

Moll Flanders

Second Year Prose

Narration
Character
Language

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Moll Flanders

I hope that so far you've managed through reading the first three lectures of this course to form an idea of the century, culture, the genre of the novel, along with Daniel Defoe's project as he puts it in his novel-writing.

- Now we come to the major part of the course: reading and analysing Defoe's *Moll Flanders*.
- As you will see from the upcoming lectures, we will not approach the novel in a chronological linear manner; in other words, we have themes to discuss in the novel regardless of the order of the chapters. I will not, therefore, move in the novel from A to Z, from page 1 to the last page.

- We will take a theme, discuss the main ideas in this theme, and read excerpts from the novel which support and explain the structure, technique...etc.
- This means, you need to read the novel in English before you do the lectures. The lectures provide a literary critical reading of the novel, which does not in any way replace the novel or summarise it. We read passages, not chapters or the novel in its entirety.

- In the following slides, we will be analysing three main literary aspects of *Moll Flanders*: narrative technique and voice, character, and language.
- First, the terms are defined, the technique is explained, then examples from the novel are used to further clarify the points.
- Page reference is to PDF copy of *Moll Flanders*. This will be provided along with these slides.

Narration

- The opening lines of the novel capture the focus of Defoe's art: **realism**.
- As discussed in the lecture on the rise of the novel, one of the distinct features of the 18th century novel had to do with realism, realistic characters, realistic settings and language...etc.
- By **realism** we refer to the technique whereby focus is on what is described, rather than on how it is described. When you read a realistic novel, you are involved in the action, characters, description in a way that you momentarily forget the skills of the writer who mastered it. Similarly, when you watch a movie or a drama that is so realistic, you get so carried away by the events that you forget it is an act performed by actors and directed by a director. You start to 'believe' it because it so resembles reality.

Narration

- What makes the introductory paragraph an example of realism?
- Let's read the opening lines to the novel to answer this question:

"My true name is so well known in the records or registers at Newgate, and in the Old Bailey, and there are some things of such consequence still depending there, relating to my particular conduct, that it is not to be expected I should set my name or the account of my family to this work; perhaps, after my death, it may be better known; at present it would not be proper, nor not though a general pardon should be issued, even without exceptions and reserve of persons or crimes.

It is enough to tell you, that as some of my worst comrades, who are out of the way of doing me harm (having gone out of the world by the steps and the string, as I often expected to go), knew me by the name of Moll Flanders, so you may give me leave to speak of myself under that name till I dare own who I have been, as well as who I am." (p. 9)

Narration

- A necessary element of realism, a procedure of authentication and a guarantee of plausibility is the device of **concealed identity**. It is also an element of criminal fiction (*Moll Flanders* is also a criminal biography as we will see in the upcoming lectures).
- Moll claims that her 'true' name is still known in courts and she is subject to prosecution, so she cannot reveal her true identity. Notice how the writer creates the illusion of realism by making his protagonist address the issue of identity as if it were an essence, a stable construct, something that exists in reality beyond the pages of the fictitious work we're reading. Moll, Defoe claims, is a real person with a true identity. This corroborates his claims in the preface whereby he presents himself as 'editor' not writer of the work.

Narration

- Added to the idea of concealed identity is the **autobiographical mode of presentation**.
- It was customary in the early 18th century novel to use the 1st person narrative voice to further create the sense of realism. Readers would therefore find themselves listening to a tale narrated by the person who lived it.
- One other example of the use of the 1st person narrative voice in 18th century novels is the epistolary novel: this was a very common narrative type at the time. As the name suggests, it is made up of epistles (letters) rather than narrated passages. Each character writes letters to other characters and through the letters we get to know the action and feelings of characters. Typically, each letter uses the I point of view.

Narration

- **The 1st person narrative voice is marked by immediacy and intimacy:** readers face no barriers when reading the novel; there is no agent to narrate the story. They believed they were listening to it directly from the mouth of the protagonist, with not distortions. In this mode of narration, the reader has an intimate, close relationship with the protagonist.
- The reader is also given free license to enter the heart and mind of the character, listen to its worries, fears, joys, and moments of truth.

