustrophobia—and perhaps paranoia—on this tiny island.

The waves form a "hexagon" because the island itself has a hexagonal, or six-sided, shape. This oddly specific, strict geometric term makes the island sound all the more rigidly bounded by water—almost as if it were a man-made enclosure. Even the waves' beautiful "glittering" is a qualified pleasure: they sparkle in the sun, but Crusoe can't see much of the sun due to the island's cloud cover ("the sky / was mostly overcast").

Combined with Crusoe's repetitious phrasing, these details make the island sound dreary, monotonous, and terribly cramped. It sounds like a place where anyone would soon feel bored and cooped up—and that's exactly what happens to Crusoe. By saying that he felt too "giant" for the island, he's really saying that the island felt too small for him.

LINES 29-35

My island seemed ...
... whole place hissed?

Lines 29-35 describe the island's weather and ambient sounds.

Crusoe makes clear that this is no sun-drenched tropical paradise. Instead, the island resembles "a sort of cloud-dump," where the rest of "the hemisphere's / left-over clouds" collect in a giant heap. His phrasing makes the island sound gloomy and forsaken, a sort of outcast dumped on by the rest of whichever "hemisphere[]" it's in.

The clouds gather "above the craters" of the volcanoes, which are dry as "parched throats" and "hot to touch." The reference to "throats" is another partial personification: Crusoe imagines the volcanoes as thirsty creatures, perhaps as a projection of his own craving for food, drink, companionship, and so on. The heat of the craters makes the island seem hostile—more like hell than paradise.

Crusoe then wonders if the interaction between the clouds and hot craters explains the island's unpleasant weather and noises: "Was that why it rained so much? / And why sometimes the whole place hissed?" These aren't technically rhetorical questions, since they have factual answers—or would, if anyone could find and study Crusoe's island. Still, they're unanswerable for Crusoe, even after all these years. They illustrate the

persistent state of disorientation in which he lived, growing intimately familiar with, yet never quite understanding, the island and its ways.

The rain and "hiss[ing]" are bleak and ominous, much like the waves eternally "closing in." Indeed, the "whole place hissed" for unclear reasons, as if it were a malicious entity. (The hissing might bring to mind snakes, traditional symbols of evil in the Judeo-Christian tradition.) Once again, the island seems somewhat hellish, though its torments have more to do with boredom than pain.

LINES 36-42

The turtles lumbered ...
... be more turtles.

Lines 36-42 continue to describe the island's eerie "hissing." The exact source of the hissing is never clear to Crusoe or the reader, though the sound seems to emanate mostly from the "turtles." Crusoe's ambiguous descriptions leave open a few possibilities:

- The hissing comes directly from the volcanic craters.
- The hissing comes from the rain falling onto the "hot" craters (and producing steam).
- The hissing comes from rain steaming off the bodies of the turtles.
- Some combination of the above.

As the large, "high-domed" turtles crawl past Crusoe, they "hiss[] like teakettles," reminding him how much he longs for a *real* "kettle." (Stuck without creature comforts on the island, he would "give[] years" off his life—or "take[] a few" years off someone else's—in exchange for that simple convenience.) At times, he thinks the hissing is coming from "lava, running out to sea"; then he "turn[s]" around and finds that it's only coming from "more turtles." In other words, he briefly thinks one of the volcanoes is erupting—something new and exciting is finally happening on the island!—only to realize that it's just the same old, same old.

At this point in his story, it seems, Crusoe would welcome real danger as much as real comfort. But the island seems to provide neither. It contains the basics he needs for survival, along with minor hazards (the hot craters) and a malignant atmosphere (the hissing), but nothing truly satisfying *or* frightening. It remains not only boring but cruelly disappointing.

LINES 43-50

The beaches were ...
... of scuffed-up white.

Lines 43-50 highlight some of the island's more picturesque features. First, Crusoe observes that the "beaches" are made entirely of volcanic "lava," which has long since dried into "variegated" (motley, multicolored) patterns. These beaches are streaked, like "marble[]," with patches of "black, red, and white, and gray"; Crusoe notes appreciatively that their "colors made a fine display."

- Like "touch"/"much" in lines 33-44, "gray"/"display" in lines 44-45 is one of the poem's occasional rhymes. These flashes of rhyme provide a hint of traditional technique within an experimental free verse poem. But the poem never becomes slick enough to settle into a rhyme scheme; like something assembled on a desert island, its music remains rough, irregular, and intuitive.

Crusoe adds that he also "had waterspouts" to appreciate. Waterspouts are basically sea-tornadoes: tall, thin, whirling windstorms that suck up sea spray into their funnels. When the weather around the island is stormy, Crusoe can spot some "half a dozen" of these funnels at a time, "far out" on the water. They "come and go, advance[] and retreat[]," but never seem to pose any danger. He's distant enough to enjoy them, and even quasi-personify them as creatures with "their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches / of scuffed-up white." (In other words, they stretch from the sky to the water and kick up spray as they move.)

By the end of the stanza, however, Crusoe will admit that these personified storms are no substitute for actual human "company." Like the multicolored beaches, they're a "fine display" for the eye, but they don't offer any deeper comfort.

LINES 51-54

Glass chimneys, flexible, ...
... not much company.

Lines 51-54 continue to describe the waterspouts that sometimes whirl around the island.

In a double metaphor, Crusoe compares them first to "Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated," and then to "sacerdotal," or priest-like, "beings of glass."

- The first metaphor provides a clear, precise visual image for readers who may be unfamiliar with waterspouts. ("Flexible" suggests that they move in a snaky fashion, and "attenuated" indicates that their funnels are tapered near the water's surface.)
- The second metaphor is stranger and invites some reader interpretation. They may look priestly because they are tall, imposing, remote, and quiet (since they're "far out" on the water). Or they may seem priestly because they're made of "water," which is symbolically associated with purity, holiness, baptism, etc. Or maybe it's because they look like beings of "glass," which might call to mind church glassware, windows, or other items

> associated with priests and worship. The seawater in their funnels resembles "smoke," giving them an added aura of mystery and perhaps evoking the incense smoke from a priest's censer.

Once again, the personification here is only partial. To Crusoe, the storms look like priestly "beings," not necessarily *human* priests. Even though they're "Beautiful," they're "not much company": their quiet, distant, alien presence doesn't ease his loneliness.

LINES 55-59

I often gave ...
... could have been."

In lines 55-59, Crusoe turns from describing what his old island looked like to describing how he felt there. In general, he seems to have been frustrated and depressed, due mostly to lack of "company." He recalls asking himself painful questions:

> I often gave way to self-pity.
> "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must.
> I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there
> a moment when I actually chose this?
> I don't remember, but there could have been."

Rather than true rhetorical questions, these are examples of a device called hypophora, in which a speaker poses questions they immediately answer. Since Crusoe is using this device while alone on a desert island, it's a pretty clear sign of his loneliness: having no one else to talk to, he talks to himself.

In his moods of "self-pity," Crusoe wonders if he somehow deserves—or even sought out—this lonely state. He decides that he "must" deserve it for some reason and that he "could have" chosen it somehow, though he doesn't remember doing so. Because Bishop's poem, unlike Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, doesn't specify how Crusoe arrived on the island, it's unclear exactly how he could have "chose[n]" to become stranded. (The novel describes a shipwreck in detail, but the poem never mentions one.) Nor does the poem describe what Crusoe was like before his island years, so it's unclear what he might have done to "deserve" his fate.

Here, the reader might again wonder whether Crusoe's island is literal or whether it's an extended metaphor for an isolated life—the life of an artist or writer, perhaps. After all, people rarely *choose* to be shipwrecked, and it's hard to say whether anyone *deserves* to be. But people can, arguably, choose to become reclusive artists—even if they feel that life has chosen them. Similarly, people can be driven into an isolated existence as a result of their personalities or actions, rather than some freak nautical accident.

LINES 60-64

What's wrong about ...
... felt at home.

Crusoe continues to reflect on his "self-pity"—and begins to defend it. Though this emotion is usually thought to be weak, self-indulgent, etc., Crusoe wonders why it has such a bad reputation: "What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?" This time, he's asking a rhetorical question (not engaging in hypophora). He's basically stating that he doesn't think self-pity is so wrong.

In fact, he decides to luxuriate in it. In a passage full of symbolism and witty repetition, he recalls that feeling sorry for himself finally made him feel "at home" on the island:

> With my legs dangling down familiarly
> over a crater's edge, I told myself
> "Pity should begin at home." So the more
> pity I felt, the more I felt at home.

"Pity should begin at home" means, in effect, "If you can't pity yourself, how are you going to pity somebody else?" Or, "compassion for others requires compassion for oneself." It's a variation on the old idiom "Charity begins at home," which means that one should provide generously for one's own family before trying to assist others. (This idiom derives from an even older proverb, whose meaning is close to Crusoe's: "Charity should begin at himself.")

Allowing these feelings of pity or compassion, rather than just accusing himself, helps Crusoe tolerate the loneliness of his life. As he basks in self-pity, he sits with his "legs dangling down familiarly / over a crater's edge." Symbolically, he's perched on the edge of the psychological abyss and gazing down into it. He may even be considering a literal jump into the crater (i.e., contemplating suicide). But by now, this is a "familiar[]" position for him: he's used to loneliness and despondency. By admitting and permitting these emotions, he comes to terms with them—starts to feel more "at home" with his situation and himself.

At the same time, there's an ironic bite to these lines. Whether the irony is gentle or harsh is a matter of interpretation. Crusoe seems to realize the danger of *morbid* self-pity, and he hints that his thoughts may sometimes have drifted in that direction. He never "gave way" entirely and ended his life, but he may have come close. (Later, he reveals that he toggled between naming one volcano "*Mont d'Espoir*"—Mount Hope—and "*Mount Despair*," suggesting that his own psyche alternated between these moods.)

LINES 65-72

The sun set ...
... sooty, scrub affair.

Lines 65-72 depict life on the island as deeply monotonous.

Once again, Crusoe's own repetitions drive the point home:

> The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun
> rose from the sea,
> and there was one of it and one of me.

On the face of it, these lines state the obvious: Crusoe is alone on the island, and he watches the sun rise and set each day. But the language aches with boredom. Crusoe clearly gets sick of seeing the "same" things day after day, and he's getting tired of his own company, too. He seems to wish he could somehow be more than "one" person; he may even absurdly wish there were more than "one" sun, for variety's sake. The word "odd" here is also telling: either the sun looks different on this remote island than it did back home (thus heightening Crusoe's sense of displacement), or he's watched the sun so many times that it *looks* "odd," despite being the most ordinary sight in the world.

Either way, he's bored senseless—and it doesn't help that his "island" has only "one kind of everything." For example, it hosts only one species of "tree snail," which has a "thin shell" and striking "violet-blue" color, and only one species of "tree," which is small, "scrub[by]," and "sooty"-colored. (Perhaps the trees were stained by soot from the now-dead volcanoes or acquired a similar color for evolutionary reasons.)

Bishop may be gesturing here toward a real phenomenon observed by Darwin and other scientists. There's often a relative lack of species variety on small islands, where flora and fauna become highly specialized to suit their unique environments. In some cases, only one type of bird, snail, etc. may adapt and survive over the course of evolution.

Crusoe's observation that "The island had one kind of everything" is also a bit of foreshadowing: it proves true in a way he couldn't have expected. Once Friday arrives, there are multiple humans on the island, but only one *kind* of human: the male kind.

LINES 73-79

> *Snail shells lay ...*
> *... I made home-brew.*

Lines 73-79 point out some other features of Crusoe's island, on which there is only "one kind of everything." The single species of snail discards its violet-blue "shells" in "drifts" under the trees; from a "distance," these shell drifts look like "beds of irises."

The poem is again showing that perspective is everything; from a distance, shells can look like flowers, just as waterspouts can look like chimneys and entire islands can look like flies on the horizon. In particular, gaining distance from something can be a crucial way of seeing it differently—or reimagining it entirely.

Here it seems significant that Crusoe is retelling, or perhaps reimagining, his experiences on the island from a distance of many years and thousands of miles. Even though he started out by saying his island is "un-rediscovered," he's metaphorically rediscovering it through the act of storytelling, from the new perspective of old age.

