

MOLL FLANDERS: BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

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This study deals with the various problems which faced Daniel Defoe in writing Moll flanders at a time when English fiction was trying to establish itself as a new genre . Defoe had to stress to his puritan readers that Moll flanders is based on a true story and that it is a highly moral novel . However , the critical reader can realise that Moll Flanders' character is a copy of her author's personality and that the moral lesson is somewhat superficial. Moreover the conflict is weak ,The human relationships are limited, and there is no real psychological depth in characterisation simply because the author's materialistic outlook dominates everything . There is no doubt that Defoe was using the style of the episodic picaresque novel although Moll Flanders provides a serious sociological study of crime. His 'didactic' aim is to 'preach' to his reader that no matter how deviant one is there is still an outlet . In fact there is a division between what the author claims and the reality of the situation; this could be traced back to a split within Defoe himself, between his theoretical alliance to puritan ideals and his fascination with Bohemianism which rejects all restrictions.

This conflict reflects the 18 th century world of uncertainty about social values . Moll Flanders is particularly successful in expounding the elements of realism, especially in concentrating on the seamy side of life. Furthermore it illustrates the concept of economic individualism which is a basic element in establishing the rise of the English novel . Thus despite some flaws in composition Moll Flanders could be considered as one of the few pioneering works which established the modern concept of realism in English fiction .

When dealing with Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders the student of fiction today is at once urged to apply modern critical standards of literature and

consider to some extent those of the 18th century which were just beginning to take shape then. The status of fiction was not particularly happy at

the time and the genre had not established itself firmly. Quite simply the 18th century audience believed that fiction is a form of lying and Daniel Defoe, along with other novelists of the period, had to go to a considerable length in order to assert the 'authenticity' of his Imaginative creation. Thus Defoe emphasises in his preface that the events in the story of Moll Flanders are 'true' in the sense that they did take place in actual life; accordingly all that Defoe did to the story, he stresses, is just a process of 'refinement' in order to make it 'readable', 'decent' and 'useful'. Certainly a modern novelist does not have to bother about justifying the reasons for writing a novel or to claim that his story is 'based on true life'. Fiction is now looked at as a serious and legitimate form of 'imaginative' creation which does not have to be strictly based on a 'true' story in the literal sense of the term; the important thing is, that a literary work should 'apparently' abide by the law of 'probability' which is largely established in the work itself. Fiction, furthermore, is highly respected today and it is an important way of exploring man's conscious and unconscious life; among other things, fiction is also considered as one source of knowing

how the human mind works and develops. Besides, novelists are usually endowed with a sharp critical insight about life and they are supposed to provide 'interesting' materials to the reader, to say the least.

Theories of 'realism' today are extremely sophisticated and the relationship between the novelist and his material is not always straightforward or easy to determine. Modern critics of fiction would not really worry too much whether the events in Defoe's story actually happened to him, to somebody he knew, or whether he himself imagined the story and put it into a 'realistic' shape.

If there was going to be any conclusion about the relationship between Defoe and his material, a modern critic would generally prefer to establish this relationship on the evidence of the events of the novel itself and not on whatever Defoe claims in his preface, unless of course the author's claim happens to be justified in the book itself. As I hope to show later the story of Moll Flanders does not substantiate Defoe's claim and that in portraying the 'adventures of Moll Flanders' the writer was essentially projecting himself rather than dramatising the life story of somebody he knew. There is no doubt that every writer, in one

way or the other, projects part or all of himself in his work but one expects in fiction some kind of apparent objectivity in treating the material presented. For example, both James Joyce's The portrait of the Artist as a young Man and D. H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers dramatise the actual life story of the two writers, but the novels are presented successfully and objectively to the extent of concluding that the similarity between the novels and the novelists' life is a mere coincidence. Defoe does not do that, or more accurately, he is incapable of achieving a sense of objectivity in his novels.

Although we can understand that Defoe did not have the critical background upon which he could guide his material and that he was perhaps the first English writer to come closer to writing a 'realistic' fiction in our sense of the word we cannot entirely exempt him from applying our own expectations of reading a novel. For if Moll Flanders is to be understood by the modern student of fiction the best approach is to apply our critical standards which have been established for almost three centuries. One does not, however, have to be rigid about any one particular approach: at times one should take into account, for example, the social history of the

period in order to determine whether or not there is any possible use of irony in the novel. Moreover, cultural values which are almost always relative may indeed affect some important critical judgements of the novel, and they certainly have to be accounted for when dealing with the question of 'morality' in Moll Flanders.

In fact Defoe's firm insistence that Moll Flanders is a realistic novel can only be understood if one realises that the Puritans - who were quite dominant in the 18th century and whose outlook on life was made extremely rigid especially by their belief that the truth is exclusively found in the Bible - despised fiction writing and their idea of literature was not very different from that of Plato; it is Plato, one should remember, who excluded poets from his Republic, or ideal state, because according to him they distorted the truth. He originated the theory of imitation which asserted that literature is twice removed from the truth and consequently can never present it. It is true that this theory was modified by Aristotle, Sir Philip Sidney and others (Later it was completely replaced by a variety of theories evolved in the 19th century) yet its negative effect was still dominant at the time when Moll Flanders was written.

