

Gentility in *Moll Flanders*

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Quest for Security

We have so far covered the theoretical part of the course (introduction to 18th-c society and culture, the rise of the novel), and we started discussion of *Moll Flanders* by introducing the Preface, the narrative technique and literary aspects that have to do with character and language. Today, we are going to discuss the theme of gentility in *Moll Flanders* (issues that have to do with money, economic individualism, and materialism).

Quest for Security

- In *Moll Flanders*, it is easy to spot signs of the middle-class striving for security. This reflects the age, where the dominating impression of life was one of uncertainty and insecurity. As discussed in the first lecture, life was precarious for many people in early 18th century society. Quest for financial security, for maintenance, preoccupied the minds of many people at the time. People thought of how to earn their living on a daily basis and the future looked grim.
- The novel also reflects Daniel Defoe's own experience and fear of Newgate, where he was imprisoned for a few months.

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- Defoe created, therefore, a character (Moll) who embodied his own desires. On different occasions, and quite consistently, Moll plainly and straightforwardly states that all she wants is a **'settled way of living'**. Obviously, she means a life of comfort and good money.
- Moll is a character of great beauty and wits. Born in Newgate, she cannot accept the fate of similar children (being put to service early in life).

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- It's also the education she gets early in her life that makes her aspire to a life of genteel standards.
- Moll feels that she has what is required to lead a comfortable life. She is pretty, witty, and was lucky to be brought up by a woman who, despite poverty, managed to keep children clean and educate them 'mannerly and genteelly' (see next slide which includes the quote describing this).
- She dreams of becoming a gentlewoman, and cannot accept the fate of working as a maid.

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"This woman had also had a little school, which she kept to teach children to read and to work; and having, as I have said, lived before that in good fashion, she bred up the children she took with a great deal of art, as well as with a great deal of care. But that which was worth all the rest, she bred them up very religiously, being herself a very sober, pious woman, very house-wifely and clean, and very mannerly, and with good behaviour. So that in a word, excepting a plain diet, coarse lodging, and mean clothes, we were brought up as mannerly and as genteelly as if we had been at the dancing-school." (p. 12)

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- Moll expresses her fear of being sent to service. When questioned by her teacher, Moll expresses her own childish understanding of genteel living.
- Moll the child does not know what a gentlewoman is.
- Intuitively, she recognizes that a gentlewoman is better than going to service.

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'And what would you have?' says she; 'don't I tell you that you shall not go to service till you are bigger?' 'Ay,' said I, 'but then I must go at last.' 'Why, what?' said she; 'is the girl mad? What would you be -- a gentlewoman?' 'Yes,' says I, and cried heartily till I roared out again.

This set the old gentlewoman a-laughing at me, as you may be sure it would. 'Well, madam, forsooth,' says she, gibing at me, 'you would be a gentlewoman; and pray how will you come to be a gentlewoman? What! Will you do it by your fingers' end?

'Yes,' says I again, very innocently.

'Why, what can you earn?' says she; 'what can you get at your work?'

'Threepence,' said I, 'when I spin, and fourpence when I work plain work.'

'Alas! poor gentlewoman,' said she again, laughing, 'what will that do for thee?' (p. 14)

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- Moll's aspiration to become a gentlewoman reaches the ears of the Mayor and his family.
- The fuss people make over her ambition makes Moll cling to it more.
- The Mayoress comes to meet her, telling her she has a 'Lady's hand':
"Mrs. Mayoress did not stop there, but giving me my work again, she put her hand in her pocket, gave me a shilling, and bid me mind my work, and learn to work well, and I might be a gentlewoman for aught she knew." (p. 18)

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- Here we have a pattern that is repeated throughout the novel: **Flattery and Reward**. The mayoress praises her work (flattery), and gives her money (reward) telling her she will one day become a gentlewoman.
- By the age of ten, Moll knows herself to be 'very mannerly' and 'pretty'. She uses the reward she is frequently given to dress herself like a gentlewoman.
- However, there is a difference between Moll's conception of Genteel life, and adult views.

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"Now all this while my good old nurse, Mrs. Mayoress, and all the rest of them did not understand me at all, for they meant one sort of thing by the word gentlewoman, and I meant quite another; for alas! all I understood by being a gentlewoman was to be able to work for myself, and get enough to keep me without that terrible bugbear going to service, whereas they meant to live great, rich and high, and I know not what." (p. 18)

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- In this passage, we have Moll's view of genteel life in her childhood: economic independence and not working as a servant.
- The novel marks the evolution of Moll's concept of gentility (from not going out to service, to being a respected and financially secure woman), and the development of her consciousness as a genteel woman.
- In the following passage, we still have the naïve views of Moll, and a bit of foreshadowing (prolepsis).