Narration

- But why did we say 'autobiographical' not 'biographical'?
- Because the author gives the impression that he is not the writer, and that the protagonist, Moll, is the writer of her own story. So it is not a biography (life story narrated by a writer other than the protagonist), but an autobiography (life story narrated by the person himself). Put in this context, this is an illusion of realism well crafted by the writer.

Narration

- **Plot:** The plot of *Moll Flanders* is episodic. It is narrated in the form of episodes, each dedicated to a certain main event in the life of Moll.
- It is made up of two main parts:
 1. Moll's Marriages
 2. Moll's criminal activities

Narration

- **Moll's Marriages:** This part consists of five episodes, each ending with death or departure of a husband. So episodes have similar structures, which creates symmetry and coherence.
 - 1) First marriage to the younger brother Robin at the family - death (Symbolic introduction to the novel as a whole)
 - 2) Second marriage to the gentleman-tradesman- departure.
 - 3) Third marriage to her half brother - departure. (leads to discovery of the secret of her birth- links with beginning and end)
 - 4) Fourth marriage to Jemmy. Departure (prison and trial)
 - 5) Fifth marriage to banker. Death.

Narration

- **Criminal Career:** The second part is devoted to Moll's career as a thief.
- This part narrates several episodes of Moll's adventures. It is mainly connected with the rest of the book in that it leads to her arrest, reunion with James (Jemmy) in prison, transportation, and meeting her family in Virginia.
- This is the part which creates a degree of continuity with the main characters in the novel (Moll meets her mother, marries her half-brother, marries her last husband and has her only significant child).
- This results in **structural coherence**: symmetrical balance of episodes where each starts and ends in a compatible way, and each is linked to the overall design of the novel, connecting characters and incidents.

Narration

- In narrating the story, Defoe uses the following **narrative strategy**:
full scenic presentation of events, followed by passages of less detailed summary to connect passages together.
- This means that there is a scheme, a structure which Defoe uses in the narration: he starts with detailed presentation of events (fully scenic description that you may visualise and imagine what is described), which is then followed by a paragraph or two offering a summary to link to the next episode.

Narration

- The effect of this technique is that of **falling tension**: episode offers heightened tension, then summary deflates it. And once again the tension rises, only to fall again.
- One example in the novel out of many is Moll's marriage to the gentleman-tradesman. The episode starts with Moll seeking a husband (women in the 18th century had to marry to be financially supported), looking for a gentleman to offer her a comfortable luxurious life. She manages to find a tradesman, who acts as a gentleman. However, he had the habit of spending too much, spending well above his financial capacity which got him in debt and was prosecuted for that.

Narration

- The structure of the episode is, as explained above, follows the rhythm of detailed narration over a few pages, to be followed by a paragraph which summarises Moll's end and shift to a new episode and new marriage.
- Let's read the first paragraph of this episode:

"Well, at last I found this amphibious creature, this land-water thing called a gentleman-tradesman; and as a just plague upon my folly, I was caught in the very snare which, as I might say, I laid for myself. I said for myself, for I was not trepanned, I confess, but I betrayed myself." (P. 89)

Narration

- In this passage, we have the beginning of the second marriage episode: her marriage to the gentleman-tradesman. Moll, like women of her time, was compelled to seek a husband to ensure financial support. She presented herself as a wealthy widow in order to lay this snare and get a wealthy husband (men also sought women of money as the wife's wealth automatically became her husband's once married). When she meets the tradesman, who presents himself as wealthy too, she marries him only to discover that both were deceiving each other.

Narration

- You need to read this episode up to its end to examine the narrative strategy Defoe applies in his work. It proceeds from the opening paragraph we've just read, where Moll announces this second marriage, and then we have scenic presentation of events (including dialogues between Moll and her husband, description of partying, or buying expensive stuff, and living a life of pleasure and luxury). This takes a few pages, and that is why we call it 'scenic presentation'; it's like scenes in films which explain the events. This is finally brought to an end by the summary, the last paragraph which concludes the episode and serves as a bridge to the next. As mentioned above, you will notice that with the summary, tension falls.