In order to counter such a belief

Defoe strenuously emphasises that Moll Flanders is a true autobiographical story and is not the work of imagination. He, furthermore, asserts that in addition to

being a true account of real adventures, the novel teaches a number of valuable lessons. In this way Defoe counters any possible criticism of the so-called fictional unreality and immorality of fiction. Therefore, the preface of Moll Flanders tries to answer whatever moral objections the 18th century reader may have, and even attempts to justify the long and thrilling title of Moll Flanders which certainly aims at some kind of sensationalism - especially for those who want to mix thrilling reading with moral uplift - by including incest, whoredom, thievery and other adventures, all of which are attractive subjects which aim to draw the attention of the 18th century reader. Thus the autobiographical and realistic mode of presenting Moll Flanders, the insistence on several moral lessons to be taught by the book and the title of the novel, all aim to convince the 18th century reader to buy the novel without any hesitation.

The adventures of Moll Flanders bear striking similarities to the picaresque novel, although the implications of each are different. Like Moll Flanders, the picaresque

novel, is a chronicle, usually autobiographical, presenting the life story of a rascal of low degree engaged in menial tasks and making his living more through his wits than his industry;¹ it presents little plot and is usually episodic and structureless in the sense that events that occur in it have no causal relationship and are put together because they happened in chronological order to a single character. The picaresque novel presents a series of somewhat far-fetched thrilling incidents, performed by the picaro, or central figure, and may afford the author an opportunity for satire on the social classes, and sometimes it points out the evils of the rogue's life by presenting especially revolting and villainous incidents as in the life of Moll Flanders at Newgate prison. Again, like Moll Flanders, the method of the picaresque novel is realistic; while the story may be romantic in itself, it is presented with a plainness of language, frankness of expression, looseness in diction, a vividness of detail, and its drawing of incident is largely from the seamy side of life, i.e. the less attractive aspects of life such as poverty and crime. The main difference, however, between the picaresque novel and Moll Flanders is that in the former the reader usually feels somewhat

detached and distanced from the story and he watches action almost from the outside while in the latter he is urged to be sympathetic and involved in the fate of Moll Flanders: Defoe's novel presents a serious study of a woman who is largely forced by difficult circumstances to opt for thievery and prostitution and, unlike the typical picaro who does not usually progress or develop, she presumably undergoes radical changes in her life and becomes a true penitent .

Through the character of Moll Flanders Defoe presents a serious sociological study of the influence of heredity and environment in the making of criminals. She is placed in a cruel world and one almost feels that she is predetermined to opt for crime. For on the one hand, her mother is a professional criminal who gives birth to Moll in prison . On the other, Moll's early life and formative years are marked by lack of care by the outside world. In the 18th century there was a wide gap between the rich and the poor and many people found themselves driven to crime. Actually the growth of crime in that period puzzled the authorities which resorted to severe punishment as a way to deal with this nuisance . The whole age looked at criminals as notorious deviants who should be got rid of rather than look into the real reasons which forced a segment of society to resort to crime and suggest

suitable remedies . The fact that some criminals who were transported to North America where they were able to find legitimate work which had enabled them to become constructive members of society - as in the case of Moll Flanders and her mother - unequivocally indicates that harsh circumstances are largely responsible for making some people criminals .

The puritan society was not particularly concerned with the possibility of reforming criminals and this was reflected in its vengeful punishment . For example , petty thefts like stealing a piece of cloth could result in hanging : both Moll Flanders and her mother were about to suffer the same fate for committing similar crimes; such a theft in England today will result in just a small fine as a first offence and this points out to the wide difference in outlook between the two Englands. In spite of the barbarity of punishment, the number of criminals increased in that age because they were not convinced of the justice of the law and the social system according to which people were divided into rich and poor and because they were placed in a kind of dilemma : either to lead an insecure life of crime or accept a disgraceful and humiliating life. In the Middle Ages poverty was looked at as one way which could lead people to salvation . Christians at the time consoled

themselves by taking the example of Christ's poverty. This image of poverty was radically changed in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries when people began to look at poverty as a kind of disgrace; many of them chose crime instead of leading a humiliating life of beggary.