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"I told her, yes, and insisted on it, that to do so was to be a gentlewoman; 'for,' says I, 'there is such a one,' naming a woman that mended lace and washed the ladies' laced-heads; 'she,' says I, 'is a gentlewoman, and they call her madam.'

"Poor child,' says my good old nurse, 'you may soon be such a gentlewoman as that, for she is a person of ill fame, and has had two or three bastards. 'I did not understand anything of that; but I answered, 'I am sure they call her madam, and she does not go to service nor do housework'; and therefore I insisted that she was a gentlewoman, and I would be such a gentlewoman as that.'" (p. 19)

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- Moll takes as her role model a woman who washes linen, believing her to be a gentlewoman only because she has her own job and is called 'madam'. Her nurse tries to explain to her that this woman is nothing to do with genteel living, and that she is called madam for no good reason. Moll, a child, does not comprehend this, and insists on her views and dream to live a life like this woman's.
- It was customary at the time to call prostitutes by the name 'madam', so this woman has ill reputation, but still Moll views her as a gentlewoman.
- Prolepsis: this means 'foreshadowing'. We have prolepsis in this passage as Moll ends up working as a prostitute, so we have foreshadowing.

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- Moll learns how to dress herself like a 'little gentlewoman' as she was often called. She is even invited by one of the ladies in town to spend a week with her daughters at her home.
- Coming to taste genteel life as it really is for the first time, Moll at fourteen has a more sophisticated idea of what she used to have earlier. Now she knows that genteel living is more than just not having to go to service. It means a more comfortable lifestyle that she enjoyed, and didn't want to change. Let's read the next passage:

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"I had such a taste of genteel living at the lady's house that I was not so easy in my old quarters as I used to be, and I thought it was fine to be a gentlewoman indeed, for I had quite other notions of a gentlewoman now than I had before; and as I thought, I say, that it was fine to be a gentlewoman, so I loved to be among gentlewomen, and therefore I longed to be there again." (p. 22)

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- After the death of her tutoress, Moll is taken by the Mayoress to live at her home.
- Here Moll learns by imitation and observation what the daughters were receiving in private tuition.
- Defoe seems to contrast sharply the difference between the **natural** attributes of beauty and wits evident in Moll and the **artificial** advantages of birth and position enjoyed by the daughters.

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"By this means I had, as I have said above, all the advantages of education that I could have had if I had been as much a gentlewoman as they were with whom I lived; and in some things I had the advantage of my ladies, though they were my superiors; but they were all the gifts of nature, and which all their fortunes could not furnish. First, I was apparently handsomer than any of them; secondly, I was better shaped; and, thirdly, I sang better, by which I mean I had a better voice; in all which you will, I hope, allow me to say, I do not speak my own conceit of myself, but the opinion of all that knew the family." (p. 26)

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- Moll is presented as a gentlewoman by breeding, a woman of beauty by nature, but a woman without money.
- Money, in early eighteenth century society, was an indispensable factor in the choice of a wife. If a woman has all the natural attributes of a marriageable woman, but has no money, it will not be easy for her to find a good husband.
- This is an issue Defoe raises in the following conversation between one of the daughters of the Mayoress and her brothers.

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"I wonder at you, brother,' says the sister. Betty wants but one thing, but she had as good want everything, for the market is against our sex just now; and if a young woman have beauty, birth, breeding, wit, sense, manners, modesty, and all these to an extreme, yet if she have not money, she's nobody, she had as good want them all for nothing but money now recommends a woman; the men play the game all into their own hands." (p. 29)

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- Although Moll is a woman without money, her ambition is to marry a gentleman to live a genteel life. Defoe foreshadows this by getting the young brother Robin to say:

“beauty will steal a husband sometimes in spite of money, and when the maid chances to be handsomer than the mistress, she oftentimes makes as good a market, and rides in a coach before her.” (p. 30)

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- The **pattern of flattery and reward** is repeated once again when the elder brother makes his advances towards Moll, starting a relationship with her. He praises her beauty, **flattering** her, and more importantly, he offers her money (**reward**) for this relationship.
- It is not love, or the promise of marriage, that captivates Moll. It is rather her obsession with gentility that ensnares her.

