



Use of capitalism in *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe

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Abstract:

Moll provides a human face to crime. Defoe suggests it's easy to dismiss criminals and want to hang them all until we get to know one, in this case Moll. We're forced to see her as an individual, to learn what life is like for someone like her, born to be an outsider by virtue of birth and poverty. We have to recognise her as a person, who suffers and triumphs, loves and loses, a person with fundamental good qualities but capable of moral weakness, someone rather like us in some ways - a sobering thought!

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1. Daniel Defoe (1660-1731)

Novelist, journalist and entrepreneur. Probably the most versatile journalist of his time and a prolific writer – over 500 publications. Best known today for his novels, especially *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724). As a novelist, he was primarily interested in man as a social being, not in individual psychology (this became the focus of attention in the Romantic era). Fascinated by travel (he himself travelled extensively in Europe), adventure, piracy and crime (piracy for landlubbers!) His own life was pretty colourful: he was a spy from 1697 to 1714, initially for William III and then for various ministers.

2. *Moll Flanders* in literary context

The novel as a form was very much in its infancy when Defoe was writing *Moll Flanders*; trying to make it fit into any one category isn't necessarily helpful. In the introduction to the 1989 Penguin edition, David Blewett approves Robert Alter's definition of Moll's narrative as 'quasi-picaresque'; other scholars such as Lincoln Faller tend to emphasise its relation to crime narratives. There is no one 'correct' approach: Defoe draws on various literary traditions and we need to have a basic awareness of them. 4 main literary traditions to be aware of when reading *Moll F*: romance; picaresque; puritan narrative; crime narratives.

3. Romance

The form originated in 12th century France, characteristically recounting the story of a knight and his adventures and concerned with courtly values in all aspects of society, love and battle. Other elements may include the supernatural and a love interest. Romances aren't fundamentally concerned with individual characterisation, although some of the more complex ones explore the psychological development of the hero through his adventures and offer a critique of society and its values. *Moll Flanders* clearly owes much to the tradition of romanticised folk-heroes or 'rogue-romance'. It has elements of romance such as finding long lost relatives, the rise to gentility, the incest theme (often only implied in romance due to confused identities eg Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* thinks at one point that Fanny is his sister - disaster is averted and we find out that she isn't). In *Moll Flanders* we have the traditional mistaken identities but the result is tragic and horrifying because the incest is actual, not an implied threat to natural order and to the

stability of the family but an actual crime. Defoe appropriates romance conventions to add colour but *Moll Flanders* is clearly not simply a romance.

4. Picaresque

Emerged in the 16th century in Spain: picaresque narratives provided a realistic account of the life of a rogue (picaro) who survives various adventures by his wits, often satirising society. The term came to be applied to anyone at odds with society, for eg Fielding's Tom Jones, who is an outsider because he's illegitimate. *Moll Flanders* has many picaresque elements: the low born rogue, a variety of adventures, sexual freedom, panorama of life reflected in the travels of the protagonist - cf Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews and their travels. The novel is steeped in irony and satire, which is closely associated with the picaresque. However, we also have to account for the strong religious element in *Moll Flanders*, something one doesn't find in picaresque novels.

5. Defoe and Puritan tradition

Part of Moll's literary heritage lies in the Puritan tradition of written meditations and spiritual diaries. Defoe's was brought up as a Presbyterian and he intended to go into the ministry - he had a solid theological education which inevitably informs much of his writing. The title page indicates how we should read the novel: Defoe claims that the narrative is based on Moll's 'memorandums'. This book purports to be the narrative of Moll's life - Defoe does NOT call it a novel - works we now call novels often claimed to be transcripts of real diaries, memoirs, letters etc to give an impression of truth; novels, along with the earlier romances, were often condemned as frivolous, as opposed to morally useful works. By presenting the narrative as true and by stressing on the title page that it is the life of a sinner who repents, Defoe stakes a claim for the novel as a moral work; Blewett refers to it usefully as 'a moral fable'. The list of her crimes, while establishing Moll as a sinner, also whets the reader's appetite for scandal. In Puritan tradition, life is understood in biblical terms of sin, repentance and redemption. Man faces a series of trials and moral choices. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for eg, is, among other things, the narrative of a self reliant, rather proud man, who comes to recognise his sin and submit to God. Puritan tradition is about man's place in the universe - how he copes with the moral choices that define his being. The episodic nature of Moll's adventures reflects the fragmented and often confused experiences of human life as we struggle to find meaning. Underlying this is the sub text of providence and thus the assurance of ultimate meaning in a divinely ordered universe: Moll seeks meaning through increasingly desperate acts to obtain wealth and social position; things society teaches us give our lives meaning. The text is complex in that we are dependent on Moll's account. She puts an editorial gloss as it were on the narrative of her life, interpreting the experience or text of her youth through the wisdom of age and repentance. We are not given immediate access to the events of the novel and never receive an unmediated account. We are reading Moll's memoirs, a narrative which functions as an appeal to the reader to like and forgive her and, ostensibly at least, a moral directive to follow the good example of her repentant old age, not the bad example of her criminal youth. Moll is a variation on the biblical parable of the prodigal son - he goes off to do his own thing, wanting freedom without responsibility to God, his family or society. He squanders his inheritance, gets involved with dissolute figures and ultimately ends up degraded and desperate, living in a literal pigsty. Newgate is Defoe's equivalent to the pigsty. Ultimately the son swallows his pride and returns to his father, begs forgiveness and offers himself as a servant; Moll's submission to transportation, a form of slavery, provides a clear parallel. The prodigal son is welcomed by his father; Defoe and his readers would have been familiar with the parable and its meaning that God welcomes penitent sinners; this is one of the reasons so much of the novel is concerned with whether or not Moll's repentance is genuine. Moll learns that man does not live alone in an individual moral universe;

