

# Daniel Defoe

- Biography
- The Education of Women
- Preface to *Moll Flanders*

- Dr Jumana Al-Dahhak 2020

# Daniel Defoe



2020

# Daniel Defoe

- Born Daniel Foe in 1660, he was an English trader, writer, journalist, and spy.
- He later added the aristocratic-sounding "De" to his name as he **wanted a gentlemanly title**.
- Defoe is noted for being one of the earliest proponents of the English Novel, and is considered by many critics to be the **Father of the English Novel**.

# Daniel Defoe

- He was educated to become a minister.
- He worked as a hosiery **merchant**.
- Also worked as a secret agent for William III and other ministers.
- He produced a pro-government paper titled "Review"
- He was a very prolific writer who produced more than 500 books on many subjects.

# Daniel Defoe

- He delighted in role playing and disguise (a skill he learned from working as a secret agent), and in his writings he often adopted a pseudonym or another personality.
- He turned to writing fiction late in his life (aged 59) and published his first novel *Robinson Crusoe* 1719.
- He later turned to writing novels that portrayed rogue criminals, like *Moll Flanders* 1722.

# Daniel Defoe: “The Education of Women”

- One of the essays Defoe wrote, which is useful to our forthcoming discussion of his *Moll Flanders*, is his essay on the education of women.
- As we will see, Defoe argues for giving women proper education to qualify them as useful citizens in society, rather than unjustly branding them as stupid, ignorant and unmannerly.
- The slides titled “The Education of Women” include excerpts taken from the full essay, with notes on the important points in each.

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

"I HAVE often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world...that we deny the advantages of learning to women. We reproach the sex every day with folly and impertinence; while I am confident, had they the advantages of education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than ourselves."

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

- Notes on the passage: Defoe is critical of patriarchal society which does not give proper education to women. This same society which satirizes folly and rudeness in women is the same one which does not give them good education to help them cultivate their skills and manners.



# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

"Their youth is spent to teach them to stitch and sew or make baubles. They are taught to read, indeed, and perhaps to write their names, or so; and that is the height of a woman's education. And I would but ask any who slight the sex for their understanding, what is a man (a gentleman, I mean) good for, that is taught no more?"

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

- Notes on the passage: Defoe is not happy either with the traditional education women are given. A woman in 18<sup>th</sup> century England was typically instructed on how to become a marriageable woman, a good wife and mother, how to read and write, but no more than that. Defoe draws a comparison between men and women saying that women are viewed as lacking in understanding and smartness because they are not given good education, which would be the fate of any man if not educated properly. In other words, Defoe is ahead of his time, viewing men and women as equal citizens in society.

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

"But why then should women be denied the benefit of instruction? If knowledge and understanding had been useless additions to the sex, GOD Almighty would never have given them capacities; for he made nothing needless. Besides, I would ask such, What they can see in ignorance, that they should think it a necessary ornament to a woman? ...Why did we not let her learn, that she might have had more wit? Shall we upbraid women with folly, when 'tis only the error of this inhuman custom, that hindered them from being made wiser?"

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

- Notes on the passage: Defoe goes on to say that women should not be denied proper education. He uses religious discourse to support his argument, stressing that God created women with minds and capacity to learn, and God would never create a needless thing.

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# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

"[They] should be taught all sorts of breeding suitable both to their genius and quality. And in particular, Music and Dancing... But besides this, they should be taught languages, as particularly French and Italian... They should, as a particular study, be taught all the graces of speech, and all the necessary air of conversation... They should be brought to read books, and especially history."

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

- Notes on the passage: Although Defoe calls for female education to be given equally to women, his plan for this education does not go beyond the traditional form given at the time, which qualified women as wives and females, rather than the liberal education which cultivated their minds and intellects as individuals.

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

"A woman well bred and well taught, furnished with the additional accomplishments of knowledge and behaviour, is a creature *without comparison*. Her society is the emblem of sublimer enjoyments, her person is angelic, and her conversation heavenly. She is all softness and sweetness, peace, love, wit, and delight..."