Narration

"...and my condition was very odd, for though I had no child (I had had one by my gentleman draper, but it was buried), yet I was a widow bewitched; I had a husband and no husband, and I could not pretend to marry again, though I knew well enough my husband would never see England any more, if he lived fifty years. Thus, I say, I was limited from marriage, what offer mightsoever be made me;" (p. 94).

- This paragraph is the summary. Notice that in a few sentences, not pages as the scenic presentation, Defoe makes Moll describe her situation: she is now left all alone, no child, and no husband, although he is not dead. The end of the episode resembles the other marriage episodes, for it ends with departure, while her first marriage ended in death. In either case, Moll is left alone to struggle against the socioeconomic pressures of life.

Character

- Defoe's is a **novel of character**. The whole of the story is told and narrated by Moll Flanders.
- **Immediacy**: we see the world through her eyes, we hear her voice, and we feel everything through her.
- This gives the story **credibility**: authentic narration.

Character

- She is not intellectual: she is plainly spoken, vigorous and direct in her approach, clear about her schemes in life, and is genuine and resilient.

"I resolved, therefore, as to the state of my present circumstances, that it was absolutely necessary to change my station, and make a new appearance in some other place where I was not known, and even to pass by another name if I found occasion."
(p.112)

- Moll's words reveal her character as one of determination and strong will. Notice the confirmed affirmation in her sentences: resolved, absolutely necessary, change my station, make a new appearance. Moll's sentences are not hesitant. There is no doubt. She knows exactly what she has to do to survive. Her words are symbolic or poetic, her language is clear, smooth and to the point.

Character

- We also notice that Defoe hardly offers any psychological analysis of Moll's character. We don't have an in-depth examination of her motives, her feelings, her sentiments as a mother for example.
- This is so because Defoe wants us to admire the **speed and resolution** of Moll's reaction to profit or danger, her wit and determination, her ability to survive, and persevere despite all pressures and obstacles. Any psychologically detailed passages will be needless.
- He actually places Moll in action so that we can see and judge for ourselves.

Character

- Through Moll, Defoe presents the particularity of the story and presents a vigorous and brisk narration of events.
- Considering the temporal aspect of the novel, *Moll Flanders* is marked by use of **"the type of narration where one often senses the gap between the action and its record."**
- This is called **"Double Focus"**.
- By this we mean that there is a gap between the time the action happened (the marriage, the theft, the dialogue...etc) and the time of its narration by Moll. Understandably, the novel offers the story in the form of memoirs, which means that Moll is narrating her story retrospectively, going back in time to the past when the action happened. That is why there is gap between the speaking voice and the narrated incident.

Character

- By 'double focus' critics generally mean that **"two characters are superimposed one upon the other, and the impression of the one who acts is coloured and distorted by the interpretations of the one who narrates."** So we hear two voices in the novel, as this quote suggests. Moll is two characters in one: the narrator adds judgment and evaluation of the action, thus making us see them in a new colour and view. Moll the narrator sometimes describes the actions of her past life as bad, unwise, evil, wrong...etc.
- Moll is thus viewed as comprised of two characters (voices)

Young Moll

Old Moll

Acting I

Narrating I

Action

Reflection

Present

Past

Character

"It will not be strange if I now began to think, but alas! it was but with very little solid reflection. I had a most unbounded stock of vanity and pride, and but a very little stock of virtue. I did indeed case sometimes with myself what young master aimed at, but thought of nothing but the fine words and the gold; whether he intended to marry me, or not to marry me, seemed a matter of no great consequence to me; nor did my thoughts so much as suggest to me the necessity of making any capitulation for myself, till he came to make a kind of formal proposal to me, as you shall hear presently." (pp. 36-37)

Character

- The I Moll uses to refer to herself is thus split into two: the old voice of wisdom, judgment and reflection, and the young voice of action, speed and thoughtlessness.
- Here in this passage, the old Moll is reflecting on how she as a young woman received the words and gifts of her master, accepting them without giving herself time to examine his true intentions. She brands herself as one with vanity and pride, but little virtue. There is a gap between Old Moll's voice of reason, and Young Moll's voice of irrational decisions.

