Meet Daniel Defoe

"No man has tasted differing fortunes more," Daniel Defoe once wrote. "And thirteen times I have been rich and poor." Spy, satirist, journalist, merchant, and writer, Defoe bounced back and forth between bankruptcy and prosperity, prison and political preference, throughout his life. Yet he never lost his sense of humor.

Once, as punishment for publishing a controversial pamphlet, he was sentenced to the pillory, a wooden device used for public punishment that locked the prisoner's head and hands. For the occasion, Defoe composed and distributed his irreverent "Hymn to the Pillory," which delighted the London populace, some of whom decorated the pillory with flowers.

As the son of a Protestant Dissenter (a person who defied the Church of England), Defoe attended Reverend Charles Morton's academy in hopes of becoming a Presbyterian minister. Here he developed his clear, graceful writing style. American writer Willa Cather once said of Defoe's work, "There is a strong weave in the sentences as they follow each other that gives pleasure... as the feel of good handwoven linen to the fingertips."

Trade and commerce fascinated Defoe, and by age twenty-three, he had abandoned his plans for the ministry to become a merchant. However, he had a weakness for risky business ventures. His various enterprises in hosiery, brickmaking, and breeding civets (carnivorous mammals that secrete a musk-like substance used to make perfume) all failed.

At twenty-five, Defoe joined a rebellion against the Roman Catholic King James II in which six hundred rebels died, but Defoe escaped. Three years later, James fled to France, and Defoe became the leading pamphleteer and political informant for Protestant King William III. Despite his royal connections, however, Defoe's troubles continued. He wrote a satire, "The Shortest Way with the Dissenters," which was intended to ridicule savage suppression of dissent. However, both Anglicans and Dissenters missed the point and were not amused. Defoe was jailed but was soon rescued by the Earl of Oxford, Robert Harley, for whom Defoe became a spy.

In his lifetime, Defoe published two newspapers, wrote fictional narratives, and penned more than five hundred books and pamphlets. Unfortunately, he spent his last years in poverty and fear of retaliation for his acts as a government secret agent.

"The best of men cannot suspend their suffering, the good die early, and the bad die late."  

"From this amphibious, ill-born mob began the reign of the ill-natured thing, an Englishman." --Defoe

"Defoe deserved immortality for the genius displayed in A Journal of the Plague Year." --Sir Walter Scott

Daniel Defoe was born in 1660 and died in 1731.
Focus Activity
What does the word vanity mean to you?

Web It! In a word web, note those things about which people are vain and the ways in which people display their vanity.

Setting a Purpose Read to find out what happens when two pilgrims encounter vanity.

Background
Allegory
The Pilgrim's Progress is a religious allegory—a work in which the characters and settings are symbols aimed at teaching a moral lesson. As in most allegories, the names of characters and places indicate the abstract quality they represent. The story focuses on a character named Christian and the obstacles he must overcome during his pilgrimage to the Celestial City. During his journey, Christian meets Faithful, who decides to join him. One of the stopovers they make is a fair in the town of Vanity.

Vocabulary Preview
allure (a lour') v. to attract with something desirable; p. 443
indictment (in dit'mant) n. a formal accusation; p. 444
diverse (di vur', di-) adj. markedly different; p. 443
reconciled (rek'an sid) adj. brought to acceptance of; p. 445