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

- Notes on the passage: Defoe's description of the woman who is given proper education stresses the feminine qualities, rather than human ones. He highlights softness, sweetness, peace, and love as the main characteristics of an educated woman. This reflects the major patriarchal ideology at the time which defined women in terms of their feminine qualities, associating them with weakness, softness, passivity and vulnerability, while men were viewed as strong, articulate and active. This is called binary opposition (dual opposites).



# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

"Here I continued till I was between seventeen and eighteen years old, and here I had all the advantages for my education that could be imagined; the lady had masters home to the house to teach her daughters to dance, and to speak French, and to write, and other to teach them music; and I was always with them, I learned as fast as they; and though the masters were not appointed to teach me, yet I learned by imitation and inquiry all that they learned by instruction and direction; so that, in short, I learned to dance and speak French as well as any of them, and to sing much better, for I had a better voice than any of them." (*Moll Flanders*, chapter 4, p.25)

# Defoe's "The Education of Women"

- Notes on the passage: We will be touching on this passage from *Moll Flanders* in the upcoming lectures, but for the time being, this is the protagonist Moll describing the education programme the ladies in the house she served as a maid were given. It is a traditional form of education which concentrated on teaching women skills to present themselves in society and find a husband (music, dance, French...etc.)

# Defoe's *Moll Flanders*



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# Defoe's *Moll Flanders*

- Notes: It is interesting to examine the cover page (title page) of novels in the eighteenth century as this original copy reflects the project of novelists and publishers: presenting the novel as a commodity for customers (readers) to buy.
- Notice the following:
  1. Titles were rather long, describing in detail the contents of the novel, and meant to attract the readers' attention to the novel to buy it.
  2. In the title, we have details that aim to present the protagonist (Moll) as a 'real' person. She is however a fictitious imaginary character drawn in imitation of reality.
  3. Tantalising details to draw on readers' sense of curiosity: (prostitution, crime, married to her own brother...etc.)
  4. "Written from her own memorandums" is meant to stress authenticity. The novel, Defoe claims, is not fiction but a real work drawn from the memoirs of Moll.

# Defoe's "Preface" to *Moll Flanders*

- Defoe's Preface is:
  - 1) Impassioned attempt to validate the authenticity of the novel (and disclaim responsibility for the work)
  - 2) Justification for the criminal (rogue) biography he is offering.
  - 3) Guide to the reader.

# Defoe's "Preface" to *Moll Flanders*

- Notes: The preface is Defoe's introduction to his novel, where he states his project, what he aims his novel to fulfill, what characterizes his novel, how he presents it as a commodity for readers to buy, and where he appeals to both: readers' tastes and critics' verdict.
- In the preface, as we shall see from the passages chosen in the slides to follow, Defoe fervently aims to present his work as authentic, real, and non-fictitious. Needless to say, this is an illusion writers had to create to popularize their novels among readers who were eager to know the secrets of other similar individuals.
- Added to this, Defoe justifies his choice of the criminal biography (life story of a criminal) by claiming that he intended to convey a moral message to readers and use the unlawful act to teach a lesson.
- Finally, the preface guides the readers on how to read the novel, focus on certain aspects of points to grasp the message.

# Defoe's "Preface": Authenticity

"The world is so taken up of late with novels and romances, that it will be hard for a private history to be taken for genuine, where the names and other circumstances of the person are concealed, and on this account we must be content to leave the reader to pass his own opinion upon the ensuing sheet, and take it just as he pleases."

# Defoe's "Preface": Authenticity

- Notes: Defoe distinguishes his *Moll Flanders* from novels and romances, claiming it to be a genuine 'private history', a real 'autobiography' where names have been concealed. Obviously, this is Defoe's strategy to create the illusion of reality and authenticity and present his work as Moll's memoirs, not a piece of fiction.



# Defoe's "Preface": Authenticity

"The author is here supposed to be writing her own history, and in the very beginning of her account she gives the reasons why she thinks fit to conceal her true name, after which there is no occasion to say any more about that.