Crusoe also recalls the "one kind of berry" on the island: a "dark red" fruit that, luckily, turned out not to be poisonous. To be on the safe side, he "tried" these berries "one by one, and hours apart," so that any toxic effect would be minimal. He found they were "Sub-acid" (slightly acidic) and "not bad"; they had "no ill effects" on his body. Once again, serious danger seems absent from the island—except, perhaps, for the danger of despair, which is internal rather than external. In that regard, the island might be compared to the imaginative world of the artist, in which the artist is the only real element and therefore the only possible threat to herself.

Speaking of art, an important shift takes place in line 79, as Crusoe begins to *make* things. And not just essentials like clothes and shelter: luxuries like liquor. He ferments the tart berries to make "home-brew," in an act that might be compared to the old idiom about "turning lemons into lemonade" (making the best of a bad situation). He has the basics he needs to survive on the island, but mere survival isn't enough; he feels the need to sustain himself in other ways, to seek novelty and variety amid the overwhelming monotony. One way he does this is by imagining things as other things (e.g., shells as irises), another is by simply getting drunk and altering his mind for a while. But, importantly, both require creativity. If Crusoe is becoming a kind of artist or inventor here, the poem may be suggesting that one motive for art is the desire to relieve the tedium of everyday existence. Art takes over when life alone isn't enough.

LINES 79-85

> *I'd drink ...*
> *... aren't we all?*

Having made "home-brew" out of the island's berries, Crusoe proceeds to get drunk. He recalls choking down the "awful, fizzy, stinging stuff," which would go "straight to his head" (that is, intoxicate him immediately). While drunk, he would "play [his] home-made flute," which (he says self-deprecatingly) must have "had the weirdest scale on earth." After all, it wasn't a slick, professionally made instrument; it was something he fashioned himself on a desert island. Piping his own tune while high on his own supply, he would get "dizzy" and "whoop and dance among the goats."

It's probably no coincidence that Crusoe's first two non-essential creations—alcohol and music—are two of the earliest non-essential creations in human history. They are luxuries or recreational pleasures, not necessary for survival but designed to make life better. They trace back to the roots of human culture, so when Crusoe makes them, he's founding a kind of rudimentary civilization on the island.

As usual, Bishop is playing with themes that were partly present in the original *Crusoe*, but taking plenty of imaginative license in the process. In Defoe's novel, Crusoe wants to brew beer but finds he doesn't have the means; later, he discovers some casks of liquor in a brand-new shipwreck. Defoe never mentions a flute or other musical instrument—this part is entirely Bishop's invention.

With his flute music and "goats" (who tamely allow him to dance among them), Crusoe also resembles the Greek mythological figure named Pan: god of nature, flocks, shepherds, and bucolic music. Pan's symbols are the goat and the instrument called the "panpipes"—a type of flute. He is half-man, half-goat in appearance; similarly, Crusoe is living on the island as part human, part beast. Bishop's mythological allusion places him, again, at the crossroads between wilderness and civilization.

It also helps explain the rhetorical question he "whoop[s]" out in a kind of drunken ecstasy:

> Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?

Through a series of associative leaps, Crusoe suggests that not only are his flute and music "home-made"—*he* is home-made in a metaphorical sense, and so are "all" people. In fact, so is all of human civilization! That is, everything humans make—from the art they create to the personalities they form—is shaped by the unique materials, pressures, and limitations of their environments. All individuals and cultures are "weird" and idiosyncratic in their own way; none sets a perfect, universal, objective standard. For example, even what Crusoe might consider normal flute music, as defined by the Western orchestral tradition, developed from a particular culture at a particular time. In this moment, then, he seems to be embracing and celebrating his own creative weirdness: unlike so much of his experience, it's something he shares in common with the rest of humanity.

LINES 86-92

I felt a ...
... drama or astronomy?

Having celebrated his "weird[]" artistry in the previous lines, Crusoe admits that he was proud of the stuff he made on his island. Indeed, "he felt a deep affection for / the smallest of my island industries"; that is, he was fond of even the most trivial stuff he managed to create. There's one exception, however: he's ashamed of the "philosophy" he slapped together, which he considers his "smallest" and most "miserable" product.

There's a reason for this failure: he "didn't know enough" before coming to the island. In a pair of rhetorical questions, he scolds himself for his ignorance:

> Why didn't I know enough of something?
> Greek drama or astronomy?

At first, this might seem a strange choice of subjects he wished he knew. Expertise in "Astronomy" might help with navigation if he managed to sail off the island, but what use could "Greek drama" possibly be in a wilderness survival situation?

Yet Crusoe doesn't just long for *practical* knowledge; he longs for *fulfilling* knowledge. It's as if he wishes his own mind made for better company on the island. Instead, he finds it undereducated and dull. Its limitations make him "miserable." And he may feel that knowledge of drama, in particular, would reduce his boredom and loneliness: it would populate his mind with a whole cast of fascinating characters!

LINES 92-99

The books ...
... look it up.

Crusoe continues to chide himself for not knowing enough to form a proper "philosophy" on the island. Throughout his exile, he tried to recall "The books / [he'd] read," but found that they were "full of blanks" in his mind's eye. In other words, he could remember them only in patches, so he struggled to integrate them into a larger understanding of the world.

Crusoe seems particularly frustrated by his spotty recollection of "poems." He "tried / reciting" one to his "iris-beds"—which are really the "violet-blue" deposits of snail shells described earlier in the poem—but found that he faltered at a key line. The poem is William Wordsworth's famous ballad "I Wandered Lonely As a Cloud," and Bishop uses this allusion to deliciously ironic effect:

> [...] I tried
> reciting to my iris-beds,
> "They flash upon that inward eye,
> which is the bliss..." The bliss of what?
> One of the first things that I did
> when I got back was look it up.

The missing word here is "solitude"! It's sadly fitting that Crusoe can't remember the phrase "the bliss of solitude," because for him, the solitude of the island is the opposite of blissful. In context, Bishop's allusion seems to poke fun at Wordsworth's poem—which, like many other classics of the British Romantic movement, celebrates communion with nature and solitary time spent with one's own imagination (the mind's "inward eye"). Bishop suggests that solitude and nature aren't so heavenly and romantic when you're trapped in them indefinitely. In fact, they can be pretty hellish.

The allusion is ironic in other ways, too. In Wordsworth's original stanza, the speaker is describing a pleasant memory of daffodils:

> For oft, when on my couch I lie
> In vacant or in pensive mood,
> They flash upon that inward eye
> Which is the bliss of solitude;
> And then my heart with pleasure fills,
> And dances with the daffodils.

Presumably, Crusoe has chosen this tribute to flowers because he's reciting to his own "irises." Except the irises aren't flowers—they're discarded snail shells that he *imagines* as flowers. It appears there *are* no beautiful flowers on this island, and perhaps no flowers at all; Crusoe only wishes there were. On the one hand, this detail further highlights his creative imagination. On the other hand, it reinforces the idea that nature can be disappointing rather than fulfilling, heartbreaking rather than blissful.

When Crusoe "got back" to England, he looked up the missing word almost immediately, because the memory block was bothering him so much. When he did, the bitter irony must have occurred to him, too; indeed, it made enough of an impression that he recalls this tiny detail many years later.

Another interesting thing about the Wordsworth allusion is that it's anachronistic, at least in relation to the original *Robinson Crusoe*. Defoe's novel was published in 1719, Wordsworth's poem in 1807, so Defoe's character couldn't possibly know the poem. Here, then, is yet another sign that Bishop has modernized Defoe's story—and made it her own.

LINES 100-106

> *The island smelled ...*
> *... they're hurting now.*

The allusion in the previous stanza slyly gestured toward Crusoe's troubled relationship with nature. Lines 100-106 highlight this conflict much more explicitly.

The island's sounds and smells not only bother Crusoe but, over time, torment him. The whole place stinks of "goat[s]" and "guano" (here meaning seagull droppings). Both goats and gulls are the same monotonous "white," and Crusoe judges that they're either "too tame" or under the false impression that he's one of them. Since a human looks nothing like a goat or gull, he may be implying that these animals are stupid. At the same time, they've probably never seen a human before, so they may simply lack the experience that would ordinarily make them afraid. They may struggle to put him in context, just as *he* struggles with context on the island—when trying to make sense of the volcanoes' heights, for example. (Again, the poem seems to show how slippery and unreliable individual perspectives can be.)

Meanwhile, the animals' noises underscore how much of an outsider—how human—Crusoe really is. He can't understand these sounds, and he can't stand them, either. His mocking repetition conveys how much they grate on him:

> *Baa, baa, baa* and *shriek, shriek, shriek,*
> *baa... shriek... baa...* I still can't shake
> them from my ears; they're hurting now.

The bleats and "shriek[s]" echo in his head after all these years, "hurting" him to think about. Between the unpleasant animal smells (which don't bother the animals themselves) and the unpleasant animal sounds (which actually help the animals form a community), Crusoe feels torturously alone in this natural setting. Even the animals' "tame[ness]" and acceptance of his presence seem to strike him as cruelly ironic. The goats and gulls aren't actually his pets or livestock, and they're nothing like an actual community. He has no authentic relationship to any living thing on the island; he's truly the odd man out.

LINES 107-114

> *The questioning shrieks, ...*
> *... real shade, somewhere.*

In lines 107-114, Crusoe elaborates on how frustrating and alienating he finds the island.

He layers on grim details, admitting with some understatement that the animals "got on [his] nerves." He mentions the gull and goat sounds again, describing them as "questioning shrieks" and "equivocal replies." This language seems almost to personify the animals: strictly speaking, it's only humans who ask "question[s]" and "equivocat[e]" or speak ambiguously.

But once again, this semi-personification actually highlights the *distance* between Crusoe and the animals. To him, their vocalizations sound annoyingly unclear and unresolved; they don't actually *communicate* anything to him. Likewise, the turtles "hiss[]" as they "ambulat[e]" or roam around, but their hiss is just more empty noise. All these sounds "g[et] on [Crusoe's] nerves"—by which he means that they only heighten his loneliness and frustration.

Crusoe then compares the sound of gulls flying off in a flock to "a big tree in a strong wind, its leaves." This simile conjures up a more pleasant image: so pleasant, in fact, that makes him wistful and nostalgic. Whenever the gulls create this sound, he closes his "eyes and think[s] about a tree, / an oak, say, with real shade, somewhere." Oaks don't exist on this island—the only tree species is "scrub[by]" and small—but they're common back in Crusoe's native England. He says he dreams of an oak "somewhere," but maybe he's really pining for home. In any case, a "big tree" would provide "real shade": a comfort that seems to stand in for everything he misses about life before the island.

LINES 115-120

> *I'd heard of ...*
> *... sniff the air.*

In lines 115-120, Crusoe takes a closer look at the island's goats. He seems so desperate for companionship that he zeroes in on the most humanlike creatures on the island—the only other mammals.

He remembers hearing that cattle can get "island-sick" and wonders if these goats have the same problem. "Island-sick," here, refers not to a physical disease but to the psychological condition sometimes known as "island fever" or "rock fever." It refers to the cooped-up, irritable, distressed feeling that sometimes afflicts humans who live for long periods on small islands. Crusoe suggests that the goats feel some version of this.

It's possible he's just projecting his own feelings onto the animals around him, out of a desperate wish for some company in his misery. However, the poem also leaves open the possibility that these were originally *tame* goats, left behind by some previous crew of sailors. That was true on the island inhabited by Alexander Selkirk, the real-life castaway who inspired the original *Robinson Crusoe* novel. If it's true here, it would explain why the goats strike Crusoe as "too tame" and strangely out of place, like himself.

Crusoe then describes a particular "billy goat" (male goat) who stands on one of the volcanoes, looking forlorn as he "bleat[s] and bleat[s], and sniff[s] the air." The goat seems to be looking out, crying out, and sniffing the wind for something; perhaps he's a lonely male yearning for rescue or love, like Crusoe. Appropriately enough, the volcano he stands on is the one Crusoe has punningly named "*Mont d'Espoir* " (French for Mount Hope) or "*Mount Despair*." Though these two names sound alike, they mean opposite things—and seem to reflect the way Crusoe himself wavers between the extremes of hope and despair. (This line also alludes to Defoe's original novel, in which Crusoe names his island "The Island of Despair.")