Moll Flanders is largely about poverty and the whole fate of the main character in the novel ramifies from this theme: thievery, prostitution, crime, punishment, worldly success, and the relationship of the individual to society - all are aspects which are dealt with through poverty. Although the writer convincingly illustrates the evil of being born poor yet he himself is not a good sociologist who can diagnose the problems of poverty and its relationship to crime and suggest adequate remedies. Everything in the novel is illustrated from the point of view of an ambitious journalist who wants to achieve worldly success at whatever cost. This tendency sometimes drives Defoe from dealing adequately with poverty and crime into misplaced preaching. There are, however, vivid touches here and there in the book which throw light on the real problems of poverty and crime, but even those are spoiled by a personality divided between loyalty to puritan and strict Christian ideals, and a strong bohemian desire for violating

society's laws and conventions under certain circumstances.

One of the reasons for the weakness of conflict in Moll Flanders is that there is no real antagonist in the novel. In spite of his bohemianism and his strong desire to break from social norms Defoe neither depicts nor criticises the evils of society which drive some people to crime; besides, he does not make his protagonist challenge society's theoretical values and principles. Although occasionally Moll Flanders tries to justify her deviation from social norms, yet both she and her creator do not condemn society's rigid rules; at the end of the novel it is she who has to repent for deviating from the social norms which, as a matter of fact, caused her to become, initially, a criminal. She always appeals to God to forgive her her wickedness and even while she is violating society's most sacred values she attempts to find a religious sermon to preach on the situation. For this reason all the themes of the novel are treated superficially and they almost lack conflict. One would hope to find in a novel a protagonist and an antagonist either in the form of a hero versus society or of two opposing forces within the character itself. True, there are two forces within Moll's character but the voice of tradition and morality always keeps

the bohemian soul under complete control and thus weakens the element of conflict in the novel. Indeed, the voice of tradition is largely responsible for the insipidity of all the sermons and misplaced direct preaching in Moll Flanders. The novel would have certainly been a far better work of art without these sermons and direct moral lessons; it is this insistence on preaching which incessantly spoils the whole narrative method. One feels that Defoe inserted these moral comments to justify an otherwise sensational story. At times one gets confused as to who the speaker is as the following passage shows :

Oh let none read this part without seriously reflecting on the circumstances of a desolate state and low they would grapple with mere want of friends and want of bread; it will certainly make them think of sparing what they have only, but of looking up to heaven for support, and of the wise man's prayer, 'Give me not poverty, lest I steal.'³

At other times one can conclude with absolute certainty that this is the voice of Defoe and not that of Moll Flanders as in the following passage:

These are the men of whom Solomon says, 'They go like an ox to the slaughter, till a dart strikes through their liver'; an admirable description, by the way, of the foul disease, which is a poisonous deadly

contagion mingling with the blood, whose centre or fountain is in the liver; from whence, by the swift circulation of the whole, mass that dreadful nauseous plague strikes immediately through his liver, and his spirits are infected, his vitals stabbed through as with a dart. (P. 218)

Here the biblical quotation and the high literary language make one feel that the passage could have never been produced by Moll Flanders, the uneducated criminal, as is clear from her various expressions.

It is in those moralising passages that Defoe forgets that he is a novelist dramatising the life of a rogue by posing as the puritan who should preach on any situation. In fact he fails to maintain an artistic distance between his assumed personality and his material.

Direct preaching is now considered an obvious and unpardonable defect in literature. The modern reader does not like to be directly told or manipulated by the author; he much prefers to be shown and to be apparently left on his own to pass judgements or reach conclusions out of the situation. Accordingly, any unjustifiable intrusion on the part of the author may spoil the reader's enjoyment and involvement.

Another element in the narrative which also affects the reader's

involvement is that Moll Flanders presumably tells the story at the age of seventy when she has already become a true penitent and this deprives the novel of a sense of immediacy and vividness. There is, surely, a difference between a criminal's mentality while he is

involved in crime and the mentality of another criminal who has repented and regretted the past life he is narrating. Therefore, there is a distance between events and the time of narrating the story of Moll Flanders which results in some lack of forceful commitment to whatever is going on. Incidentally, Defoe does not tackle this problem in his preface which reveals his unawareness of the sensitivity of the issue.

As E.M. Forster concludes, Moll Flanders is undoubtedly a novel of character.⁴

Moll Flanders' character actually dominates the whole narrative to the extent of suppressing the plot of the novel. As in the case of the picaresque novel the incidents of Moll Flanders are not connected carefully enough to make a unified story: they are only significant because they happen chronologically to the same person. There is no causal relationship among the episodes whose place in the narrative could easily be shifted without affecting the story. Indeed,

one can omit whole episodes without radically changing the story of Moll Flanders. Unlike life, which is often chaotic and contains meaningless incidents and accidents, one expects to find form, order and meaning in fiction: everything in a work of art should be accounted for and nothing should be redundant. The reader of Moll Flanders may be quite disappointed to find that some episodes are superfluous and that others are irrelevant to the main plot of the book.