It is true that the original of this story is put into new words, and the style of the famous lady we here speak of is a little altered; particularly she is made to tell her own tale in modester words than she told it at first, the copy which came first to hand having been written in language more like one still in Newgate than one grown penitent and humble, as she afterwards pretends to be."

# Defoe's "Preface": Authenticity

- Notes:

1. Defoe claims that Moll Flanders, the heroine, is the authentic writer of her memoirs, which he presents as an 'account' rather than novel. He presents her as a real person with a hidden identity. This is one of the techniques of realism, where reference is made to reality and a camouflaged identity.
2. Defoe also creates the illusion that he is not the writer, but the editor of the work. He claim he has mainly modified, changed, and edited the original work to make it presentable to the public.
3. When Defoe claims he had to change the language into a more suitable language for publishing, he is also creating the illusion that it was Moll who wrote it in her own vulgar language and style, which had to be polished by an editor, Defoe.

# Defoe's "Preface": Authenticity

"We cannot say, indeed, that this history is carried on quite to the end of the life of this famous Moll Flanders, as she calls herself, for nobody can write their own life to the full end of it, unless they can write it after they are dead. But her husband's life, being written by a third hand, gives a full account of them both, how long they lived together in that country, and how they both came to England again..."

# Defoe's "Preface": Authenticity

- Notes: In his constant attempts to enhance the illusion of reality, Defoe fills all gaps. So if one wonders how can Moll Flanders keep writing her memoirs to the end (death), which is not possible, Defoe creates the plot of a third hand writing the full account which was used in ending the story. In other words, Defoe keeps repeating the same scenario of a genuine account written by the heroine which he edited to present this piece of work.

# Defoe's "Preface": Moral Justification

"The pen employed in finishing her story, and making it what you now see it to be, has had no little difficulty to put it into a dress fit to be seen, and to make it speak language fit to be read...

All possible care, however, has been taken to give no lewd ideas, no immodest turns in the new dressing up of this story; no, not to the worst parts of her expressions. To this purpose some of the vicious part of her life, which could not be modestly told, is quite left out, and several other parts are very much shortened. What is left 'tis hoped will not offend the chastest reader or the modest hearer..."

# Defoe's "Preface": Moral Justification

- Notes: Defoe again and again presents himself as the editor who polished and modified the manuscript he obtained in order to comply with social and moral criteria: presenting it in a polite and modest language suitable for the ears of readers.
- Defoe is keen on highlighting the moral aspects of his work in order to win the approval of critics (that this novel is moral and suitable for readers), license his novel, and sell it as a commodity. Writing is thus a profession.

# Defoe's "Preface": Moral Justification

"In a word, as the whole relation is carefully garbled of all the levity and looseness that was in it, so it all applied, and with the utmost care, to virtuous and religious uses. None can, without being guilty of manifest injustice, cast any reproach upon it, or upon our design in publishing it."

# Defoe's "Preface": Moral Justification

- Notes: Again, emphasis on 'virtuous and religious uses' in order to gain approval of critics.

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# Defoe's "Preface": Guide to the Reader

"But as this work is chiefly recommended to those who know how to read it, and how to make the good uses of it which the story all along recommends to them, so it is to be hoped that such readers will be more pleased with the moral than the fable, with the application than with the relation, and with the end of the writer than with the life of the person written of."

# Defoe's "Preface": Guide to the Reader

- Notes: Defoe is giving his readers tips on how to read the novel: good readers, he claims, should focus on the instructional part of the novel (that which offers a moral lesson) not on the entertaining parts (suspense, action, feelings...etc). He wants readers to enjoy the moral than the fable (story).
- Defoe may not be serious in his tips, for as a writer he would want the readers to enjoy reading the novel, get thrilled by the adventures and actions of the protagonist, admire the skill of the writer, rather than just read the novel for the moral lesson it may offer. He has, however, to put on this attitude in order to be approved by critics.