As a kind of excuse for his corny joke, Crusoe notes that he certainly had "time enough to play with names" on the island. Once again, he seems to be a literary sort of man, interested in "poems," "philosophy," and wordplay. His pun here points to the quirkiness, slipperiness, and arbitrariness of language—something he also has good reason to reflect on, since none of his language means anything to the landscape or creatures around him.

At the same time, both the *hope* and *despair* labels seem to fit the volcano on a symbolic level. On top of the volcano, Crusoe (or the goat) is both at a *peak* and on the edge of a *pit*. He's at the greatest heights the island has to offer, but he can also stare into the lowest depths. No wonder the location puts Crusoe in mind of emotional heights and depths.

LINES 121-128

I'd grab his ...
... wouldn't recognize him.

In lines 121-128, Crusoe not only observes but interacts with the island's goats. These interactions disappoint him and aggravate his loneliness.

First, he "grab[s]" the "beard" of the "billy-goat" who habitually stands on the volcano. He "look[s] at him" closely, as if seeking some sign of human-like intelligence or emotion—but the goat only "narrow[s]" his "horizontal," very un-humanlike "pupils." The animal's eyes "express[] nothing" recognizable, or perhaps "a little malice." (Crusoe has been skinning these goats for their fur and probably killing them for meat as well, so "malice" wouldn't be surprising!) Clearly, even though these goats are docile, they can't offer Crusoe the kind of company he longs for. By extension, the natural world around him seems either emotionless or actively hostile toward humanity.

As a result, his boredom and frustration deepen. At one point, he gets "so tired of the very colors" on the island that he "dye[s] a baby goat bright red / with my red berries, just to see / something a little different." Talk about being starved for entertainment!

His prank has unintended consequences, too, even if it offers some temporary variety. After he dyes the young goat, the animal's "mother wo[n't] recognize him"—in other words, treats him as an interloper and refuses to take care of him. Rather than amusing Crusoe, the goat becomes yet another poignant reflection of his isolation. It's as if Crusoe is so lonely that his loneliness spreads to everything he touches.

LINES 129-135

Dreams were the ...
... away from mine,

In lines 129-135, Crusoe begins to describe his "Dreams," which he identifies as "the worst" part of living on the island. This claim suggests that the psychological hardships of extreme isolation were far worse than any physical hardships he endured.

He acknowledges that not all his dreams were bad: he sometimes "dreamed of food / and love," and these dreams "were pleasant rather / than otherwise." Notably, this is the poem's only direct mention of "love," even though it's 182 lines long and ends up being a tragic love story. Crusoe's offhand, dismissive tone here—"Of course I dreamed of [...] love"—seems to reflect his slight discomfort with the subjects of sex and romance. (He's admitting that he had sexual and romantic fantasies, but like a stereotypically buttoned-up Englishman, adds no further comment except to say they were "pleasant.") The island kept his body in a constant state of hunger, and not just for food, so even these pleasant dreams reflect his harsh waking life.

Meanwhile, some of his dreams were "nightmares" involving violence and isolation. For example, he would dream about "slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it / for a baby goat." As a

reflection of Crusoe's troubled psyche, this dream might be interpreted in several ways:

- First, he may be guilty about killing the goats on the island (for food, clothing, etc.), and his subconscious may be vividly rendering that guilt in altered form. (He feels as bad as if he's killed an innocent person, not an animal.)
- Second, his imagination may be channeling some of the guilt he felt after dyeing the baby goat red, thereby alienating it from its mother.
- Third, the idea of killing a human infant ties in with his anxieties about procreation and parenthood, which he expresses in the next stanza as well (he "want[s] to propagate his kind," but can't). The dream of killing a baby might dramatize his fear that, as he languishes alone on the island, he's letting his reproductive potential go to waste.

Finally, the rhyming, similar-sounding phrases "baby's throat" and "baby goat" once again demonstrate the unsettling slipperiness of language. Previously, Crusoe has struggled to recall the books he's read and poems he's memorized; he's also given a volcano similar-sounding names that mean opposite things ("*Mont d'Espoir* [and] *Mount Despair*"). Now, once again, language proves unreliable and even treacherous: his subconscious imagination transforms one phrase/idea into a nearly identical phrase/idea, which nevertheless carries a completely different moral weight. Crusoe's weakening grip on language may reflect a weakening grip on reality—an increasing struggle to define and orient himself in the world. Although Crusoe's struggle is born of extreme isolation, the poem hints that it's not unique: language is more arbitrary and less powerful than humans like to think.

Crusoe also has "nightmares of other islands" that "stretch[] away from" his own, as if to mirror or prolong his isolation. These nightmares—which he elaborates on in the following lines—seem to dramatize a fear of endless, unrelieved loneliness.

LINES 135-141

infinities ...
... fauna, their geography.

In lines 135-141, Crusoe continues to describe his island-themed nightmares. His repetition conveys the nightmares' haunting repetitiveness and persistence:

> [...] infinities
> of islands, islands spawning islands,
> like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs
> of islands, [...]

Stuck on an island himself, he can't stop dreaming about islands; they seem to have invaded the deepest regions of his mind. The simile about "frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs" illustrates how fast these dream-islands multiply and how numerous they become. (Frogs lay many eggs at a time, and the frogspawn that hatches into tadpoles, a.k.a. "polliwogs," resembles a multitude of dark islands floating in bubbles of protective jelly.)

Not only does the sheer number of islands overwhelm Crusoe, but in these dreams, he's condemned "to live / on each and every one, eventually, for ages." It's as if he's been sentenced to indefinite solitary confinement, far beyond the span of a natural human life. While trapped on these islands, he's mysteriously tasked with "registering their flora, / their fauna, their geography," like a naturalist or surveyor who never signed up for the job—or a writer who's forced to keep writing poems like this one!

As with the dream about "baby goats" and "a baby's throat," these nightmares can be interpreted in multiple ways:

- One one level, they symbolize Crusoe's fear of endless, ever-increasing loneliness. By now, his isolation has gone on so long that he fears nothing will ever break it.
- On another level, the dreams involve an odd, paradoxical combination of fertility and sterility. The islands "spawn[]" like egg-laying frogs, but they are *desert* islands like Crusoe's, full of "flora and "fauna" but barren of any *human* life besides his own.

These dreams thus seem related to Crusoe's anxieties about reproduction and childlessness (see the following stanza). Perhaps he fears that, despite his vast creative potential, his creative output can't cure his loneliness. Nor can it produce a separate human life, since creative fertility isn't the same as literal, reproductive fertility. Instead, it condemns him to repetition and disappointment. His mind spawns all sorts of ideas and inventions, but none of them truly satisfy him.

It's worth noting that Bishop published "Crusoe in England" in a book called *Geography III*, so Crusoe's line about "registering [...] geography" wittily links the poet and her character. Many critics have speculated that Crusoe's fears and anxieties, including his nightmares, channel Bishop's own ambivalence about her artistic, romantic, and family life. (For example, she wanted to raise children with her partner, Lota de Macedo Soares, but never did. Meanwhile, she spent her life writing poems of great variety and island-like uniqueness; critics have often noted how distinct her poems are from one another, as well as from her contemporaries' work.)

Crusoe's nightmares might also channel Bishop's lifelong feelings of isolation: she once told her friend and fellow poet Robert Lowell, “When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived.”

LINES 142-146

Just when I ...
... we were friends.

In lines 142-146, Crusoe finally gets some relief from his punishing isolation. Suddenly, he has human company on the island, thanks to the arrival of the man he calls Friday.

Crusoe recalls that "Friday came" to the island "Just when I thought I couldn't stand it / another minute longer." In other words, loneliness had driven Crusoe to the brink of a psychological breakdown; Friday arrived in the nick of time. As a parenthetical aside, Crusoe adds, "Accounts of that [meeting] have everything all wrong." This claim echoes the one in line 10: "None of the books has ever got [my island] right." Once again, Crusoe is asserting that previous versions of his story, including Daniel Defoe's original *Robinson Crusoe*, are profoundly misleading.

As told by Defoe, Friday's arrival is a famous moment in world literature. First, Crusoe finds a mysterious footprint on the beach:

> It happened one day, about noon, going towards my boat, I was exceedingly surprised with the print of a man's naked foot on the shore, which was very plain to be seen on the sand. I stood like one thunderstruck, or as if I had seen an apparition.

Rather than being overjoyed at this sign of another human being, he is at first so terrified that he is "ready to sink into the ground." Later, he discovers the source of the footprint: a group of cannibalistic natives from the South American mainland. Years afterward, a group of these natives brings prisoners to the island, but one prisoner escapes and flees. Crusoe intervenes to kill the pursuers and rescue the escapee, whom he names Friday, after the day of the week when he saved the man's life. Crusoe then makes the man his "slave for ever," tells Friday to refer to him as "Master," and refers to him possessively as "my man Friday." In Defoe's account, the two men become close—and Crusoe's descriptions hint at his romantic attraction to Friday—but their supposed bond is built on a foundation of colonialist enslavement.

Bishop (who claimed to dislike the original *Crusoe*) discards this disturbing backstory, which her Crusoe insists is "all wrong." Yet when Bishop's Crusoe tries to describe his *real* relationship with Friday, he falters. He doesn't explain how they actually met, and he trusts that the reader will know from previous "Accounts" who Friday is. His language becomes comically repetitive and childlike:

> Friday was nice.
> Friday was nice, and we were friends.

Again, his reticence contrasts sharply with the novel, which offers detailed descriptions of Friday's "comely" appearance and the interactions between the two men. Yet the sudden shyness of Bishop's Crusoe hints at complex emotions stirring beneath the surface. It makes the reader wonder: how close a "friend[ship]" was this?

LINES 147-152

If only he ...
... a pretty body.

In lines 147-152, Crusoe elaborates on his relationship with Friday, though he leaves many details carefully unstated. Whereas Defoe's novel dances around the topic of sex, Bishop's Crusoe immediately brings it into the equation, blurting out "If only [Friday] had been a woman!"

This is an ambiguous remark: it might imply that Crusoe wasn't attracted to men and would have preferred "a woman" companion so that romance could blossom. Perhaps this is even what Crusoe intends to imply. Yet he then explains that he and Friday wanted to father children: "I wanted to propagate my kind, / and so did he, I think, poor boy." This suggests that Crusoe's disappointment may have stemmed from the impossibility of having kids with Friday, not from a lack of attraction to Friday. Indeed, Crusoe leaves open the possibility that he and Friday *were* attracted to each other and acted on those desires. That may be why he starts talking about sex and fatherhood virtually as soon as he mentions his "friend[]."

He then fondly recalls Friday "pet[ting] the baby goats," "rac[ing] with them" around the island, and "carry[ing]" them in his arms. These sound like very parental activities! They mirror the ways human parents play with and comfort their own children. Earlier, Crusoe's dreams linked baby goats and baby humans, and they seem to be symbolically linked here as well. (Recall that a common word for both baby goats and baby humans is *kids*.) Crusoe's warmest memories of the island involve Friday acting like a father—more evidence of his love for and desire to have children with Friday.

Crusoe adds that, in these moments, Friday was "Pretty to watch; he had a pretty body." This is a fairly straightforward statement of sexual desire. Bishop is taking a cue here from Defoe's Crusoe, who describes Friday's body in great detail:

> He was a comely, handsome fellow, perfectly well made, with straight, strong limbs, not too large; tall, and well-shaped; and, as I reckon, about twenty-six years of age. He had a very good countenance, not a fierce and surly aspect, but seemed to have something very manly in his face; [...]

The passage goes on from there, combining admiration with ethnic stereotypes. Again, Bishop's Crusoe is reticent by comparison, but his praise carries a clear erotic charge—in part

because of how much he *doesn't* say.

All in all, it seems that while Crusoe may have wished to meet, fall for, and have kids with "a woman," Friday was the person he did meet and fall for in reality. Both men wanted to be fathers, but the closest they could come was taking care of the island's goats. Thrown together on the island, they made the best family they could—and seem to have experienced real happiness for a time.