total freedom on an individual level to do anything we want would lead to anarchy. Moll learns that individual behaviour has to be regulated by law in order for society to have any hope of harmony and stability - human beings are not by nature good citizens but something closer to what Hobbes described. Thomas Hobbes was an influential 17th century philosopher, whose theories were well known in the 18th century. He was a materialist, who argued that man is simply a physical being and so thought and emotion are physical processes. His was a mechanistic, atheistic view of the world, denying freedom of will and arguing that our behaviour is determined solely by our reactions to pleasure and pain. He argued that human beings are essentially selfish and defined morality as conforming to social restraint out of self interest as a means of avoiding anarchy. Hobbes's best known work is *Leviathan* (1651), in which he explains his theories of human nature. He drew a distinction between man in society and man as he would be in a state of nature, without law and social regulation as part of the moral and political systems which govern our behaviour. He refers in *Leviathan* to this theoretical state of nature as 'a war of all against all', a perpetual state of savagery, where 'every man is enemy to every man' and life is 'nasty, brutish and short'. Hobbes felt England had come close to this during the Civil War of 1642-8. Hobbes constructed a philosophical myth of the origins of society, arguing that man had decided to exchange natural freedom for the benefits of peace and profit. He believed that human nature is so untrustworthy that external political and legal powers and severe punishments are necessary to restrain us. Moll lives in a sort of Hobbesian state of nature for a while, preying on the weak by thieving in a world which supports the survival of the fittest. Indeed she is sometimes viewed as a kind of early capitalist woman.

6. Moll and Capitalism

Juliet Mitchell in her intro to the 1978 Penguin edition of *Moll Flanders* sums up Moll's world as follows: 'The first decades after the removal of King James in 1688 were in certain senses the most revolutionary in English history. This was the period of bourgeois revolution transcendent, of individualism and capitalism let loose, of the transition from the religion-based ethics of feudalism to the secular ethics of capitalism...Property became King'(pp.9-10). She notes on p.11: 'fewer and fewer people were persecuted, as they had been previously, for opinions they held, political or religious; the rapid escalation of the death penalty was for offences against property'. In the light of the emergent values of capitalism, Mitchell views Moll as 'the new small time capitalist...progressing to what...she rightly takes to be the capitalist definition of a gentlewoman - the wife of a prosperous businessman or a self-made woman in her own right'(pp.11-12). Moll's marriage to the draper enables her to achieve a degree of bourgeois status but of course this is short lived and she finds that in her society, capitalist values favour men: women were not educated to engage in trade and even if they managed to find someone to teach them, they were often not legally in a position to trade: most women had no legal identity and therefore couldn't fulfil contracts. The legal identity of unmarried women under 21 was subsumed into that of the father; when a woman married, her legal identity was vested in her husband. The law put women in the same category as children and lunatics, with no legal identity or the rights which attend such an identity. The only women who really had a legal identity were widows. This is why Moll stresses her status as respectable widow - it means she has certain rights and the legal ability to trade. However, as she finds out, she still can't compete on an equal footing with men because she has to rely on male bankers etc - she can't run her affairs herself. There were successful women traders in the 18th century but society made it very difficult for them - capitalism was essentially a masculine dream - the woman's part lay in basking in the glory of her husband's success and running the household in as genteel a manner as possible. Frustrated at the difficulties society puts in her way and determined to gain money and thus status and power, Moll turns to a different market and sells herself, initially by marrying for

money and ultimately in prostitution. Defoe in no way condones his heroine's behaviour but neither does he dwell on what was in reality a tragic and ugly profession which invariably led to disease, poverty and death. Defoe chooses rather to show us why Moll becomes involved in various kinds of crime (prostitution was and is a crime). Critics such as Mitchell rightly point out that for Moll, it is a kind of alternative trade - the only form of capitalism easily open to women of the time but such a view denies the clear moral register of the text. We must be wary of interpreting Moll's behaviour simply as an expression of capitalist principles when for Defoe it is clearly a moral issue. Moll is also an extreme example of the pragmatic and materialistic way in which her society approached moral values. She is well aware that her society's concern for feminine virtue wasn't to satisfy religious standards but to ensure that children would be legitimate heirs and that a man wouldn't be leaving his estate to another man's child. Moll's rather calculating attitude towards moral values, her concern with being 'found out' as opposed to genuine moral feeling, partly reflects 18th century attitudes in general. The 18th century was full of contradictions: great intellectual achievements in literature, philosophy and science, religious revival; yet beneath the civilised veneer there was gross hypocrisy and immorality on a scale that would make 20th century tabloids blush. In questioning Moll's moral decisions, Defoe questions his society and its values.

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