Unlike the vast majority of the critics of Moll Flanders, Terence Martin has stated that Moll Flanders is unified, at least in connection with motivation and geography. Accordingly he sees Moll's efforts as an attempt, in the second part of the book, to regain the security she has known as a wife in the first part; in middle age she revisits most of the scenes of her early life as stages in this attempt; thus the geographical pattern is circular.⁵ It is unlikely that Defoe consciously organised his novel in this way; moreover Martin's argument is a little strained especially in connection with geography which has a limited relation to the plot of the novel. Moll Flanders' adventures do not really form part of any larger structure. The series of robberies, for example, fails to lead up to a climax.

Although there is a degree of structural coherence in Moll's marriage with her half-brother which has vague links with her birth and with the end of the novel, the plot remains submerged in the details of Moll's other activities. The only unity in the plot is that everything in the novel happens to the same person.

Consequently the character of Moll Flanders is everything in the novel. She is presumably our only guide to the events and to the other characters; in other words, she functions as a centre of consciousness in Henry James's sense of the term although how adequately she performs this role is something which should be explored. Because she is a criminal justifying all the time her crimes in ridiculously narrow terms, and because her distinction between good and evil is blurred and distorted one can safely conclude that Moll Flanders is not a reliable narrator.

Although we are tempted to sympathise with the difficult circumstances of a poor, desolate woman in the 18th century, yet we are fully aware of her limitations, mercantile mentality and even her superficiality. She never grasps the reality of any situation behind strict material measurement. Thus there is no psychological depth, inner conflict, or humanistic dimension in

her portrayal. Defoe is not skillful at describing individual reactions; he gives a clinical picture of the emotion itself, not of the person undergoing it; he views everything, including human relationship, in terms of numbers and through a material perspective as the following passage clearly shows:

It concerns the story in hand very little to enter into the further particulars of the family, or of myself for the five years that I lived with this husband, only to observe that I had two children by him, and that at the end of five years he died. He had been really a very good husband to me, and we lived very agreeably together; but as he had not received much from them, and had in the little time he lived acquired no great matters, so my circumstances were not great, nor was I much mended by the match. Indeed, I had preserved the elder brother's bonds to me, to pay me £500, which he offered me for my consent to marry his brother; and this, with what I had saved of the money he formerly gave me, and about as much more by my husband, left me a widow with about £1200 in my pocket. (P.76)

The reader is aware of the material force of phrases like 'what a very good husband', 'lived very agreeably', 'received much', 'acquired no

great matters', 'my circumstances were not great', and 'much mended by the match'. For Moll 'a very good husband', for instance, simply means a man who can provide her with all the necessary material luxuries of the middle class. She is not concerned with mutual understanding between husband and wife. The human relationship in marriage is reduced to numbers and figures.⁶ In fact, This novel abounds in figures and they, according to Moll and her creator, determine the value of any situation. Thus Moll is defined as 'a widow [left] with about £1200', not as a widow who is spiritually endowed with a special power to stand up to all challenges, or a widow who can manipulate her own fate in a world dominated by men, or even a widow who is unfortunate in terms of finding the right man who can understand her potentiality, etc. Defoe only concentrates on drawing an external picture of his heroine without attempting to get inside her and expose her inner reality to the reader. He is not as successful as other writers in the English tradition who have created outstanding female characters. Jane Austen's Emma, George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss, Henry James's The Portrait of a Lady, and Angus Wilson's The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot are all successful works of fiction which provide a comprehensive picture of

women whose ambition is to achieve self-realisation through self-examination and interacting with life and people. The females in these works are particularly projected from the inside and they prove that their inner resources are in no way inferior to those of men; this enables them to learn through new experiences in the course of their reeducation in life. Unlike these heroines, Moll Flanders' inner resources are extremely limited and her cold, economic and calculating mind dominates her personality; hence she resorts to crime in order to get a 'room at the top' at all costs.

Moll Flanders is not exactly placed in extremely difficult circumstances which force her to opt for crime but her outlook and ambition could not be reconciled with her kind of reality. She has to choose between servitude and crime and she finds no difficulty in convincing herself to opt for the latter. Perhaps she is partly justified considering her strong desire to become a member of the genteel class and her special revulsion at becoming a servant; both of which attitudes are created by her own social environment. The justification or condemnation of Moll Flanders' decision to become a criminal may, to some extent, depend on the individual personal response to the circumstances of this character; what is certain, however, is that Defoe has not, on the

whole, been able to create a strongly individualised character who can overcome the difficulties she confronts and who can manipulate her own fate rather than the other way round.

