

Just Crusoe Things: Understanding the Lyric Self Through a Subject-Object Dialectic

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Elizabeth Bishop's poem, "Crusoe in England," is an elegiac lyric poem which meditates on loss, isolation, and the concept of home. Integral to the poem is Bishop's creation of a persona. The poem invites the reader to interpret and diagnose the emotional state of this persona, Crusoe, who is presented in the speaker's dramatic monologue. Bishop constructs the lyric self in relation to "things," both geographic and material. I will explore how thing theory can shed light on Bishop's poem. In the poem, Crusoe transfers meaning and significance onto objects and geographic sites to assuage loneliness and to explore his feelings indirectly, with less pain. Bishop thus comments on the nature of grief: Crusoe is incapable of divulging his grief literally because it is too overwhelming, but his narration of events allows him to manifest it symbolically. Crusoe is removed from the primary site of his anguish and instead presents a narrative of secondary emotion. The reader must engage in an analytical process of diagnosing Crusoe's turmoil through his animation of the inanimate and his reimagining of places and things.

Bishop employs several strategies to create the

persona of Crusoe in her poem. Bishop connects past and present time. This strategy leads to what Helen Vendler calls “a whole temporal self available to be inhabited” (179). From England, Crusoe writes of the past: “Well, I had fifty-two / miserable, small volcanoes I could climb” (ll. 11-12), of the present: “Now I live here, another island, / that doesn’t seem like one, but who decides?” (ll. 154-155), and of future events: “The local museum’s asked me to / leave everything to them” (ll. 171-172). Crusoe does not exist only in the present; he extends into the past, and can be projected into the future as well (even if the future will be the site of his death). Bishop employs other important poetic strategies like the use of rhetorical questions and tone. Subsequently, “the personality of the speaker seems to have more than one facet” (Vendler 182). Crusoe questions and queries: he engages in a dialogue with himself, and thus becomes a very real presence in the poem. At times Crusoe is despairing, asking “How many years did I / beg it, implore it, not to break?” (ll. 163-164). At times he is simple and child-like: “Friday was nice. / Friday was nice, and we were friends” (ll. 145-146). Finally, throughout the poem, he is often frustrated: “None of the books has ever got it right” (l. 10). These key shifts in tone, alongside the use of discourse, show that Crusoe is a complex character.

Bishop also characterizes Crusoe by showing his relationship to things material and geographic,

British and island. Thing theory is the study of human interactions with objects in literature, and things hold great significance for Bishop's *Crusoe*. In "Thing Theory," Bill Brown writes that "the story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (4). Bishop presents us with a lyric self that can only be understood in relation to objects: *Crusoe* is an obscured subject who is understood through his animation of inanimate things. The relationship between *Crusoe* and his objects is imbued with loss, loneliness, and isolation. Bishop's indirect creation of persona accomplishes various things. One, it suggests that *Crusoe* is incapable of understanding his loss in a direct and literal manner; instead he must understand his emotional turmoil through the lens of objects. Two, it implies that *Crusoe* is not fully self-aware, and that *Crusoe's* grief or loss is too monumental to be spoken of directly.

Crusoe's relationship with objects changes throughout the poem, and we can map these changes to emotional or epistemological crises of home and love. The first "thing" in the poem is "my poor old island" (l. 8). *Crusoe* personifies the geography of the island: the volcanoes have "their heads blown off" (l. 17), the craters have "parched throats" (l. 32), and the "whole placed hissed" (l. 35). These descriptions emphasize

Crusoe's loneliness and illustrate his attempt to view things from another perspective or epistemology in which volcanoes could be friends. However, the violent language suggests that Crusoe is unable to find companionship in geographic things. He writes, "Beautiful, yes, but not much company" (l. 54). Thus, the image of Crusoe on the island is one of isolation and loneliness. Furthermore, while he is on the island, Crusoe attempts to imagine or make British things. He dreams of teakettles for which he would "have given years, or taken a few" (ll. 38-39), and he makes a home-brew and plays his "home-made flute" (l. 82); these actions are all symbols of the cultured English life. Crusoe thus performs English identity in exile through his relationships with things. However, he has no teakettle and the brew is "awful, fizzy, stinging stuff" (l. 80). Here is not England. Crusoe writes of his books: "Why didn't I know enough of something? / Greek drama or astronomy? The books / I'd read were full of blanks" (ll. 91-93). Here, Bishop shows how the relationship between subject and object can change dramatically in a different context. Crusoe learns nothing from his books because his framework for understanding the world has been shattered by his relocation outside of England. Things that once held meaning, such as Greek poetry and Shakespeare, do so no longer. The books, the imagined teakettle, the fizzy brew, and the flute are symbolic of his epistemological