LINES 153-158

And then one ...
... out. I'm old.

Line 153 is the poem's only one-line stanza, and it marks a dramatic turning point in Crusoe's story. In a perfectly flat tone, Crusoe reports: "And then one day they came and took us off."

Who's "they"? How did this departure happen? Unlike the original *Robinson Crusoe*, Bishop's poem doesn't say. In Defoe's novel, Crusoe and Friday leave the island under complicated circumstances (read a full plot summary here). An English ship arrives on the island under the control of mutineers, and Crusoe has to rescue the captain and help kill and capture some mutineers before finally returning to England. In place of this intricate plot, Bishop's Crusoe simply makes a vague gesture toward rescue. It's as though he doesn't care who his rescuers were or how "they" managed to "t[ake] us off" the island. Perhaps he's indifferent or resentful because, thanks to Friday's arrival, he had finally begun to be *happy* on the island.

Lines 154-158 then return to the present tense, and to the setting in the title ("England"). The poem begins to juxtapose Crusoe's life on the island with his life after the island. Dryly, Crusoe notes the irony that he is still living on *an* island: Great Britain. But it "doesn't seem like [an island]," presumably because it lacks most of the qualities stereotypically associated with islands. For example, it's quite large by island standards, and very populous—the opposite of a small, solitary desert isle. Crusoe wonders "who decides" what counts as an island and what doesn't; his rhetorical question implies that *islandness* is as much a matter of individual perspective as geographical definition. (And even geographical definitions are only human, of course.)

From Crusoe's subjective viewpoint, his island days seem to be over. Physically and psychologically, he's no longer in island mode: his "blood" used to feel "full of islands," and his "brain / bred" them in feverish dreams, but that's no longer the case. The endless "archipelago" (chain or cluster of islands) that seemed to spring from his imagination has finally "petered out." He feels tired and "old."

Once again, as in lines 133-141, Crusoe uses the language of fertility ("bred") to describe his imaginative relationship with islands. He seems to feel past both his sexual prime and his *imaginative* prime, and he seems to feel that these two losses are related. His physical and creative vitality have "petered out" in tandem.

LINES 159-164

I'm bored, too, ...
... not to break?

Crusoe continues to describe his life as an old man in England. Now that he's home from the island, he appears to be a lonely retiree, without work or family to keep him occupied. He confesses that he's "bored" with the ease and convenience of civilized life: the "real tea" he's able to obtain easily, the "uninteresting lumber" that "surround[s]" him in his home. On the island, he implies, he had to work hard just to improvise a *version* of tea, and the wood of the exotic trees made for a much more interesting construction material.

There's some quiet irony in these two examples of "bor[ing]" conveniences. Earlier, he compared the island's hissing turtles to "teakettles" and added, "I'd have given years, or taken a few, / for any sort of kettle, of course." It sounds as though, back on the island, he would have *killed* for "real tea"!

Likewise, he previously dismissed the "one variety of tree" on the island as "a sooty, scrub affair" (lines 71-72). That doesn't sound like a source of interesting lumber! As he grows nostalgic for island life, then, Crusoe seems to be looking back through rose-tinted glasses. He implies that he misses his years of wilderness survival—yet he's already made clear that, until Friday arrived, he didn't enjoy the wilderness.

The next lines help clarify what he really misses. Crusoe's language leaps from simile to personification:

> The knife there on the shelf—
> it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix.
> It lived. How many years did I
> beg it, implore it, not to break?

During Crusoe's struggle to survive, the knife—which he presumably used to kill and skin animals for food and clothing—became so important that it seemed to "reek[] of meaning." He began to see it as a symbolic, totemic object, "like a crucifix" (a figurine of Jesus on the cross). The knife seemed to promise further life on earth, just as Christ's suffering on the cross, in the Christian tradition, guarantees believers life after death. Crusoe may also have seen the knife as a symbol of his own suffering or martyrdom, since it was so central to his experience on the island.

In his imagination, Crusoe personified the knife and spoke to it as though it were alive, much as Christian believers pray to Jesus (sometimes while holding a crucifix). He "beg[ged] it, implore[d] it, not to break," just as a worshipper might pray to a god for protection. He asks rhetorically "How many years" this relationship with the knife lasted—implying that it seems too long to pin down with any certainty, and also that he may have

lost track of time altogether on the island.

Perhaps, then, what Crusoe really misses is not the wilderness itself, or the struggle he faced there, but the "meaning" that struggle brought to his life. Day-to-day subsistence became a passionate, high-stakes drama, almost a religious experience. Now, in the comfort of England, life no longer seems as meaningful.

LINES 165-170

I knew each ...
... and pass on.

In lines 165-170, Crusoe's tribute to his knife continues—and takes on a mournful tone.

He recalls that, during his years on the island, he "knew each nick and scratch" of his knife "by heart." He learned every detail of this all-important object: "the bluish blade, the broken tip, / the lines of wood-grain on the handle." Of all his tools, it seems to have been the most crucial to his survival; presumably, he'd brought it with him to the island and couldn't replace or repair it. And apparently, it weathered some nerve-racking damage: its "tip" was "broken," but it remained functional for Crusoe's purposes (e.g., skinning goats). As if answering his prayers (his "beg[ging]"), it held up throughout his time on the island. He survived.

"Now," however, the knife he personified (or deified!) seems utterly lifeless. Back in England, Crusoe complains that "it won't look at me at all." He can't bear to look at it, either: his "eyes rest on it and pass on" in sadness or embarrassment. He feels as though the "living soul" of the thing "has dribbled away," leaving only an inanimate object. If it once resembled a "crucifix," now it resembles a god who's stopped caring for him—or died altogether. Now that it's no longer the key to his survival, he no longer believes in its power.

Symbolically, the knife might also represent his *own* waning power. Crusoe describes this phallus-shaped object in very phallic terms, as though he were talking about his own male potency: he begged it "not to break," but it partly broke anyway, and now its vitality "has dribbled away." Consciously or unconsciously, he seems to associate the end of his island adventure with the end of his youth, sexual fertility, and creativity.

LINES 171-175

The local museum's ...
... in the fur),

Lines 171-175 reveal that Crusoe has become a minor celebrity in his homeland. He reports that "The local museum's asked" him to "leave everything to them"—that is, bequeath all his island memorabilia to their collection. The items they want include his "flute," "knife," "shoes," and "shedding goatskin trousers."

Except for the flute, which was "weird[]" to begin with, all these items show signs of deterioration. The knife has a "broken tip," the shoes are "shrivelled," and "moths have got in the fur" of the trousers, which are also "shedding" hair. All seem to mirror Crusoe's own aging and physical decline. They are evidence of the passage of time, symbolic reminders that Crusoe's adventure is all over. (In the original novel, Crusoe actually makes a return trip to his island, but nothing of the kind seems to be in the cards for Bishop's character.) The "goatskin trousers" are a decaying memento of the goats he once lived with—and often killed. Meanwhile, no human family, pets, etc. seem to have taken the goats' place (unlike in the novel, whose hero gets married and has children).

The museum's request signals that Crusoe's life is nearing its end and that the most exciting phase of it has been reduced to a few moldering souvenirs. And if Crusoe has achieved a kind of celebrity status, it's a pretty modest one: the request comes from the "local" museum, not, say, the British Museum. All of these details cast a new, sobering light on the poem's title. "Crusoe in England" equals Crusoe in retirement, pondering his legacy—which looks as diminished and ordinary as his "shrivelled shoes."

LINES 176-180

the parasol that ...
... want such things?

Lines 176-180 describe one last item that the "local museum" wants: Crusoe's handmade "parasol." A parasol is a sun-umbrella, designed to protect its user from heat and sunburn. Crafting one on the island posed a major technical challenge: Crusoe recalls that it took him a long "time" to "remember[] the way the ribs should go." Nevertheless, he worked the problem out and managed to make a parasol that opened and closed properly. His creation is still functional but no longer very impressive-looking, as he admits in a sad simile:

> It still will work but, folded up,
> looks like a plucked and skinny fowl.

Like Crusoe's chipped knife, "shrivelled shoes," and moth-eaten trousers, this parasol seems to symbolize his faded glory and diminished vitality. It's a testament to the ingenuity and persistence that helped him survive, but like his creative imagination, he doesn't use it anymore. It's all "folded up" and ready for its afterlife in the museum, just as Crusoe himself sounds ready for death.

Crusoe doesn't even understand why the museum, or anyone else, would care about his past. His final rhetorical question sounds exasperated: "How can anyone want such things?" Not only have his island possessions lost their practical use—much better trousers, parasols, flutes, knives, and shoes are available in England—they've lost all "meaning" for him. As a result, he

can't understand why they would hold meaning for anyone else. The significance, or "soul," of each item seems to have vanished with the change of setting and the passage of time. What was essential in the wilderness just doesn't matter as much in civilization. Crusoe's emotional detachment from these items has another cause, too, as the following lines reveal.

LINES 181-182

—And Friday, my ...
... ago come March.

The poem ends with a twist of sorts. The last two lines are introduced by a dash, suggesting that something has suddenly occurred to Crusoe, or that he's blurting out something he may not have expected to say. His final repetition, in a monologue full of them, is the repetition of his companion's name:

> —And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles
> seventeen years ago come March.

This revelation helps explain why Crusoe sounds as "bored" and lonely in England as he was throughout most of his years on the island. He has lost his "dear Friday," his implied romantic partner, the person who finally brought companionship and happiness into his life—at least for a short while. Indeed, he recalls the exact date of Friday's death and continues to grieve him almost two decades later. Together with the details about Friday in lines 142-152, these closing lines reframe Crusoe's adventure story as a tragic love story.

Friday's cause of death makes the story even more tragic. He "died of measles," a contagious illness to which indigenous Americans had never been exposed before the era of European colonization. Lack of exposure meant zero immunity within the population. As a result, over several centuries, measles, smallpox, and other infectious diseases from the other side of the world killed the vast majority of indigenous people in the Americas. It's implied, then, that Friday died *because he accompanied Crusoe back to England* and encountered a disease his body could not fight. Love doomed him in a way neither he nor Crusoe could have expected. Ironically, too, it's civilization, not the wilderness, that has caused Crusoe his deepest loneliness.

Coming after 20 lines about Crusoe's old island implements, these last two lines help explain why those implements have lost their "meaning." They remind Crusoe not only of his survival but of what—and who—he lived *for*. Now that his "dear Friday" is gone, Crusoe's will to survive seems to have vanished also. His life (not just his knife) seems to have lost its "soul." All he has left are memories.

SYMBOLS

ISLANDS

Islands are symbolically linked with isolation and loneliness, and this poem draws heavily on those associations. In castaway stories like Crusoe's, island life is also associated with self-reliance and individuality. In Bishop's version of the story, the desert island even seems to represent Crusoe's private, subjective world—which resembles the private world of the writer. The island is where Crusoe makes and invents things, where he gives names to things (as some poets do, for example, and as Adam does in the Garden of Eden), and where he tries to assemble a "philosophy" from both his experience and the "books" he's read. But it's also where he longs for love and escape.

The poem is actually set on two different islands: the island where Crusoe was stranded, and the island of Great Britain, where he returns after he's rescued. Crusoe also mentions an island that was recently "born" from a volcanic eruption, a phenomenon he reads about in the newspaper. Then there are the islands Crusoe has "nightmares" about: "infinities / of islands, islands spawning islands."

This proliferation of islands seems to symbolize Crusoe's deepening loneliness. Throughout his life, he simply moves from island to island—from one kind of boredom and isolation to another—to the point where he can only *imagine* islands (i.e., further loneliness). Worse, the islands he imagines are *desert* islands, symbols of a barrenness that carries over into his family life. (He "want[s] to propagate [his] kind"—have children—but never does.)

In short, while his "brain" is creatively fertile, his creativity never relieves his isolation. It only "br[eeds] islands," or further traps him within the limits of his individual worldview. Meanwhile, his literal fertility goes to waste; he grows "old" without fathering kids who might keep him company.

