

Island of the Blue Dolphins
Understanding *Island of the Blue Dolphins* as a Robinsonade

Grade Level

High School: Ninth and Tenth Grade

Subject

Literacy and Language Arts

Common Core Standards

9–10.RL.1, 9–10.RL.2, 9–10.RL.3, 9–10.RL.9, 9–10.RL.10

Background Information

In 1960, Scott O’Dell published *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, a story about a twelve-year-old girl who is left alone on an island for eighteen years in the mid-1800s (nineteenth century). O’Dell has stated in interviews that *Robinson Crusoe* was one of his favorite books as a child, and it is clear that his favorite childhood novel influenced the way he told the story of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, a favorite novel of many children who grew up during the second half of the twentieth century.

Daniel Defoe’s immensely influential *Robinson Crusoe: The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner* (1719) is credited with popularizing the island survival genre. Many editions and versions of *Robinson Crusoe* are in print, but it also spawned many derivative texts (that is, books that borrow heavily from its plot and literary devices). Today, such novels are known as *robinsonades*.

Since the 1700s (eighteenth century), Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* has also served as a mechanism (or script) for understanding real-life incidents of island isolation. This is very much true in the case of the Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, the California Indian who was isolated off the coast of California between 1835–53, and who served as inspiration for Scott O’Dell’s protagonist Karana. When newspaper reporters began telling the story of the Lone Woman’s isolation in the 1840s, they characterized her as a “female Robinson Crusoe.”

This lesson aims to develop students’ understanding of the robinsonade as a genre, including its connection to European colonialism. It also asks students to reflect on what it means to write a robinsonade such as *Island of the Blue Dolphins* in which the protagonist is not a shipwrecked European, but rather a Native American, a person native to island on which she is isolated.

The names of Defoe’s protagonist (Crusoe) and O’Dell’s protagonist (Karana) echo each other, which you can hear if you read them out loud. Placing these characters in historical context is illuminating. Crusoe is an *agent* of colonialism while both Karana and the historical Lone Woman on whom she is based are *victims* of colonialism and imperialism. Consider that Defoe’s Crusoe is *en route* to purchase slaves when he shipwrecks. Once on land, he undergoes a religious conversion and turns the island first

into his personal plantation and then into a colony. In *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, however, O'Dell's Karana is isolated only after most of her people are massacred (by visiting Russians and Aleuts) or removed from the island by colonial forces. When alone, Karana undergoes a kind of spiritual conversion after which she vows to live in harmony with nature and refrain from killing the island's mammals and birds. When she departs from the island with American sea otter hunters and a Spanish priest at the story's end, all the wealth of her island home and its surrounding water is, de facto, left for procurement by foreign powers.

Materials

- Copy of activity sheet for each student (provided)
- Pens/pencils

Procedure

1. Prepare materials and familiarize yourself with the readings. Teachers might find it useful to consult some or all of the literary scholarship listed in the Additional Resources selection below.
2. Have students read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* in its entirety.
3. Introduce the novel *Robinson Crusoe*, reviewing both its plot and cultural influence.
4. Pre-teach any vocabulary words appearing in the documents below that might prove difficult for your students (e.g., ague, antic, bower, dictates, mused, sop, voracious). Explain to students that the passages from *Robinson Crusoe* utilize British spelling.
5. Divide students into appropriately-sized discussion groups.
6. Distribute the activity sheet and direct students to read, discuss, and answer questions.
7. Bring students together for a whole-class discussion of responses, either after each set of document-based questions is completed or after all sets of questions have been completed in small groups.

Additional Resources

Baecker, Diann L. "Surviving Rescue: A Feminist Reading of Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*." *Children's Literature In Education* 38, no. 3 (2007): 195–206.

Defoe, Daniel. *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. Urbana: Seeley, Service & Co., 1919. Ebook available through Project Gutenberg.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/521/521-h/521-h.htm>

O'Malley, Andrew. *Children's Literature, Popular Culture, and Robinson Crusoe*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Schwebel, Sara L., ed. *Island of the Blue Dolphins: The Complete Reader's Edition*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016.