Language

- The language of *Moll Flanders* is lively; sentences are untidy and breathless; dialogues are lively. This is meant to reflect the volume of action and adventure in the novel. Defoe wanted his readers attracted to the novel by the speed of action he offered them. This is best conveyed through lively dialogues and long sentences that seem to record spoken language.
- There are also many instances of sentences beginning with 'however', 'but', 'yet'. What effect does this have?
 - This expands meaning and keeps the reader hooked, wanting to know the rest of the story.
- Active verbs and participles: stress is on the agent doing the action, on Moll, so active verbs are commonly used in the narrative, as we will see when we read the passages below.

Language (Dialogue)

- 'Thou foolish child,' says she, 'thou art always crying (for I was crying then); 'prithee, what dost cry for?' 'Because they will take me away,' says I, 'and put me to service, and I can't work housework.' 'Well, child,' says she, 'but though you can't work housework, as you call it, you will learn it in time, and they won't put you to hard things at first.' 'Yes, they will,' says I, 'and if I can't do it they will beat me, and the maids will beat me to make me do great work, and I am but a little girl and I can't do it'; and then I cried again, till I could not speak any more to her. (p. 14)
- The dialogue is lively, sentences are plain and simple. The point of the sentences is not to show subtlety. The objective is to establish communication and convey meaning easily. The dialogue has a touch of drama rather than reflection, so it is more of action rather than narration.

Language (Narration)

"Away I went, and, coming to the house, I found them all in confusion, you may be sure. I ran in, and finding one of the maids, 'Lord! sweetheart,' says I, 'how came this dismal accident? Where is your mistress? Any how does she do? Is she safe? And where are the children? I come from Madam ---- to help you.' Away runs the maid. 'Madam, madam,' says she, screaming as loud as she could yell, 'here is a gentlewoman come from Madam ---- to help us.' The poor woman, half out of her wits, with a bundle under her arm, and two little children, comes toward me. 'Lord! madam,' says I, 'let me carry the poor children to Madam ----,' she desires you to send them; she'll take care of the poor lambs;' and immediately I takes one of them out of her hand, and she lifts the other up into my arms."

(p. 304)

Language (Narration)

"'Ay, do, for God's sake,' says she, 'carry them to her. Oh! thank her for her kindness.' 'Have you anything else to secure, madam?' says I; 'she will take care of it.' 'Oh dear! ay,' says she, 'God bless her, and thank her. Take this bundle of plate and carry it to her too. Oh, she is a good woman. Oh Lord! we are utterly ruined, utterly undone!' And away she runs from me out of her wits, and the maids after her; and away comes I with the two children and the bundle." (P. 304-305)

Language (Narration)

- The passages on the previous two slides are taken from one of Moll's criminal adventures. There was a fire in a house down the street, so there she goes pretending to be the maid of one of the ladies, asking to take the valuables to protect them from fire.
- The language here reflects the speed of action (fire, panic, rush and haste ...etc)
- The dialogue includes the I views and discourses of several characters engaged here: we can hear the voices of several people at the scene as if in a real setting of fear and chaos. We call this **polyphony**: multiple characters in a narrative each using its own language and discourse. If you think closely of this episode, the narration and characters' words, you will be able to visualise it. It is so full of life and speed of action that one may think of it as a scene in a movie .

Language (Narration)

- We also notice a few grammatical mistakes in the passages: 'I takes', 'comes I". What do these suggest? That Daniel Defoe was not good at English? That he was writing in haste so he forgot to edit and proofread his novel?
- In fact, it is neither of these suggestions. The mistakes are not done carelessly. Defoe deliberately inserts these in the dialogue to validate the authenticity of the work. At times of fear and disaster, grammar and linguistic accuracy are not significant. We tend to make mistakes when in such situations. Besides, Moll is not an educated character. She is a simple, plain girl without a good share of education, and in order to persuade the readers that the narrative is hers, written by her in the form of memoirs as suggested in the preface, Defoe deliberately makes her language suitable for this character.