The English poet John Donne famously wrote that "No man is an island," meaning that no one is truly alone in the world. The symbolism of "Crusoe in England" suggests otherwise! It depicts isolation—island-ness—as a kind of default state. Whether this is supposed to be the default state of humanity, or just artistic and individualist types (like the poet herself), is open to interpretation.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "where some ship saw an island being born:"
- **Lines 5-9:** "and then a black fleck—basalt, probably— / rose in the mate's binoculars / and caught on the horizon like a fly. / They named it. But my poor old island's still / un-rediscovered, un-renamable."

- **Lines 29-30:** "My island seemed to be / a sort of cloud-dump."
- **Line 68:** "The island had one kind of everything:"
- **Lines 86-87:** "I felt a deep affection for / the smallest of my island industries."
- **Line 100:** "The island smelled of goat and guano."
- **Lines 115-116:** "I'd heard of cattle getting island-sick. / I thought the goats were."
- **Lines 133-141:** "I'd have / nightmares of other islands / stretching away from mine, infinities / of islands, islands spawning islands, / like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs / of islands, knowing that I had to live / on each and every one, eventually, / for ages, registering their flora, / their fauna, their geography."
- **Lines 154-158:** "Now I live here, another island, / that doesn't seem like one, but who decides? / My blood was full of them; my brain / bred islands. But that archipelago / has petered out. I'm old."

VOLCANOES/CRATERS

Volcanoes are traditional symbols of emotional volatility—they're quiet for long periods, then they erupt! They combine heights (they're a kind of mountain) and depths (craters). The volcanoes in "Crusoe in England" also represent a paradoxical combination of creative power and sterility. In fact, Crusoe links them with both birth and death.

On the one hand, the poem's volcanoes are a disruptive, even violent creative force: in the first stanza, an island is "born" from a volcanic eruption. On the other hand, it's a *desert* island, just like Crusoe's. The volcano's creative power, ironically, produces a kind of barrenness. Meanwhile, the volcanoes on Crusoe's island—which may originally have *created* his island—are now "dead" and look as though they have "their heads blown off" (lines 14 and 17). Even when they seem to spew hissing lava, it's an illusion: the noise is really coming from the island's turtles (lines 40-42).

If the volcanoes seem to represent both creativity and sterility (or creation and destruction), they also represent, in Crusoe's mind, both hope and despair. Presumably, that's why he names one of them Mont d'Espoir (French for "Mount Hope") *and* Mount Despair. The bilingual pun captures twin facets of his own situation. He hopes to be rescued from solitude, and may even watch for ships from higher ground, but he fears that rescue will never come. Although he "climb[s]" the volcanoes—invoking traditional notions of mountain-climbing as an optimistic, ambitious pursuit—he acknowledges that they're absurdly easy to scale. And what waits at the top is not a peak but a crater: a pit that seems to represent the depths of depression and "self-pity" (lines 55-64).

There's a tradition in American poetry of associating volcanoes with creative power, and female creative power in particular. Emily Dickinson compares herself to the volcano "Vesuvius" in multiple poems, including one whose language (references to "Geography," "Home," etc.) contains striking similarities to Bishop's:

> Volcanoes be in Sicily
> And South America
> I judge from my Geography
> Volcanoes nearer here
> A Lava step at any time
> Am I inclined to climb
> A Crater I may contemplate
> Vesuvius at Home

The poet Adrienne Rich published her landmark feminist essay on Dickinson, "Vesuvius at Home" (1975), a year before Bishop published "Crusoe in England" in *Geography III*. Rich's essay elaborates on Dickinson's metaphor, linking the volcano with elemental, dangerous female power. Whether or not Bishop, as an American woman and poet, was alluding to these works, "Crusoe in England" taps into similar ideas. Crusoe's references to volcanoes channel his anxiety about fertility and barrenness (both creative and reproductive), as well as his experience of emotional highs and lows.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-7:** "A new volcano has erupted, / the papers say, and last week I was reading / where some ship saw an island being born: / at first a breath of steam, ten miles away; / and then a black fleck—basalt, probably— / rose in the mate's binoculars / and caught on the horizon like a fly."
- **Lines 11-20:** "Well, I had fifty-two / miserable, small volcanoes I could climb / with a few slithery strides— / volcanoes dead as ash heaps. / I used to sit on the edge of the highest one / and count the others standing up, / naked and leaden, with their heads blown off. / I'd think that if they were the size / I thought volcanoes should be, then I had / become a giant;"
- **Lines 30-33:** "All the hemisphere's / left-over clouds arrived and hung / above the craters—their parched throats / were hot to touch."
- **Lines 40-41:** "The folds of lava, running out to sea, / would hiss."
- **Lines 43-45:** "The beaches were all lava, variegated, / black, red, and white, and gray; / the marbled colors made a fine display."
- **Lines 61-63:** "With my legs dangling down familiarly / over a crater's edge, I told myself / "Pity should begin at home.""
- **Lines 117-119:** "One billy-goat would stand on the volcano / I'd christened / Mont d'Espoir / or / Mount Despair / (I'd time enough to play with names),"

GOATS

Goats take on a complex symbolism over the course of the poem. Until Friday arrives, they seem to be the only mammals on the island (apart from Crusoe himself). They're also animals that humans frequently keep as livestock. (The original *Robinson Crusoe* was based partly on the real-life story of Alexander Selkirk, a castaway on an island inhabited by feral goats—which were descended from tame goats left behind by previous sailors.) For these reasons, they provide a symbolic link between humanity and nature, or civilization and the wilderness.

In fact, Crusoe considers the island's goats (and gulls) "too tame"—eerily docile in the presence of humans. He speculates that they might think *he* is "a goat, too, or a gull." He seems to lose part of his humanity in their presence, or, rather, recognize how little divides the categories *human* and *natural*, *tame* and *wild*, etc. The goats even mimic the behavior of domestic animals, and of Crusoe himself. They seem to get "island-sick," the way "cattle" do, and one cries out from the slopes of a volcano that Crusoe has named "*Mont d'Espoir* or *Mount Despair*." In other words, the goats unnervingly reflect Crusoe's own kind of "island-sick[ness]": his loneliness, despondency, etc. And that reflection might not be *purely* symbolic: if the goats aren't native to this island, they may feel as displaced and miserable there as he does. (Both goats and Crusoe like to climb the volcanoes and gaze out to sea, as if searching for some sign of rescue.)

At the same time, the goats aren't human enough to offer any real company. When Crusoe looks at one directly, its eyes "express[] nothing, or a little malice" as opposed to intelligence or love. Once again, these animals blur categories: they are neither truly wild nor truly human.

Though it never appears in the poem, the standard word for baby goats is "kids"—a word also applied to human children. Perhaps for this reason, the poem symbolically links goat kids with human kids. Crusoe has nightmares of "slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it / for a baby goat," and he connects his desire for parenthood with memories of Friday petting baby goats. In each case, the goats are presented as *almost* human, but not quite. Crusoe seems to feel a kind of murderer's remorse at the violence he's done to the animals (to make his "goatskin trousers," for example), while Friday lavishes parental affection on them. They're not as satisfying to either man as a baby of their own would be, but they come tantalizingly close.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 100-106:** "The island smelled of goat and guano. / The goats were white, so were the gulls, / and both too tame, or else they thought / I was a goat, too, or a gull. / Baa, baa, baa / and / shriek, shriek, shriek, / baa... shriek... / baa / ... / I still can't shake / them from my ears; they're hurting now."
- **Lines 115-128:** "I'd heard of cattle getting island-sick. / I thought the goats were. / One billy-goat would stand on the volcano / I'd christened / Mont d'Espoir / or / Mount Despair / (I'd time enough to play with names), / and bleat and bleat, and sniff the air. / I'd grab his beard and look at him. / His pupils, horizontal, narrowed up / and expressed nothing, or a little malice. / I got so tired of the very colors! / One day I dyed a baby goat bright red / with my red berries, just to see / something a little different. / And then his mother wouldn't recognize him."
- **Lines 131-133:** "But then I'd dream of things / like slitting a baby's throat, mistaking it / for a baby goat."
- **Lines 150-151:** "He'd pet the baby goats sometimes, / and race with them, or carry one around."
- **Lines 174-175:** "my shedding goatskin trousers / (moths have got in the fur),"

THE KNIFE

Crusoe himself remarks on the symbolic power of his knife. While he lived on the island, "it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix" (a figure of Jesus on the cross). He would "beg it, implore it, not to break," because he needed it so badly. But now that he's safely back in civilization, it seems meaningless; its "living soul" is gone.

The knife is first and foremost a symbol of survival—including the violence that wilderness survival entails. (It's implied, for example, that Crusoe uses his knife to kill goats for their meat and fur.) Just as Christians trust in and pray to Jesus for the eternal life of their souls, Crusoe depended on—and, in a sense, prayed to—the knife for the survival of his body.

The knife could also be read as a phallic symbol, an emblem of Crusoe's sexual and creative vitality. Crusoe stresses how intimately familiar he was with the knife while he needed it, how he begged it not to "break" and let him down, etc. Now that he's old, its vitality is gone: its tip is "broken," and its "living soul has dribbled away." He groups it together with his (also unused, phallic-shaped) "flute" and "shrivelled shoes." All of this language carries connotations related to male potency and impotence. The once-vital, now-useless knife seems to reflect Crusoe's sense that his best years are behind him: his love life and creative life are over, and he has no children to carry on his legacy.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 161-170:** "The knife there on the shelf— / it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix. / It lived. How many years did I / beg it, implore it, not to break? / I knew each nick and scratch by heart, / the bluish blade, the broken tip, / the lines of wood-grain on the handle... / Now it

won't look at me at all. / The living soul has dribbled away. / My eyes rest on it and pass on."
- **Lines 171-173:** "The local museum's asked me to / leave everything to them: / the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes,"

THE FLUTE

Crusoe's flute is a symbol of art and creativity. As a "home-made" instrument with possibly "the weirdest scale on earth," it also seems to represent his individuality, eccentricity, and outsider status. If the poem is read as an allegory about the creative/artistic life, Crusoe's music represents the kind of art that's made at the social margins, outside of official traditions and institutions. Its "weird[ness]" could be seen as a source of strength rather than weakness.

In Greek myth, the pan flute or panpipes is associated with Pan, the god of nature, shepherds, and flocks. In appearance, he is part man, part goat; in other words, he straddles the borderline between the human and the natural. Between his flute and his adopted flock of goats, Crusoe is a very Pan-like figure himself. In the English poetic tradition, panpipes also famously appear in John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which they're associated with poetry, art, and loneliness all at once:

> Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
> Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
> Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
> Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
> Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
> Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
> Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss, [...]

Once Crusoe is back in England, he contemplates leaving his flute to "The local museum[]," along with other discarded possessions: a broken knife, a folded parasol, "shrivelled shoes," etc. All of these objects might be read as sad phallic symbols, hints of the elderly hero's waning potency—or his loss of interest in romance and art after the death of Friday. The fact that Crusoe no longer plays his flute might suggest that his creative life, along with his love life, is a thing of the past.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 82-84:** "and play my home-made flute / (I think it had the weirdest scale on earth) / and, dizzy, whoop and dance among the goats."
- **Lines 171-173:** "The local museum's asked me to / leave everything to them: / the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes,"

POETIC DEVICES

METAPHOR

Over the course of the monologue, Crusoe uses a number of metaphors and similes to illustrate his desert island experience. For example, he compares his island to "a sort of cloud-dump" and its volcanic craters to "parched throats" that were "hot to touch." These comparisons make it clear that Crusoe has not found an island paradise: the weather's bad, and the landscape is dry, hot, and dangerous.

Elsewhere, metaphor conjures up exotic sights and natural phenomena, such as the "waterspouts" Crusoe witnesses at sea: "Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated, / sacerdotal beings of glass." Readers who have never seen a waterspout (a tornado-like sea-storm) can probably picture a flexible glass chimney and have *some* idea of what Crusoe is describing. The second metaphor, "sacerdotal beings," compares the waterspouts to priestly figures. This may be because they are:

- tall and imposing
- quiet when witnessed from "far out"
- connected to the heavens (they have "their heads in cloud"
- made of water, which is symbolically linked with purity and holiness

Or all of the above!