Schwebel, Sara L., ed. Lone Woman and Last Indians Digital Archive, University of South Carolina, <http://calliope.cse.sc.edu/lonewoman/home>. [Use “Browse by Trope” feature to track instances of “Girl Crusoe”]

Tarr, C. Anita. “An Unintentional System of Gaps: A Phenomenological Reading of Scott O’Dell’s *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.” *Children’s Literature in Education* 28, no. 2 (1997): 61–71.

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Selected Readings

Document 1

The following excerpt comes from Chapter VI of Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe (1719). The passage describes Crusoe's physical and spiritual sickness during his time on the island.

June 27.—The ague again so violent that I lay a-bed all day, and neither ate nor drank. I was ready to perish for thirst; but so weak, I had not strength to stand up, or to get myself any water to drink. Prayed to God again, but was light-headed; and when I was not, I was so ignorant that I knew not what to say; only I lay and cried, "Lord, look upon me! Lord, pity me! Lord, have mercy upon me!" I suppose I did nothing else for two or three hours; till, the fit wearing off, I fell asleep, and did not wake till far in the night. When I awoke, I found myself much refreshed, but weak, and exceeding thirsty. However, as I had no water in my habitation, I was forced to lie till morning, and went to sleep again. In this second sleep I had this terrible dream: ... I saw a man descend from a great black cloud, in a bright flame of fire, and light upon the ground. He was all over as bright as a flame, so that I could but just bear to look towards him; his countenance was most inexpressibly dreadful, impossible for words to describe. ... He was no sooner landed upon the earth, but he moved forward towards me, with a long spear or weapon in his hand, to kill me; and when he came to a rising ground, at some distance, he spoke to me—or I heard a voice so terrible that it is impossible to express the terror of it. All that I can say I understood was this: "Seeing all these things have not brought thee to repentance, now thou shalt die;" at which words, I thought he lifted up the spear that was in his hand to kill me.

...

I had, alas! no divine knowledge. What I had received by the good instruction of my father was then worn out by an uninterrupted series, for eight years, of seafaring wickedness, and a constant conversation with none but such as were, like myself, wicked and profane to the last degree. I do not remember that I had, in all that time, one thought that so much as tended either to looking upwards towards God, or inwards towards a reflection upon my own ways; but a certain stupidity of soul, without desire of good, or conscience of evil, had entirely overwhelmed me; and I was all that the most hardened, unthinking, wicked creature among our common sailors can be supposed to be; not having the least sense, either of the fear of God in danger, or of thankfulness to God in deliverance.

In the relating what is already past of my story, this will be the more easily believed when I shall add, that through all the variety of miseries that had to this day befallen me, I never had so much as one thought of it being the hand of God, or that it was a just

punishment for my sin—my rebellious behaviour against my father—or my present sins, which were great—or so much as a punishment for the general course of my wicked life. When I was on the desperate expedition on the desert shores of Africa, I never had so much as one thought of what would become of me, or one wish to God to direct me whither I should go, or to keep me from the danger which apparently surrounded me, as well from voracious creatures as cruel savages. But I was merely thoughtless of a God or a Providence, acted like a mere brute, from the principles of nature, and by the dictates of common sense only, and, indeed, hardly that. When I was delivered and taken up at sea by the Portugal captain, well used, and dealt justly and honourably with, as well as charitably, I had not the least thankfulness in my thoughts. When, again, I was shipwrecked, ruined, and in danger of drowning on this island, I was as far from remorse, or looking on it as a judgment. I only said to myself often, that I was an unfortunate dog, and born to be always miserable. . . .

Well, but then it came on strangely, if God has made all these things, He guides and governs them all, and all things that concern them; for the Power that could make all things must certainly have power to guide and direct them. If so, nothing can happen in the great circuit of His works, either without His knowledge or appointment.