crisis. In exile, Crusoe clings to the idea of England. However, he is thwarted: his English things no longer make sense outside the homeland.

Yet, as the poem progresses, the speaker implies that home is not a geographic location—home is Friday. The poem’s diction changes when it first introduces Friday. It becomes simple and child-like: “Friday was nice. / Friday was nice, and we were friends” (ll. 145-146). This shift in tone does two things. It suggests that Crusoe’s sentiments defy language; since he cannot articulate the depths of his emotions, he must express himself with the simplest of words. Additionally, it implies that Crusoe does not understand the full significance of his relationship with Friday. The speaker creates dramatic irony, thus allowing the reader to understand Crusoe’s relationship with Friday better than Crusoe does himself. Crusoe says “just when I thought I couldn’t stand it / another minute longer, Friday came” (l. 142-143) and describes Friday as “pretty to watch; he had a pretty body” (l. 152). These lines imply an intimate, deep, and likely erotic connection between the two. Crusoe never discloses his actual feelings for Friday. However, it is Crusoe’s inability to articulate the nature of his relationship that reveals his love for Friday.

In England, Crusoe must confront the loss of Friday, and his relationship with objects exposes his loneliness and isolation. Crusoe fixates on objects

because it is too painful to write of “[his] dear Friday” (l. 181). Just as his things lose their “living soul” (l. 169), Crusoe loses his will to live. He writes, “Now I live here, another island, / that doesn’t seem like one, but who decides?” (ll. 154-155). Once, Crusoe longed for teakettles and Shakespeare, now England is just another island. Dislocated from the homeland, Crusoe was forced to imagine home, yet now that he is home, he is completely isolated and alone. He drinks his “real tea, / surrounded by uninteresting lumber” (ll. 159-160). In England tea may be real, but real tea is no longer what Crusoe needs or desires. The knife that was once vital for survival fills no purpose here, for “It reeked of meaning, like a crucifix. / It lived. / ... / Now it won’t look at me at all” (ll. 162-163, 168). The knife represents Crusoe’s own sense of loss. Just as the knife is meaningless in English society, Crusoe’s life is meaningless without Friday; he has no framework through which to understand himself or his role in the world. He has no geographic home: “that archipelago / has petered out” (ll. 157-158).

In the final stanza of the poem, Crusoe focuses on a series of objects, and then concludes with news of Friday’s death. As I have suggested, objects are representative of epistemological or emotional crises concerning the nature of home and love. Crusoe’s island objects (“the flute, the knife, the shrivelled shoes” (l. 173)) are meaningless in England. Crusoe’s relationship

to them has changed; now, they represent his lost life with Friday. Crusoe fixates on objects as representative of lost meaning, lost love, lost joy (the knife has died, the parasol looks like “a plucked and skinny fowl” (l. 179)), to explore his own deep sense of loss. In the end, his things will live on in the museum, they “still will work” (l. 178), but they no longer matter because “Friday, [his] dear Friday, died of measles / seventeen years ago come March” (ll. 181-182). At the end of the poem, Crusoe’s things are empty shells, the last vestiges of meaning and joy have dissipated, and “the living soul has dribbled away” (l. 169) because Friday is gone. Crusoe explores his own anguish through the lens of things; he imbues things with significance to mourn the one person who lent meaning to his life.

Crusoe is a lyric self-constructed in relation to objects; he animates objects with his own spirit and, in doing so, divulges the nature of his person (his wants, hopes, and sorrows). Bishop meditates on concepts of home, isolation, and loss throughout the poem. She reimagines what it would mean to be Crusoe in England, Crusoe returned, and in doing so, she presents a sad tale of mourning and grief.

Works Cited

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