By the same token, the main themes of thievery, prostitution, and incest are treated superficially principally because the character who is supposed to carry them out is not a strong individual. Among these themes, thievery is the most realistically portrayed because the scenes of theft are described vividly and all the necessary details are aptly given as if they were actually written by a thief. It is in those scenes intended to illustrate what might be called circumstantial detail- which is to give exact information as to what happens in reality - that Defoe's mastery of fiction writing is most evident. The description of customs, the setting, the crowd of people, and the movement and reactions of Moll Flanders when she is planning to steal - all enhance the atmosphere of reality and create a special sense of immediacy in spite of the separation between events and the time of narration. Here is an episode of an attempted theft which provides a convincing picture as if drawn by an experienced thief with all the necessary details about Moll and the setting :

The next thing of moment was an attempt at a gentlewoman's gold watch. It happened in a crowd, at a meeting-house, where I was in very great danger of being taken. I had full hold of her watch, but giving a great jostle, as if somebody had thrust me against her, and in the juncture giving the watch a fair pull, I found it would not come, so I let it go that moment, and cried out as if I had been killed, that somebody had trod upon my foot, and that there were certainly pick-pockets there, for somebody or other had given a pull at my watch; for you are to observe that on these adventures we always went very well dressed, and I had very good clothes on, and a gold watch by my side, as like a lady as other folks ... (P. 205)

In spite of his theoretical objections to crime Defoe succumbs to the danger of writing a crime story by almost becoming a criminal himself. He is often absorbed so totally in the story that at times one finds it difficult to determine the writer's attitude towards thievery; although theoretically we are aware of Defoe's position, yet it is sometimes unclear whether or not he is criticising systematically the society which produced Moll Flanders. Her repentance at the end of the story, however, makes the reader conclude that Moll Flanders is a case of aberration who should get back to the social 'norm' if she is to

survive at all. Although thievery is realistically portrayed in the novel, Defoe does not get down to the real problem which causes it. In his treatment of this theme, as elsewhere, he oscillates between Defoe the puritan who is keen on moralising and Defoe the bohemian who enjoys breaking away from rigid social rules.

Both thievery and prostitution were not particularly suitable subjects for the 18th century audience. The picaresque novel, however, popularised the theme of thievery and made it quite possible for Defoe to deal with it freely. But the subject of prostitution was certainly 'taboo' in the 18th century which Defoe could not deal with freely had he wanted to. It was daring enough of him to merely include it in his novel. Naturally, Defoe could not portray any scenes of Moll's 'prostituting' activities or deal with the psychology of his heroine while she is in the process of practicing her 'profession'. By contrast a modern novel about prostitution is bound to provide a comprehensive picture of the typical life of a prostitute to the extent of portraying in detail scenes of sexual intercourse. It also usually deals with the difficulty of a prostitute's acceptance to provide sexual joy to somebody she finds

revolting. It may even question the validity of 'moral' objections of traditional social attitudes to prostitution. Aside from one scene in Moll Flanders where Moll finds herself driven to sexual intercourse with a drunk she is planning to rob, there is nothing really prostitutional about Moll's life, at least by the standards of the English society today. All her love-making activities are not strictly speaking prostitutional and they can be practiced by any 'decent' lady in England nowadays; but the puritan society looked at Moll as a 'whore' who was violating society's most 'sacred' values.

If Defoe is partly excused for not dealing adequately with prostitution because of his apparent alliance with the puritans he has no excuse whatever to lightly treat a subject which was considered serious by society such as incest. For as soon as Moll discovers her incestuous marriage with her half-brother she of course regrets the unfortunate union but almost automatically wishes that she had not known anything about it and that she continued the marriage since her brother was providing her with all the necessary material comforts:

I was now the most unhappy of all women in the world. oh! had the story never been told me all had been well; it had been no crime to have lain

with my husband, since as to being my relation I had known nothing of it .(P.102).

Even after she goes back to England and spends some time there she wishes again that she had not discovered the unfortunate incestuous union since her marriage with her brother was 'happier' than her new situation:

.... and I reflected that I might with less offence have continued with my brother, and lived with him as a wife , since there was no crime in our marriage on that score, neither of us knowing it.(P.132).

This reaction is really absurd and one feels as if Defoe was flirting with his reader on a very serious and solemn subject. Another novelist would have made a tragedy out of the situation .As a matter of fact when King Oedipus discovers his incestuous union with his mother he blinds his own eyes, while his mother commits suicide. But for Defoe and his heroine the discovery is only unfortunate, just one of several unhappy occurrences in Moll's life. The writer simply throws away a material for tragedy. It would certainly strain the argument to conclude that Defoe was questioning traditional views of incest. The man was simply unconcerned with the 'spirituality' of any situation .