And if nothing happens without His knowledge, He knows that I am here, and am in this dreadful condition; and if nothing happens without His appointment, He has appointed all this to befall me. Nothing occurred to my thought to contradict any of these conclusions, and therefore it rested upon me with the greater force, that it must needs be that God had appointed all this to befall me; that I was brought into this miserable circumstance by His direction . . .

I went, directed by Heaven no doubt; for in this chest I found a cure both for soul and body. I opened the chest, and found what I looked for, the tobacco; and as the few books I had saved lay there too, I took out one of the Bibles which I mentioned before, and which to this time I had not found leisure or inclination to look into. . . . I took up the Bible and began to read; but my head was too much disturbed with the tobacco to bear reading, at least at that time; only, having opened the book casually, the first words that occurred to me were these, “Call on Me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me.” These words were very apt to my case, and made some impression upon my thoughts at the time of reading them, though not so much as they did afterwards; for, as for being *delivered*, the word had no sound, as I may say, to me; the thing was so remote, so impossible in my apprehension of things, that I began to say, as the children of Israel did when they were promised flesh to eat, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” so I began to say, “Can God Himself deliver me from this place?” And as it was not for many years that any hopes appeared, this prevailed very often upon my thoughts; but, however, the words made a great impression upon me, and I mused upon them very often. It grew now late, and the tobacco had, as I said, dozed my head so much that I inclined to sleep; so I left my lamp burning in the cave, lest I should want anything in the night, and went to bed. But before I lay down, I did what I never had done in all my life—I kneeled down, and prayed to God to fulfil the promise to me, that if I called upon Him in the day of trouble, He would deliver me.

Discussion Questions: Document 1

Compare Karana in Chapter 24 of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* to Crusoe in the above excerpt from Chapter VI of *Robinson Crusoe*. Discuss the following questions in your small group, being sure to cite specific passages as evidence for your answers.

1. Karana and Crusoe transform emotionally during their time alone on their respective islands. How does each change? According to the texts, what prompted the changes?
2. Karana and Crusoe both discuss the societies they used to belong to before their island isolation began. What are their attitudes toward those societies? How are the characters' feelings similar or different? Why do you think that might be?
3. The actual Lone Woman did not significantly change her diet during her years of isolation on San Nicolas Island. Why do you think Scott O'Dell decided to write a narrative in which the Lone Woman changes her eating habits? How does Karana's vow serve the larger argument made in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*? Do you think the change in Karana's behavior has affected the way readers respond to the book? How so?

Document 2

The following excerpt comes from Chapter VII of Robinson Crusoe. It describes in detail how Crusoe made and arranged a clearing on the island.

While this corn was growing I made a little discovery, which was of use to me afterwards. As soon as the rains were over, and the weather began to settle, which was about the month of November, I made a visit up the country to my bower, where, though I had not been some months, yet I found all things just as I left them. The circle or double hedge that I had made was not only firm and entire, but the stakes which I had cut out of some trees that grew thereabouts were all shot out and grown with long branches, as much as a willow-tree usually shoots the first year after lopping its head. I could not tell what tree to call it that these stakes were cut from. I was surprised, and yet very well pleased, to see the young trees grow; and I pruned them, and led them up to grow as much alike as I could; and it is scarce credible how beautiful a figure they grew into in three years; so that though the hedge made a circle of about twenty-five yards in diameter, yet the trees, for such I might now call them, soon covered it, and it was a complete shade, sufficient to lodge under all the dry season. This made me resolve to cut some more stakes, and make me a hedge like this, in a semi-circle round my wall (I mean that of my first dwelling), which I did; and placing the trees or stakes in a double row, at about eight yards distance from my first fence, they grew presently, and were at first a fine cover to my habitation, and afterwards served for a defence also, as I shall observe in its order.

Discussion Questions: Document 2

Compare the excerpt above with Chapter 12 of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, being sure to cite specific passages as evidence for your answers.