Crusoe's figurative language also demonstrates his vivid imagination; he is, after all, a writer of sorts, one who's interested in "poems" and "philosophy." For example, he observes that the island's "Snail shells" visually resemble "beds of irises." Later, he converts this observation into a metaphor: "I tried / reciting to my iris-beds." His imagination seems to have changed one thing into another, transformed shells into flowers—and personified them as a conscious audience. He's even reciting them a poem *about* flowers! Maybe island solitude is playing tricks with his mind. Or to put it another way: maybe Bishop is implying that eccentric, "poetic" thinking is a product of extreme solitude.

Later, metaphors and similes illustrate Crusoe's growing fixation on islands—which, in turn, illustrates his deepening isolation. At night, he dreams of "islands spawning islands, / like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs / of islands." Even in waking life, a whole cluster ("archipelago") of islands seems to swim in his "blood" and spring forth from his "brain." While these descriptions also attest to the vividness of Crusoe's imagination, they suggest that, after a certain point, he can imagine only *more loneliness*—only variations on his current solitude.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "where some ship saw an island being born:"
- **Line 7:** "and caught on the horizon like a fly."
- **Line 14:** "volcanoes dead as ash heaps."
- **Line 17:** "naked and leaden, with their heads blown off."
- **Lines 29-30:** "My island seemed to be / a sort of cloud-dump."
- **Lines 32-33:** "the craters—their parched throats / were hot to touch."
- **Line 37:** "hissing like teakettles."
- **Lines 49-50:** "their heads in cloud, their feet in moving patches / of scuffed-up white."
- **Lines 51-52:** "Glass chimneys, flexible, attenuated, / sacerdotal beings of glass..."
- **Lines 52-53:** "I watched / the water spiral up in them like smoke."
- **Lines 94-95:** "well, I tried / reciting to my iris-beds,"
- **Lines 111-112:** "When all the gulls flew up at once, they sounded / like a big tree in a strong wind, its leaves."
- **Lines 136-138:** "islands spawning islands, / like frogs' eggs turning into polliwogs / of islands,"
- **Lines 156-158:** "My blood was full of them; my brain / bred islands. But that archipelago / has petered out."
- **Lines 161-162:** "The knife there on the shelf— / it reeked of meaning, like a crucifix."
- **Line 169:** "The living soul has dribbled away."
- **Lines 178-179:** "It still will work but, folded up, / looks like a plucked and skinny fowl."

PERSONIFICATION

Crusoe personifies some of the features of his island, though always in a restrained or ambiguous way. Ironically, these hints of personification only underscore how lonely the island is—how badly Crusoe lacks for human company before Friday arrives. Examples include the "naked" volcanoes with "parched throats" and "their heads blown off"; the "sacerdotal," or priestlike, waterspouts; and the goats and seagulls making "questioning" or "equivocal" noises.

If the volcanoes resemble humans, they resemble *dead* humans; they can't breathe or speak out of their dry throats. The waterspouts resemble alien "beings" more than humans, and they seem as holy and remote as priests. As Crusoe frankly acknowledges, they're "not much company."

As for the goats and gulls, only humans can question and equivocate (speak in hedged language), as far as we know. So this may be the one time Crusoe personifies the animals—yet even here, the words *questioning* and *equivocal* imply a frustrating ambiguity. The constant bleating and shrieking doesn't sound like a fruitful human dialogue; it sounds dissatisfying, uncertain, unresolved. Even when the animals seem most human, then, they don't actually communicate anything to human ears. Once again, the brief personification merely serves to emphasize that Crusoe is the only *real* person around.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 16-17:** "and count the others standing up, / naked and leaden, with their heads blown off."
- **Lines 32-33:** "above the craters—their parched throats / were hot to touch."
- **Line 52:** "sacerdotal beings of glass..."
- **Line 107:** "The questioning shrieks, the equivocal replies"
- **Lines 168-169:** "Now it won't look at me at all. / The living soul has dribbled away."

JUXTAPOSITION

The entire poem is built on juxtapositions—particularly the juxtaposition between Crusoe's life on the desert island and his life in England afterward. Most of the first 152 lines recount Crusoe's experience as a castaway, including his psychological struggles and his eventual encounter with Friday. Lines 154-182 ("Now I live here [...] seventeen years ago come March.") take place at least 17 years after the end of his adventure, by which time he is a kind of retired minor celebrity.

The hinge between the two settings is the poem's only one-line stanza: "And then one day they came and took us off." Despite the apparently dramatic difference between England and a small desert island, the juxtaposition actually highlights some important similarities between these settings. Both are islands (though England "doesn't seem like one"), and both find Crusoe wrestling with isolation and boredom—though for slightly different reasons. Put another way, the juxtaposition highlights *continuities* in Crusoe's character: no matter where he is, he seems restless and melancholy.

Also important is the juxtaposition between Crusoe's life before and after meeting Friday, as well as his life before and after Friday's death. Friday's arrival on the island partly relieves Crusoe's loneliness (though not entirely, as both men wish they could have kids). Later, Friday's death plunges Crusoe into the loneliness of grief. For Crusoe, their romantic "friend[ship]" marks a brief, happy oasis in an otherwise solitary life.

Before all of this comes the juxtaposition that sets up the poem. Crusoe mentions "reading" in the papers about a volcanic "island being born." To the sailors who "named it," this heap of rock looked as small as a "fly" on the "horizon." This opening image puts Crusoe's island adventure into a larger, ironic perspective, suggesting that as dramatic as it may have felt to him, it's just a speck in the grander scheme of things. (There may be an implied, symbolic analogy here between islands and individual human lives. Like lives, islands come and go, and from a distance, they look trivial—however important they seem to the people experiencing them up close.)

Where Juxtaposition appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-182

REPETITION

The poem uses a great deal of repetition, primarily to convey the repetitiveness of Crusoe's life on the island.

For example, Crusoe mentions all of the island's main features many times over: "volcanoes," "goats," "gulls," "turtles," etc. He also uses repetition to convey the island's monotonous natural cycles, as in lines 24-27:

> [...] or the overlapping rollers
> —a glittering hexagon of rollers
> closing and closing in, but never quite,
> glittering and glittering, [...]

A similar effect occurs in lines 65-67: "The sun set in the sea; the same odd sun / rose from the sea, / and there was one of it and one of me." And again in lines 104-105, as Crusoe imitates the island's maddening animal noises: "*Baa*, *baa*, *baa* and *shriek*, *shriek*, *shriek*, / *baa*... *shriek*... *baa*..." Each of these repetitious passages emphasizes the island's tedium and lack of variety.

Bishop also uses repetition to highlight important themes and emotions. The many references to "pity," "self-pity," and "at home" in lines 55-64 dramatize Crusoe's deepening melancholy—a psychological state he's increasingly *at home* with.

> I often gave way to self-pity. [...]
> What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?
> With my legs dangling down familiarly
> over a crater's edge, I told myself
> "Pity should begin at home." So the more
> pity I felt, the more I felt at home.

Likewise, the three repetitions of "home-made" in lines 82 and 85 signal the thematic importance of this word. (Crusoe suggests that our whole identities are metaphorically "home-made"—idiosyncratic products of our circumstances and limitations—even if we don't happen to be castaways.)

Repetition helps convey Crusoe's tone, too. In lines 145-146, it suggests hesitancy, carefulness, or shyness:

> Friday was nice.
> Friday was nice, and we were friends.

This is an understatement: the two men seem to have shared a close romantic bond. But Crusoe stumbles over his language here, as if unsure how much private information to share with the reader/listener. His final repetition—"And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles" (line 181)—represents a brief outpouring of the emotion he's been holding back. It reveals that Friday has been more central to Crusoe's story, and Crusoe's life, than his modest presence in the poem might have suggested.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "volcano"
- **Line 3:** "island"
- **Line 8:** "island's"
- **Line 9:** "un-," "un-"
- **Line 12:** "volcanoes"
- **Line 14:** "volcanoes"
- **Line 19:** "volcanoes"
- **Lines 19-20:** "I had / become a giant"
- **Line 21:** "I had become a giant"
- **Line 23:** "goats," "turtles"
- **Line 24:** "gulls," "rollers"
- **Line 25:** "glittering," "rollers"
- **Line 26:** "closing," "closing"
- **Line 27:** "glittering," "glittering"
- **Line 29:** "island"
- **Line 30:** "cloud"
- **Line 31:** "clouds"
- **Line 32:** "craters"
- **Line 35:** "hissed"
- **Line 36:** "turtles"
- **Line 37:** "hissing," "teakettles"
- **Line 39:** "kettle"
- **Line 40:** "lava"
- **Line 41:** "hiss"
- **Line 42:** "turtles"
- **Line 43:** "lava"
- **Line 55:** "self-pity"
- **Line 60:** "self-pity"
- **Line 62:** "crater's"
- **Line 63:** "Pity," "home," "the more"
- **Line 64:** "pity," "I felt," "the more," "I felt," "home"
- **Line 65:** "sun," "the sea," "sun"
- **Line 66:** "the sea"
- **Line 67:** "one of," "one of"
- **Line 68:** "island"
- **Line 69:** "tree," "snail"
- **Line 70:** "shell"
- **Line 71:** "tree"
- **Line 73:** "Snail," "shells"
- **Line 75:** "irises"
- **Line 76:** "berry," "red"
- **Line 79:** "home"
- **Line 82:** "home-made," "flute"
- **Line 84:** "goats"
- **Line 85:** "Home-made, home-made!"
- **Line 87:** "smallest," "island"

- **Line 88:** “smallest”
- **Line 90:** “I didn't know enough”
- **Line 91:** “didn't I know enough”
- **Line 95:** “iris-beds”
- **Line 97:** “the bliss,” “The bliss”
- **Line 100:** “goat”
- **Line 101:** “goats,” “gulls”
- **Line 103:** “goat,” “gull”
- **Line 104:** “shriek, shriek, shriek,”
- **Lines 105-105:** “baa... shriek... / baa / ...”
- **Line 108:** “hissing”
- **Line 109:** “hissing,” “turtles”
- **Line 111:** “gulls”
- **Line 112:** “tree”
- **Line 113:** “I'd,” “tree”
- **Line 115:** “I'd,” “island”
- **Line 116:** “goats”
- **Line 117:** “billy-goat,” “volcano”
- **Line 120:** “bleat,” “bleat”
- **Line 125:** “baby goat,” “red”
- **Line 126:** “red,” “berries”
- **Line 129:** “Dreams,” “dreamed”
- **Line 131:** “dream”
- **Line 132:** “baby's”
- **Line 133:** “baby goat”
- **Line 134:** “islands”
- **Line 136:** “islands,” “islands,” “islands”
- **Line 138:** “islands”
- **Line 140:** “their”
- **Line 141:** “their,” “their”
- **Line 145:** “Friday was nice.”
- **Line 146:** “Friday was nice,”
- **Line 150:** “baby goats”
- **Line 152:** “Pretty,” “pretty”
- **Line 154:** “island”
- **Line 156:** “My,” “my”
- **Line 157:** “islands”
- **Line 159:** “tea”
- **Line 161:** “The knife”
- **Line 164:** “it,” “it”
- **Line 166:** “the,” “the”
- **Line 167:** “the”
- **Line 173:** “flute,” “the knife”
- **Line 174:** “goatskin”
- **Line 181:** “Friday,” “Friday”

RHETORICAL QUESTION

Crusoe asks rhetorical questions at several key moments in the poem. In line 60, for example, he asks, "What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?" Crusoe isn't really seeking an answer here; he's defending his general emotional state on the island (and perhaps off the island, too).

Another thematically important question comes in line 85:

> Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?

Here, Crusoe links his situation with humanity's in general. He suggests that, in a metaphorical way, everyone is "home-made" or self-made: we're all idiosyncratic individuals figuring things out for ourselves. There are no truly objective standards or perspectives, just a lot of subjective and limited ones.

In lines 91-92, his questions are self-chiding, a cry of frustration at his own perceived inadequacy:

> Why didn't I know enough of something?
> Greek drama or astronomy?

In lines 154-55, his question again highlights the subjective nature of human standards and judgments:

> Now I live here, another island,
> that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?