Defoe has created a character who

cannot be restricted by either love, tragedy, human relationships , or anything. For this reason love for Moll is not love , tragedy is not tragedy and human relationships are not what they are supposed to be. All these have no influence on Moll's life in any way. They are treated superficially and they do not prevent Moll from proceeding on measuring every situation according to a few figures. There is not , in the whole novel , a complex situation. If there were two choices in a particular situation then Moll mechanically opts for the more profitable one regardless of the emotional consequences, if any. When , for example, Defoe presents a complex situation with a possible crucial moral choice by confronting his heroine with either choosing a man she claims to love, the highwayman, or a successful clerk, the banking man, she automatically opts for the latter simply because of the material comforts he is prepared to provide. Again, when the marriage does occur her past love of the highwayman does not affect her union in any way. Another novelist would take this opportunity for clarifying his heroine's conflicting motives over the two men and might, furthermore , compare the two types of characters in society: the one who is socially successful but unloved by the heroine, the other who is a criminal but is able to draw his beloved to himself and his

world of deviation. Defoe does not attempt to do that or present a moral dilemma in his novel simply because he has created a heroine who cannot conceive a situation with such a dilemma. Consequently we know very little about the quality of Moll's 'love affairs', and we have to assume that they do not possess any deep emotional feelings about them, at least as far as Moll is concerned. The twelve years of 'whoring' and the five marriages which the title of the novel refers to, one may conclude, do not have any one relationship that is meaningful emotionally from a modern reader's point of view.

Perhaps it is cruel to demand of somebody who is principally seeking financial security in life a fully realised emotional relationship; however, when Moll does get the financial security she is desperately looking for, i.e. when she is married to the banking man for five years, she remains as callous as ever to her human emotions. Similarly, we know very little about her children and we have to conclude that she is a callous and somewhat unnatural mother by any conventional standard. Perhaps her life as a criminal necessitated a particular type of conduct which does not show either deep human relationships or emotional commitment to men and children

(although one may doubt that criminals do not have emotional commitments); but again there were times in Moll's life when she was not a criminal and was leading a conventional way of living as a wife and yet she did not show any emotional commitments. She does not even respond fully and humanly to the facts of life, of birth, and death, and she immediately and almost mechanically adapts herself to any situation. Her children are never an obstacle in her way for whatever she sets out to do. Their fate is never accounted for, and aside from Humphrey, they are born merely to die because Moll herself does not need them.

Indeed, everything in the novel exists for Moll's sake and almost disappears when Moll does not need it. Her ego-centred world dominates everything in the book. Not even one character resents Moll in any way and they all praise her very highly and show ultimate devotion. The highwayman, the governess, and Humphrey could provide the reader with a somewhat 'objective' picture of Moll but unfortunately they are not fully free characters to do so since they themselves are conveyed to us through Moll. Because Moll is a criminal and sometimes dishonest even with those she pretends to love, one may doubt her evaluation of the other characters in the novel and their apparent

adoration . In fact, Moll is self - deceived and is perhaps, psychologically speaking, desperately looking for some kind of imagined emotional security which she has failed to find in real life and which for her meant the fascination of the outside world with her personality and 'achievements' . One expects the governess, for example, to regret that she has lost a valuable partner in crime when Moll suddenly repents; instead, she herself becomes automatically 'a true penitent' who is also given to preaching. It is obvious that the writer is unable to create 'free' secondary characters; the few 'puppets' around Moll are more or less a projection of one side or another of the heroine - herself a projection of Daniel Defoe.⁷

In fact, one can safely conclude that Defoe is not able to create an artistic distance between himself and his material, and that there are many similarities between the author and his character to the extent of concluding that Moll herself is an honest copy of her creator . For Moll is not inhibited by her sex in doing anything . Although she has some female traits these do not prevent her from acting like males and at times becoming a thief among^{men}; she is, in fact, often dressed like men when she is attempting to steal .

Besides, all the values which are embraced by Defoe are echoed in one way or another by his heroine. Essentially both accept the Machiavellian principle that the end justifies the means and they are prepared to do anything in their power to achieve worldly success: Moll chooses crime while Defoe thrilling and popular journalism and, he even becomes, at one time in his life, a government secret 'agent' . Both Defoe and Moll are fascinated by gentility and middle class life - style and they are prepared to prostitute themselves for that purpose: one prostitutes his intellectual side, the other her physical. They are, furthermore, marked by a strong tendency to preach on any situation even when it is most awkward that they should do so. Thus Moll claims that she is stealing a necklace from a child because she wants to teach the parents a lesson that they should attend to their children; behind this argument is Defoe's desperate attempt to search for 'lessons' . Neither the author nor the character finds it odd to sermonise on an awkward situation like this . Moll's criticism of 'unnatural mothers' who leave their children unguarded is really ridiculous since she is herself more of an 'unnatural' mother than they. By the same token, Defoe wants to convince us that the drunken man whom

Moll robs should also be given a hard lesson by taking his money away from him so that he will never get into that dreadful situation and he quotes the Bible to support his argument; nothing is said about the immoral implications of robbing a child or a drunken man as if it was justifiable for Moll to steal anything which is not guarded. Most of the arguments used in the novel to justify Moll's behaviour are extremely strained and could only reflect a puritan mentality.