1. In what ways is the excerpt from *Robinson Crusoe* similar to Chapter 12 of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*?
2. Can you find other parts of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* that echo *Robinson Crusoe*? Describe the similarities.
3. What do you think makes these passages appealing to readers?

Document 3

The following excerpt comes from Chapter XIV of Robinson Crusoe. The passage appears right after Robinson Crusoe saves a native man from cannibals encountered on the island.

After he had slumbered, rather than slept, about half-an-hour, he awoke again, and came out of the cave to me, for I had been milking my goats which I had in the enclosure just by: when he espied me he came running to me, laying himself down again upon the ground, with all the possible signs of an humble, thankful disposition, making a great many antic gestures to show it. At last he lays his head flat upon the ground, close to my foot, and sets my other foot upon his head, as he had done before; and after this made all the signs to me of subjection, servitude, and submission imaginable, to let me know how he would serve me so long as he lived. I understood him in many things, and let him know I was very well pleased with him. In a little time I began to speak to him; and teach him to speak to me; and first, I let him know his name should be Friday, which was the day I saved his life; I called him so for the memory of the time. I likewise taught him to say Master; and then let him know that was to be my name; I likewise taught him to say Yes and No and to know the meaning of them. I gave him some milk in an earthen pot, and let him see me drink it before him, and sop my bread in it; and gave him a cake of bread to do the like, which he quickly complied with, and made signs that it was very good for him. I kept there with him all that night; but as soon as it was day I beckoned to him to come with me, and let him know I would give him some clothes; at which he seemed very glad, for he was stark naked. As we went by the place where he had buried the two men, he pointed exactly to the place, and showed me the marks that he had made to find them again, making signs to me that we should dig them up again and eat them. At this I appeared very angry, expressed my abhorrence of it, made as if I would vomit at the thoughts of it, and beckoned with my hand to him to come away, which he did immediately, with great submission. I then led him up to the top of the hill, to see if his enemies were gone; and pulling out my glass I looked, and saw plainly the place where they had been, but no appearance of them or their canoes; so that it was plain they were gone, and had left their two comrades behind them, without any search after them.

Discussion Questions: Document 3

Consider the excerpt above and the concluding chapter of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

1. In the passage above, how does Defoe portray the interaction between Crusoe and the man that Crusoe names "Friday"? How does this portrayal compare to Scott O'Dell's description of Karana when she meets the sea otter hunters and priest at the end of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*?
2. In *Robinson Crusoe*, the titular character (Crusoe) rescues the man he names Friday from cannibals. In *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, is Karana described as being "rescued"? Cite textual evidence in support of your answer.

Document 4

The following is a photograph of a plaque that hangs at Mission Santa Barbara. Juana María is the baptismal name that was given to the historical Lone Woman of San Nicolas Island, the model for Scott O'Dell's *Karana*. George Nidever is named in the Author's Note of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. He is one of the sea otter hunters who appears in the final chapter of the book.



Discussion Questions: Document 4

Consider document 3 (from *Robinson Crusoe*) along with this plaque and the final chapter of *Island of the Blue Dolphins*.

1. In *Robinson Crusoe*, the titular character (Crusoe) “rescues” the native Friday. Is Karana depicted as being rescued in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*? In the plaque above, is Juana María depicted as being rescued? Cite textual evidence in your answer. (You might think about how language is used. For example, do the writers employ active or passive voice?)
2. Who sponsored the plaque in the photograph above? Conduct some research on the organization. Does it surprise you that this group commemorated the Lone Woman’s life and death? Does it surprise you that the organization commemorated Captain George Nidever? Why or why not?

Concluding Questions

Having studied each of the four documents above (three excerpts from *Robinson Crusoe* and the Daughters of the American Revolution plaque), discuss the following questions.

1. *Island of the Blue Dolphins* unquestionably draws inspiration from *Robinson Crusoe*. In what ways is O'Dell's novel a robinsonade?
2. Are there ways in which Scott O'Dell's novel also offers a kind of revision or critique of *Robinson Crusoe*? If so, how successful is he in this task?