This other "island" is Great Britain, which "doesn't seem like" an island because it's so large and populous. In other words, it lacks the qualities stereotypically associated with islands. Crusoe wonders "who decides" on the distinction between, say, an island and a continent—and implies that this distinction is arbitrary and meaningless.

The question in lines 163-64 hints that, for Crusoe, even time is hard to define objectively. Trapped without clocks or calendars on the unfamiliar climate of the island, he seems to have lost all sense of how long certain experiences lasted. Or maybe his memory is just getting hazy in old age:

> How many years did I
> beg [my knife], implore it, not to break?

Finally, in line 180, he questions why his island possessions—and by extension, his whole island adventure—would mean anything to "anyone" else:

> How can anyone want such things?

He distrusts the idea that his personal experience could have impersonal significance, that others could understand or appreciate what he went through.

The poem also contains a few non-rhetorical questions, such as "Was that why it rained so much? / And why sometimes the whole place hissed?" (lines 34-35) and "The bliss of what?" (line 97). These are answerable, fact-based questions, even though Crusoe doesn't know the answers to them. They help illustrate the confusion and frustration he experienced on the island. Then there are the questions he asks in lines 55-60, while

brooding on his hardships:

> "Do I deserve this? I suppose I must.
> I wouldn't be here otherwise. Was there
> a moment when I actually chose this?
> I don't remember, but there could have been.

Technically, these aren't rhetorical questions but examples of hypophora, a device in which a speaker asks themselves questions they immediately answer. Tellingly, he uses this device *while alone on the island*; in other words, he's talking to himself, whether silently or out loud. His questions are a sign of his loneliness, which causes him to turn inward in self-judgment and self-pity.

Where Rhetorical Question appears in the poem:

- **Line 56:** "Do I deserve this?"
- **Lines 57-58:** "Was there / a moment when I actually chose this?"
- **Line 60:** "What's wrong about self-pity, anyway?"
- **Line 85:** "Home-made, home-made! But aren't we all?"
- **Lines 91-92:** "Why didn't I know enough of something? / Greek drama or astronomy?"
- **Lines 154-155:** "Now I live here, another island, / that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?"
- **Lines 163-164:** "How many years did I / beg it, implore it, not to break?"
- **Line 180:** "How can anyone want such things?"

IRONY

Crusoe's monologue is laced with irony, including both situational and dramatic irony. There's some irony in the very setup of the poem, since Bishop's Crusoe is based on Daniel Defoe's original character, yet rejects Defoe and his character as unreliable sources: "None of the books has ever got it right." Similarly, Bishop borrows the Friday character—and the homoerotic undertones of the Crusoe-Friday relationship—from Defoe's novel, but again insists that Defoe is not to be trusted: "Accounts of that have everything all wrong." (Bishop wasn't a fan of the original *Robinson Crusoe*, so these lines are pointed jabs: she basically kept what interested her about the original material and discarded or rewrote the rest.)

There's some strong dramatic irony in lines 94-99, as Crusoe remembers being unable to complete the lines: "They flash upon that inward eye, / which is the bliss..." Of course, Bishop knows (and the reader can easily look up) that these famous William Wordworth lines refer to "the bliss of solitude." This phrase sounds especially ironic in reference to Crusoe, for whom solitude is torture, not "bliss." In fact, his inability to remember the line might hint that he subconsciously finds it dubious or false. Presumably, the irony would have hit home as soon as he returned to England and looked up the poem.

Later, there's ironic understatement in Crusoe's coy description of the man he loved: "Friday was nice. / Friday was nice, and we were friends." Crusoe doesn't *intend* this irony, necessarily: rather, he seems to be shy or cautious about disclosing his romance, leaving the reader to infer that he means much more than he says. Later, there's a terrible situational irony in Friday's death from "measles." Though the poem (unlike the novel) doesn't specify that Friday belongs to an indigenous South American tribe, it implies, here, that Friday's death results from exposure to a disease unknown in the Americas until the age of European colonization. In other words, Friday dies as a result of being rescued by Europeans and/or returning with his "friend"/lover to England. Ironically, he was safer on the desert island he was rescued from, and the two men were happier there.

In fact, that last irony extends throughout the poem as a whole. Crusoe complains at length about his boredom and loneliness on the island—yet he feels the same things once he's back in England. To be fair, this is partly because his "dear Friday" has died. But he also seems to miss the survival struggle he once hated. Retired in his "old" age, he confesses: "I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea, / surrounded by uninteresting lumber." Yet back on the island, he hated the "scrub[by]" trees and would have killed for "real tea":

> The turtles lumbered by, high-domed,
> hissing like teakettles.
> (And I'd have given years, or taken a few,
> for any sort of kettle, of course.)

Ironically, then, Crusoe's real struggle may be less external than internal: less with Mother Nature than with his own melancholy nature.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 8-10:** "But my poor old island's still / un-rediscovered, un-renamable. / None of the books has ever got it right"
- **Lines 94-99:** "well, I tried / reciting to my iris-beds, / "They flash upon that inward eye, / which is the bliss..." The bliss of what? / One of the first things that I did / when I got back was look it up."
- **Line 144:** "(Accounts of that have everything all wrong.)"
- **Lines 145-146:** "Friday was nice. / Friday was nice, and we were friends."
- **Lines 159-160:** "I'm bored, too, drinking my real tea, / surrounded by uninteresting lumber."
- **Lines 181-182:** "—And Friday, my dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March."

ALLUSION

The poem not only incorporates allusion, it's an allusion from

start to finish! It's based on one of the earliest and most famous novels in English literature: Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Bishop's adaptation plays fast and loose with the original story, which she disliked. On the one hand, it preserves the broad outlines of Defoe's material: its hero, too, lives alone for many years on a desert island before encountering and bonding with a young man named Friday. On the other hand, Bishop removes the novel's religious elements (Crusoe's conversion of Friday to Christianity), plays up its homoerotic elements, and reimagines its setting (e.g., by adding volcanoes to the island). Bishop also discards or obscures much of the novel's plot, glossing over the details of Crusoe's shipwreck, encounter with Friday, and return to England.

Bishop's Crusoe claims to be telling the *real* story of his adventure, unlike the narrators of previous versions: "None of the books has ever got it right." Similarly, when describing his meeting and relationship with Friday, he insists that "Accounts of that have everything all wrong." Whereas Defoe's colonialist Crusoe—himself escaped from slavery—makes Friday his "slave for ever," Bishop's Crusoe and Friday seem to meet and bond on equal terms. Yet Bishop acknowledges their different backgrounds through one tragic detail, which doesn't appear in Defoe's novel. After accompanying Crusoe to England, her Friday dies of "measles": a disease that indigenous Americans first encountered upon contact with Europeans.

The poem contains one other explicit allusion, to William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1807):

> [...] the poems—well, I tried
> reciting to my iris-beds,
> "They flash upon that inward eye,
> which is the bliss..." The bliss of what?
> One of the first things that I did
> when I got back was look it up.

The allusion is drenched in irony, since the word Crusoe can't remember is "solitude." Obviously, the island's solitude is anything but blissful for him! (Maybe that's why he gets stuck trying to complete the sentence.) Note, too, that Wordsworth's poem was written about a century after Defoe's novel. This anachronism further suggests that Bishop's Crusoe is based on, but not identical to, Defoe's character.

The poem may also contain some subtler, indirect allusions. For example, its references to "volcanoes," "craters," "lava," "geography," and "home" echo the language of Emily Dickinson's mid-1800s poem "Volcanoes be in Sicily," as well as other Dickinson volcano poems. Its focus on islands and loneliness might be a retort to John Donne's "Meditation XVII" (1624), which famously declares that "No man is an *Iland*." (In other words, no one is really alone in the world.) And as a kind of goat-shepherd who plays a "flute," Crusoe resembles the nature god Pan: a half-man, half-goat character in Greek mythology. (For more on these and other possible references, see the Line-by-Line and Symbols sections of this guide.)

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-182

VOCABULARY

Basalt (Line 5) - An igneous volcanic rock, formed from cooling lava.

Mate's (Line 6) - Refers to the first mate of a ship (the officer ranking just below the captain).

Leaden (Line 17) - Here meaning the gray color of lead. (Could also suggest that the volcanic rock looks dense or heavy as lead.)

Hexagon (Line 25) - A shape with six sides. Since the waves, or "rollers," closing in around the island form a hexagon, it's implied that the island is hexagonal as well.

Rollers (Line 25) - Long curling waves that roll slowly toward shore.

Cloud-dump (Lines 29-30) - In other words, a place where bits of cloud arrive from elsewhere and join together (as described in the next lines).

Hemisphere's (Lines 30-31) - The original Crusoe story is set off the coast of South America (the continent where Bishop also lived for many years), so this phrase probably refers either to the Southern or Western Hemisphere.

Variegated (Line 43) - Motley; composed of various colors.

Marbled (Line 45) - Having a streaked or mottled pattern of the kind found in marble.

Waterspouts (Line 46) - Sea-tornadoes; columns of whirling wind and spray that form over bodies of water.

Attenuated (Line 51) - Tapering; thinning (refers to the way the waterspout columns grow thinner near the water).

Sacerdotal (Lines 51-52) - Priest-like; spiritual or sacred in nature.

Familiarly (Lines 61-62) - In a habitual manner, or in the manner of someone/something known well.

Scrub (Lines 71-72) - Here used as an adjective meaning "scrub-like," as in scrub-brush or forest undergrowth. Basically, the trees were undersized and unimpressive.

Sub-acid (Line 78) - Slightly acidic or tart.

Home-brew (Line 79) - Liquor brewed at home or in an amateur fashion; moonshine.

Scale (Line 83) - The range of notes that can be played on a musical instrument.

Inward eye (Lines 96-97) - The mind's imagination. This quotation comes from William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" (1804):

For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

Guano (Line 100) - Seabird droppings.

Equivocal (Line 107) - Ambiguous, qualified, or uncertain.

Ambulating (Line 109) - Walking; moving from place to place.

Island-sick (Line 115) - Mentally distressed, anxious, etc. as a result of relocation to a small island. ("Island fever" is a concept similar to "cabin fever.")

Mont d'Espoir (Lines 118-118) - French for "Mount Hope."

Malice (Line 123) - Ill will.

Polliwogs (Lines 137-138) - Tadpoles.

Registering (Lines 140-141) - Noting down, recording (as in a *register* or log).

Flora, Fauna (Lines 140-141) - Plants and animals.

Propagate (Line 148) - Breed; reproduce and spread. ("Propagate my kind" means "have children.")

Archipelago (Lines 157-158) - A chain or cluster of islands.

Crucifix (Line 162) - A cross bearing an image of Christ; a figural representation of Christ's crucifixion.

Implore (Lines 163-164) - Beg fervently.

Parasol (Lines 176-177) - An umbrella designed to shield the user from sun as opposed to rain.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Crusoe in England" contains 12 stanzas, which vary wildly in length—from a single line to 29 lines. There is no enjambment across stanzas, and the arrangement of stanzas is mostly paratactic: there are few transitional phrases (e.g., "Because" or "And then" in lines 90 and 153) linking one stanza logically to the next. As a result, the stanzas in this poem about islands resemble idiosyncratic islands unto themselves.

The poem is written in free verse, although it contains a high proportion of iambic pentameter lines (lines that follow a five-beat, da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm). It sprinkles in a small handful of rhymes, for musical color or emphasis, but is mostly unrhymed. In general, the poem takes a unique, unpredictable form that seems to reflect life on Crusoe's island, where he's a solitary man living spontaneously in nature. (The poet W. H. Auden once compared the writer of free verse to "Crusoe on his desert island," figuring out everything for himself rather than working from existing patterns. Bishop greatly admired Auden, so it's possible that she had that quote in mind when shaping her poem.)

In terms of genre, the poem is a dramatic monologue, meaning that it's voiced by a character separate from the poet. In fact, it adopts the voice of an established literary character: the castaway hero of Daniel Defoe's classic novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Though the poem preserves elements from the original story, Bishop makes the Crusoe character her own, turning him into a modern-sounding, dryly understated, quietly grieving figure.