Actually 'self-righteousness' has been described as characteristic of the viewpoint of the puritans who found no contradiction between criticising others while being blind to their own faults. Like the puritan Defoe, Moll Flanders often displays the attitude of virtuous and public-minded citizens, even when she is committing crimes against society, crimes which she justifies as necessitated by difficult circumstances and not committed out of deviation. The Puritans could easily recognise the faults of others but usually ignored their own. Moll often criticises 'unnatural mothers' 'drunken people' and even thinks of criminals as vicious, ignoring that she herself is one of them. The Puritans also equated worldly success with moral righteousness and conse -

quently failure with evil. Thus Moll does not so much regret doing wrong or adopting a criminal career as she does being caught. She is not, in other words, concerned with the moral implications of any action as she is concerned with materially benefiting from it and avoiding punishment.

Actually the preface of the novel demonstrates Defoe's strong tendency to justify writing 'fiction' and to, by hook or by crook, try to convince the reader that there are many lessons to be learned from reading Moll Flanders. On the whole the preface is naive in its assumption that it will benefit the reader and make him change his life style. The novel, moreover, does not substantiate any claim stated in the preface; on the contrary it attempts to find a way to justify crime under certain circumstances and to deceive the reader into believing that there is always a possibility to repent at the end. The preface states bluntly that 'there is not a wicked action in any part of it, but is first or last rendered unhappy or unfortunate', (P.30) In other words, Defoe wants to say that vice must be paid for and that crime does not pay. The action of the novel, however, does not substantiate this simple argument but tries to convince the reader that if he happens to be involved in crime he should not repent

until he has built up an adequate income through crime. For, on the one hand, Moll at one time possesses a comparatively huge amount of money (£500) and yet she continues in her career after she closely and consciously analyses her situation. On the other hand, when she repents she does not disgorge her ill gotten gains which are the basis of her prosperity and repentance. The whole action of Moll Flanders supports the view that if honesty does not work, then crime may prove rewarding. For Moll is placed in certain circumstances whereby she has to choose between servitude and crime and without much resistance or any strong sense of dilemma she opts for the latter. Her Decision provides her with vast opportunities to experience life fully and then when circumstances allow she presumably repents without getting any real punishment.

Moreover, her presumed change is not convincing and it is achieved through some form of 'Deus Ex Machina'; the reader is not sufficiently prepared to accept this change which is achieved externally by the prison chaplain who, like a god brought down by machine, saves the heroine from hanging. There is no internal conflict which is used to convince us of the radical spiritual change in her life. Indeed, the reader has the legitimate

right to ask whether Moll Flanders changes at all. Thus even after her assumed penitence her mercantile mentality continues to dominate her life. For once she has lost the power to be a criminal in life because of old age she begins to 'invest' in 'heaven'. Penitence for Moll is therefore a way to live comfortably in what she believes to be a second life. The reader can in this connection conclude that once Moll is poor she is bound to become a criminal whereas when she is prosperous and old she turns into 'a true penitent'. Her attitude towards her husband's penitence confirms this conclusion. She even finds no contradiction in juxtaposing religious words and counting her, and her husband's, new property :

.... Then I let him know what I had brought over in the sloop, besides all this; I mean the horses, hogs, and cows, and other stores for our plantation; all which added to his surprise, and filled his heart with thankfulness and from this time forward I believe he was as sincere a penitent, and as thoroughly a reformed man, as ever God's goodnees brought back from a profligate, a highwayman, and a robber. (P. 314)

This juxtaposition of religious phrases with 'horses, hogs and cows.. brings us to another critical aspect

of the novel and raises the question whether Defoe is mocking his heroine regarding certain serious aspects of her life . In other words, is the author being ironical in deliberately juxtaposing two 'contradictory' aspects in order to make fun of his heroine ? More specifically, is he conspiring with the intelligent reader against a kind of penitence caused by sudden prosperity and against insipid sermonising preached immediately after committing crimes ? Perhaps the question of irony, if there is any, is better understood in terms of the social history of the 18th century. Perhaps there were some radical changes in certain social attitudes in England to the extent of considering ironical what was felt to be deadly serious in the 18th century puritan society. It may be odd for us to think that the puritans found nothing funny in explicitly basing repentance on prosperity or in sermonising when it was most unlikely and awkward to have done so . In the light of these assumptions one may conclude that 'ironical' scenes - as when Moll unexpectedly shows signs of sentimentality and common sense by kissing the ground which her son has just trodden on and desisting as soon as she discovers that it is 'damp and dangerous' - are merely

slips of an inaccurate narration in the same way that there are contradictory details as when Moll presents her son with a golden watch whose descriptions exactly correspond to those of the one she unsuccessfully attempted to steal . Defoe had undoubtedly an unreconciled personality between puritanism and bohemianism and this was reflected in apparently contradictory attitudes in his narrative, something which tempts the modern reader to conclude that Defoe was sometimes ironical in his novel. The fact that Defoe is always echoed by his heroine and his inability to create a free character (unlike himself) also help the reader to conclude from the portrayal of Moll Flanders that Defoe is a puritan in theory, a bohemian in practice who delights in violating social rules . This is really one reason why the criminal part of the novel is far more interesting and fascinating than the penitent part when Moll has only bland preaching to offer. In the criminal part everything is dramatised, in the penitent one the story is hurried up to enable Defoe draw the conclusions he wants . Although he does not explicitly say so Defoe reflects himself in Moll Flanders by portraying an individual who is not at heart convinced of society's values and the divisions between the rich and the poor and consequently finds it, in

