

Eighteenth-Century Animals and Ethics

SS 2006

- 1) Write an animal scene that you think goes missing from *Robinson Crusoe* or *Gulliver's Travels*. Try to make it fit into the novel in terms of its language and form. Briefly describe the criteria for your attempting to make the scene appear authentic.

Creative writing exercise: An Animal Scene in *Robinson Crusoe*

Reading Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* with a special focus on the topic of "animals and ethics in the 18th century" opens up many ways of interpreting the novel. Examining human-animal relationships in the narrative raises many questions about the general mindset of people at the time, not only concerning their attitudes towards animals but also towards other human beings. One major question that came up during our discussions in class was whether Robinson Crusoe changed his attitude towards animals and "savages" during the course of the novel.

A major motif in the novel is the continuum from 'wild' to 'tame' that the animals Crusoe encounters can be located on. A general development that we suspected but could not find definitive proof for was that the animals, in Crusoe's view, can potentially undergo a change from appearing 'monstrous' to being experienced as 'wild' or even 'tame.' These category assignments depend on how much Robinson feels threatened by the animals he encounters. Those animals he only sees from far away, like the lions, represent a threat to him and are perceived by him as 'monstrous.' Yet the more Robinson comes into contact with a particular animal, the more familiar he becomes with it. Accordingly, his perceptions of the animal and his attitude towards it change as well. For instance, the parrots or the goats were originally considered to be 'wild' by him. Eventually, Robinson adopts some of them as pets and considers them to be members of his family.

In the following animal scene, I want to show this alteration from perceiving an animal as 'monstrous' to regarding it as 'wild' and then the change from seeing it as 'wild' to viewing it as 'tame.' This scene demonstrates a general change in Robinson's attitude through the example of his dealing with a fox.

"One day, in the third and twentieth year of my first setting foot on this desolate island, having been occupied with feeding and counting my flock of goats for about half of the morning, and being just about to set out back to my fortress, I was surprised to see a fully grown fox stride through the braches and bushes not far from

where I was. My first intention being to shoot the wild creature, I reached for my powder, which I always made sure to carry about me in sufficient amounts and set my gun at a mark.

While I was thus pointing my rifle at the animal it suddenly made a stop and with its black and wild eyes looked at me. At first I was resolved to kill the creature as I couldn't see any use in keeping it alive and was entertaining some thoughts of making me a good bag of its skin for the convenience of collecting fruits of the forest in it. But under the power of the impression of those black pair of eyes I stood for several minutes, not knowing how I should proceed. The impression was so strong upon my mind that I finally resolved to let the poor creature live and continued my journey. The wind having abated over night, I had a great mind to venture out in my boat and therefore hurried back to my castle before midday.

Not little was I surprised when I discovered the same fox which I had granted its life an hour earlier in the woods, sitting in front of the secret entrance to my fortress. I could perceive that the animal was almost starved for want of food. Taking a closer look at the wretched creature I further noticed a wound of the flesh of considerable size in its hind leg which must have hindered it to such an extent in its natural habit of hunting that it was unable to supply itself with food. After several minutes of quiet observation, I resolved to approach the animal as it seemed to me to be quite calm and not a threat to my life. The creature was so tame with being hungry that it did not stir but just kept fixing me with its black eyes. Moved by the desolate state the animal was in, I fetched some water from my cave and fed the poor creature. During the following days I continually fed the fox which never ventured far from my settlement, as I guessed, partly because of the wound and partly because of its dependence on me for food. After about a week, the creature was tame enough to let me dress its wound which I undertook with great care, always being aware of the animal's wild nature. But I need not have worried about this as the fox had grown so accustomed to my sight and my feeding that it wouldn't venture to offend its benefactor. This proceeding continued for the next couple of weeks or so, until the fox had recovered from its wound.

One morning when I stepped out of my cave in order to fetch some water from the nearby creek, I realized that the fox I had grown so accustomed to had disappeared. This observation convinced me that the animal must have recovered to such an extent that it was now able to supply itself with food again. I felt no remorse

at its disappearing but from that time on, could never bring myself to shoot any fox even if it snuck around my flock of goats.”

I tried to make this scene fit the form and content of the novel by including several references to Robinson’s environment mentioned in the text, such as his settlement and his “country estate.” Furthermore, I took care to use the same sort of vocabulary that Defoe employs in *Robinson Crusoe* as well as the syntax of seventeenth-century English, as Defoe imagines it. I also attempted to imitate Robinson’s narrative style: he mentions many details and often includes his own thoughts and reflections on a certain topic. I tried to capture Robinson’s world, the things that are important to him and the things that occupy his thoughts.