METER

The poem is written in free verse, meaning that it doesn't follow a consistent meter. However, it contains a great deal of iambic pentameter: lines of five iambs, poetic feet that follow a da-DUM rhythm. For example, eight out of the first ten lines (lines 2-5 and 7-10) are either perfect or near-perfect iambic pentameter:

> the pa- | pers say, | and last | week I | was reading
> where some | ship saw | an i- | sland be- | ing born:
> at first | a breath | of steam, | ten miles | away;
> and then | a black | fleck—ba- | salt, prob- | ably—
> [...]
> and caught | on the | hori- | zon like | a fly.
> They named | it. But | my poor | old i- | sland's still
> un-re | discov- | ered, un- | rena- | mable.
> None of | the books | has ev- | er got | it right.

Meanwhile, lines 1 and 6 are shorter than ten syllables, so they don't fit the pattern. In general, the poem keeps discarding and resuming iambic pentameter at irregular intervals. While this first stanza uses it heavily, for example, the next stanza uses it sparsely, and some long passages (e.g., lines 93-106) contain no iambic pentameter whatsoever.

In English-language poetry, free verse became widespread during the 20th-century modernist movement; previously, poets wrote almost entirely in meter. Meanwhile, iambic pentameter is the most common and traditional English meter of all. This combination of the traditional and modern seems to fit a poem that's a 20th-century take on an 18th-century classic (*Robinson Crusoe*). The poem's quirky rhythms might also reflect the quirks of life on Crusoe's island, including the "home-made," idiosyncratic nature of the objects Crusoe makes.

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in free verse and has no rhyme scheme, though it does contain stray end rhymes here and there. Examples include "touch"/"much" in lines 33-34,

"gray"/"display" in lines 44-45, "sea"/"me" in lines 66-67, "*Despair*"/"air" (lines 118 and 120), and "eventual**ly**"/"geogra**phy**" (lines 139 and 140).

These rhymes add a little extra musicality to the poem's language while highlighting a few key images and thematically important words. For example, the "sea"/"me" rhyme (which occurs in a passage about repetition) highlights the monotony of Crusoe's existence: it's just him, the sea, and the island, day after day. Likewise, the rhyme on "*Despair*" gently underscores Crusoe's mounting sense of hopelessness. "Geography" (which completes a subtle rhyme *and* ends its stanza) is a crucial word not only in the poem but in the collection it comes from: Bishop's *Geography III*. Both the poem and the book explore the difficulty of orienting oneself—metaphorically, mapping one's place—in an often lonely, confusing, hostile world.

SPEAKER

"Crusoe in England" is a dramatic monologue voiced by Robinson Crusoe, the narrator of Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel *Robinson Crusoe*. Or at least, the speaker is a *version* of Defoe's narrator. Bishop adapts her source material very freely, preserving some elements, discarding others, and adding many original touches of her own.

The full title of the original novel provides more context: *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner: Who Lived Eight and Twenty Years, all alone in an un-inhabited Island on the coast of America, near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque; Having been cast on Shore by Shipwreck, wherein all the Men perished but himself. With: An Account how he was at last as strangely deliver'd by Pyrates.* (Titles in the 18th century were often on the longer side, and their subtitles could provide character detail, plot summary, etc.) Bishop preserves the broad outlines of this story: her Crusoe is also a shipwrecked English mariner who lives alone for many years on a deserted island, possibly off the coast of South America (the location of the "Oroonoque," or Oronoque River). Yet she cuts or condenses much of Defoe's plot, including the rescue by pirates (reduced to a single line: "And then one day they came and took us off"). Her narrative focuses, ultimately, on the love between Crusoe and his "dear Friday."

Compared with the original character, then, Bishop's Crusoe speaks less to how he *survived* on the island and more to how he *felt* there. (Also, how he felt after returning to England, "another island.") He discusses, for example, his bouts of "self-pity," his pride in his "island industries," his terrifying "nightmares," and his desire for children, while delicately conveying his attraction to Friday.

Defoe's novel certainly explores loneliness and melancholy, and his depiction of the Crusoe-Friday relationship contains homoerotic elements. But Defoe's protagonist is essentially an English colonizer who converts Friday, a member of a nearby mainland tribe, to Christianity—and makes him his servant as well as his companion. By contrast, Bishop drops the colonialist material, obscures the details of how Crusoe and Friday met, and places the two men on pretty much equal terms (apart from their age gap). As a result, Crusoe's monologue becomes less a survival story than a tragic love story: a tale of deep loneliness followed by joyous connection, untimely loss, and grief.

SETTING

The poem has two main settings: the island where Crusoe was shipwrecked and stranded for many years, and the country of the title, "England," where Crusoe returns after his adventure.

The desert island in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* lies off "the coast of America," somewhere "near the Mouth of the Great River of Oroonoque." In other words, it's off the coast of South America, near a river that originates on the Guyana-Brazil border and flows into the Caribbean. Bishop's Crusoe, on the other hand, suggests that his "poor old island's" whereabouts are indeterminate: the place is not only unnamed but "un-rediscovered, un-renamable."

Crusoe spends much of the poem describing the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the island, which seems to be tropical but can't be pinned down to any one location. Critics have found many possible inspirations for the island's "flora," "fauna," "geography," and weather, from the Galápagos as described by Charles Darwin to Bishop's impressions of her vacations to Aruba. Bishop's version of Crusoe's island is a vivid but imaginary place, constructed from literary precedents as well as real-life observations. It's small, sparse, and severely lacking in variety: it seems to contain only "one kind of everything," from snails to berries.

As for England, Crusoe describes it as "another island, / that doesn't seem like one, but who decides?" After his exotic exile, Crusoe's home country strikes him as "bor[ing]"; its "real tea" and "uninteresting lumber" excite him far less than the food, drink, and raw materials he had to forage for himself. Evidently, he misses the challenge of survival in the wilderness. Yet the desert island often bored him, too: in both places, it's the presence and love of Friday that really engages him.

The "local museum" in England wants to preserve his island clothes and implements, but Crusoe can't understand why "such things" would hold meaning for anyone else. This detail conveys how *personal* "my poor old island[]" feels to Crusoe (especially compared with his crowded, impersonal home country). His place of exile becomes a theater for his private drama of survival, creativity, and love. It even mirrors his own psyche: he associates the island's volcanic "crater[s]," for example, with his depths of self-pity and despair.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) was a celebrated American poet, as well as a short story writer, painter, and translator. "Crusoe in England" appears in her final collection, *Geography III* (1976), which also features such famous poems as "One Art," "The Moose," and "In the Waiting Room." At 182 lines, "Crusoe" is the longest poem of her career, as well as one of the few poems she based explicitly on an existing work of literature. Its source is one of the earliest novels in English literature, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which is credited with launching the genre of the "castaway narrative" or desert island story.

Bishop created visual art throughout her life and kept multimedia journals. Her work is sometimes described as imagistic; she tends to observe the physical world closely and encode her conclusions in minute descriptive details, often while exploring themes of loss, belonging, and yearning.

Bishop's career also overlapped with the literary movement called Confessionalism. Confessional poets—who included Bishop's peers Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, as well as her longtime friend Robert Lowell—emphasized the autobiographical in their poetry, often highlighting intense emotional and psychological experiences. Bishop, however, was critical of this mode of writing and resisted including such detailed or direct personal accounts in her poems. Though her poems draw on her life, they often do so with a degree of distance and convey their feeling in indirect or ironic ways. "Crusoe in England," for instance, adopts the voice of a famous literary character, Robinson Crusoe, but uses the dramatic monologue form to express facets of Bishop's own experience.

Bishop traveled a great deal throughout her life (including to the island of Aruba, which inspired some of her descriptions in this poem). She was also a gay woman writer in the male-dominated 20th-century literary world, and many of her poems explore the experience of being an outsider—or loner—in a faraway or unfamiliar place. Some scholars have argued that "Crusoe in England" fits this pattern, and in particular, that it reflects the 15 years she spent in Brazil with her partner Lota de Macedo Soares (1910-1967). Soares, a Brazilian architect and designer, took her own life in 1967, about nine years before the poem's publication. Scholars have pointed to parallel elements in Crusoe's and Bishop's experiences: for example, living in or around South America as a transplant from the Northern Hemisphere, feeling lost and isolated before finding love, then losing and mourning one's longtime partner. In other words, they have suggested that Crusoe's grief for his "dear Friday" indirectly channels Bishop's grief for Soares.

After the poem was published, Bishop discussed it in an interview with the poet George Starbuck, and revealed that she wasn't actually a Defoe fan:

> GS: What got the Crusoe poem started?
> EB: I don't know. I reread the book and discovered how really awful *Robinson Crusoe* was, which I hadn't realized. I hadn't read it in a long time. And then I was remembering a long-ago visit to Aruba—long before it was a big developed "resort." I took a trip across the island, and it's true that there are small volcanoes all over the place.
> GS: I forget the end of *Robinson Crusoe*. Does the poem converge on the book?
> EB: No. I've forgotten the facts there, exactly. I reread it all one night. And I had forgotten it was so *moral*. All that Christianity. So I think I wanted to re-see it with all that left out.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After growing up in Nova Scotia, Canada, and the northeastern United States, Bishop traveled extensively throughout southern Europe and northern Africa, recording many of her observations in verse. Intending to take a short trip, Bishop traveled to Brazil in 1951 and ended up living there for 15 years. Bishop's extensive travels fed her interest in international literature, and she published translations of poetry originally written in French, Spanish, and (most famously) Portuguese.

The mid-to-late 20th century was a tumultuous time in world history, as political instability and social tensions bubbled over around the globe. However, Bishop's poems rarely address conflicts and world events directly. Instead, they tend to confront universal human struggles, such as grief and the drive to be understood.

"Crusoe in England" is ostensibly set in the early 1700s, when *Robinson Crusoe* takes place, though Bishop gives her Crusoe a much more modern-sounding voice than Defoe's character. Defoe, in turn, may have based his Crusoe partly on Alexander Selkirk (1676-1721), a naval officer who spent four years marooned on a desert island in the South Pacific. (Details like Crusoe's "goats" and "goatskin" clothes, for example, derive from Selkirk's real-life adventure.) Scholars have suggested that Charles Darwin's observations in the Galápagos Islands and other remote locations, described in his groundbreaking scientific study *On the Origin of Species* (1859), may have helped inspire other details in Bishop's poem. For example, Darwin's book discusses volcanoes and volcanic islands, whereas these do not appear in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

Bishop also modernizes the relationship between Crusoe and Friday. Defoe's novel was published at the height of European colonialism, during which Europeans killed and enslaved indigenous Americans in large numbers, while spreading deadly

diseases (e.g., smallpox, measles, and flu) to which native populations had never been exposed. Christian missionaries also converted, or attempted to convert, many indigenous Americans to Christianity. Accordingly, Defoe's narrator both proselytizes his companion Friday (a member of a mainland South American tribe) and enlists him as a servant. Bishop's Crusoe, by contrast, never mentions Christianity and describes Friday simply as a "friend[]" (while intimating that he was a romantic partner as well). Only at the end does Bishop gesture toward the deadly legacy of colonialism: Friday dies of exposure to "measles" upon accompanying Crusoe to England.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- Measles and Smallpox in the Americas — Historical context for the poem's tragic ending. (https://www.pbs.org/gunsgermssteel/variables/smallpox.html#:~:text=When%20the%20Europeans%20arriv 20Ar
- The Poet's Life and Work — A biography of Bishop via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/elizabeth-bishop)
- The Poet Reads — Listen to Bishop's reading of the poem, courtesy of the Poetry Archive. (https://poetryarchive.org/poem/crusoe-england/)
- Bishop and Soares — Background on the longtime relationship between the poet and Lota de Macedo Soares, which some critics consider a key inspiration for the poem. (https://www.nytimes.com/2002/06/09/books/the-love-of-her-life.html)
- The Poem Aloud — A reading of part of the poem, with commentary by Bishop's friend and fellow poet, Frank Bidart. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tN9ERG0h9X4)
- The Original Crusoe — Read the original (1719) novel on which the poem is based. (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/521/521-h/521-h.htm)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER ELIZABETH BISHOP POEMS

- Filling Station
- First Death in Nova Scotia
- One Art
- Sestina
- The Fish
- The Man-Moth
- The Mountain

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