practice at least, justifiable to break those rigid puritan rules in order to achieve her ambition of securing a 'comfortable' way of living. This conflict may be responsible for what appears to the modern reader as ironical statements or situations. This is not to conclude that there is not any conscious irony in the novel as when young Moll Flanders strongly desires to become a 'gentlewoman' (P.38) not knowing that one meaning of the word is a prostitute. In this way she is ironically and unconsciously predicting her own future of genteel prostitution and the pursuit of middle class life style. Here, however it is unlikely that Defoe is mocking his young heroine, he is simply drawing attention to the irony of fate that Moll should unconsciously have the insight to prophesy her own 'dreadful' future. There is not one example which unequivocally shows that Defoe is conspiring with the intelligent reader to ridicule his heroine for her apparently moralising and misplaced generalisations and comments. The modern reader should remind himself again and again that Defoe is badly in need of extricating a moral lesson out of any situation in order to fulfil the promise he made in the preface that reading Moll Flanders is morally highly rewarding and that there is a wide

gap both in time and thinking between us and the 18th century.

Apparently Moll Flanders has more faults than merits, but the novel among other pioneering works, helped to establish 'realism' in fiction as we understand it today and to portray a world of conflicting ethical values which give us a picture of the kind of society the 18th century had produced. Defoe's autobiographical narrative, his portrayal of the seamy side of life, his rejection of artificial stylistic conventions, his setting and vivid details, especially in the scenes of theft, are all remarkable achievements particularly if we take into account that the man was the first writer to start writing the kind of fiction which was to become a starting point for other contemporary and later writers in the English tradition. Furthermore, his deviation from social norms and at the same time his insistence on moralising throughout his novel provide us with a dramatised and convincing picture of the 18th century world which was beginning to question the very basic structure of society's ideals and values. Perhaps people like Defoe were partly responsible for beginning an inquiry into the 'moral' and social values of the 18th century society. Because he is less of a conscious and sophisticated novelist than his contemporaries Defoe is able to present to us a much more

valuable psychological study of an unsettled personality. He is divided between loyalty to puritan values and a strong desire to break away from social norms. In spite of this conflict he maintains and insists

that the world is still 'harmonious' and ruled by a 'supervisor'. This last characteristic is, indeed, the dominant feature of eighteenth century fiction no matter how differently expressed.

مول فلاندرز : بين النظرية والتطبيق

يعالج هذا البحث المشكلات المتعددة التي واجهت دانيال ديغو حينما كتب روايته مول فلاندرز في زمن لم تكن الرواية قد أسست بعد كنوع أدبي . وكان على ديغو أن يؤكد لقراءه البيوريتانيين أن روايته قد حدثت في الواقع وانها مثال أخلاقي يحتذى به . ان غاية ديغو " التعليمية " هي أن " يعظ " القارئ بأن التوبة مفتوحة أمام الانسان مهما شد . هناك صراع أساسي بين ما يدعيه الكاتب وبين واقع الاحداث وقد يعود ذلك الى الانقسام في شخصية ديغو بين البيوريتانية التي تصر على قواعد دينية معينة في السلوك وبين البوهيمية التي تطمح الى التحلل من جميع القيود الاجتماعية ، وهو أنجح في تصوير الجزء البوهيمي من شخصية البطلة . ان نجاح مول فلاندرز الحقيقي يتجلى في تركيزه على العوامل التي تؤكد على واقعية الرواية في تصويرها للحياة الاجتماعية كما تحدث فعلا وخاصة في معالجتها للجانب الأسوأ من الحياة المتعلق بالفقر والجريمة .

NOTES

- 1- C.H.Holman, A Handbook to literature The Odyssey press, New York 1960, P 351 .
- 2- The picaresque novel may have originally presented serious social problems about roguery but later it tended to be principally an amusing account of how a rogue tricks his society . See Ibid.PP. 351 - 353. see also A.Kettle , 'Defoe and the Picaresque Tradition ' in An Introduction to the English Novel, London, 1951 -3 , Vol . 1 PP. 52 - 58 .
- 3- Daniel Defoe, Moll Flanders , Penguin Books, 1980, P. 188. All other references to the novel are from this edition .
- 4- E.M.Forster, Aspects of the Novel, Edward Arnold & Co, London, 1949, P.61.
- 5- Terence Martin, 'The Unity of Moll Flanders', Modern Language Quarterly, Vol. XXII, 1961, PP.115 - 124 .
- 6- See Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function, New York, 1953, PP. 33 - 43 .
- 7- See Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1981, PP.126 - 7.

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