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"I was more confounded with the money than I was before with the love, and began to be so elevated that I scarce knew the ground I stood on. I am the more particular in this part, that if my story comes to be read by any innocent young body, they may learn from it to guard themselves against the mischiefs which attend an early knowledge of their own beauty." (p. 34)

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- Her lover offered her money after every time they met. She **"thought of nothing but the fine words and the gold; whether he intended to marry me or not seemed a matter of no great consequence to me."** (p. 36)
- But it is not only money that seduces her; it's **fashion and genteel** style as displayed in the following:
 - a. The way she and her lover dress up for the meeting (both dress up in a genteel way).
 - b. He hands her a silk purse containing a hundred guineas. This acts as the bait which ensnares her. It is not the money only that lures her, but the silk purse which is a symbol of fashionable genteel life.

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- 1) Dressing up: "Immediately he calls for his best wig, hat, and sword... prepares to go into the coach." Moll "had a hood, a mask, a fan, and a pair of gloves in my pocket."
- 2) Bait: money and fashion: "if I would grant his request, he would maintain me very honourably; and made me a thousand protestations of his sincerity and of his affection to me ...he pulls out a silk purse, with an hundred guineas in it, and gave it me. 'And I'll give you such another,' says he, 'every year till I marry you.' My colour came and went, at the *sight of the purse...*" (p. 41)

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- When Robin, the younger brother proposes to her, it is the money the elder brother pays her (£500) and her own obsession with genteel life, which will come true when she becomes the wife of Robin.
- After the death of Robin, and finding herself in search of a husband, Moll says:
"The case was altered with me: I had money in my pocket, and had nothing to say to them. I had been tricked once by that cheat called love, but the game was over; I was resolved now to be married or nothing, and to be well married or not at all." (p. 88)

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- This passage shows quite clearly how, in Moll's mind, **"Money, marriage, and virtue, were...linked in a chain of analogies."** So they all meant similar things to her. To have money meant to have a good marriage and to be virtuous.
- All her subsequent marriages are the outcome of the need for financial security. Notice, for example, how she describes the way she marries Jemmy in the following passage: (please read the passage and focus on material value of money and things, rather than values and love. How is this marriage described? As a spiritual and emotional tie, or as a strategy to gain money?)

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"I that was a great fortune, and passed for such, was above being asked how much my estate was; and my false friend taking it upon a foolish hearsay, had raised it from £500 to £5000, and by the time she came into the country she called it £15,000. The Irishman, for such I understood him to be, was stark mad at this bait; in short, he courted me, made me presents, and ran in debt like a madman for the expenses of his equipage and of his courtship. He had, to give him his due, the appearance of an extraordinary fine gentleman; he was tall, well-shaped, and had an extraordinary address; talked as naturally of his park and his stables, of his horses, his gamekeepers, his woods, his tenants, and his servants, as if we had been in the mansion-house, and I had seen them all about me. *[Proceed to the next slide to finish the passage]*

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He never so much as asked me about my fortune or estate, but assured me that when we came to Dublin he would jointure me in £600 a year good land; and that we could enter into a deed of settlement or contract here for the performance of it. This was such language indeed as I had not been used to, and I was here beaten out of all my measures; I had a she-devil in my bosom, every hour telling me how great her brother lived. One time she would come for my orders, how I would have my coaches painted, and how lined; and another time what clothes my page should wear; in short, my eyes were dazzled. I had now lost my power of saying No, and, to cut the story short, I consented to be married;" (p. 211)

A Woman's Quest for Security

- Defoe is portraying the eighteenth century society which was marked by insecurity. However, his protagonist's dilemma is aggravated by the fact that she is a woman.
- She expresses her tricky situation very clearly at several points in the text. (See page 188-189) **"I cast about innumerable ways...behaviour."**
- You need to read the passage and consider how her situation as a woman without money in a patriarchal society is risky. She needs to find a husband to support her as women don't have a job to maintain themselves, and so having no money and no husband means she cannot survive.

Materialism

- Materialism is the main pervading element of *Moll Flanders*.
- Moll's world contains many "**things**": tangible, concrete, material things: watches, goods, wigs, necklaces, dresses....etc.
- Things are described in as far as their **material worth** is concerned.
- When Moll says she gave her son a "**fine gold watch**", she doesn't describe it in detail or explain to us what it looks like. The word '**fine**' means to tell us it was **valuable**. Moll also says at one point that she wore a "**good pearl necklace**". **Good** here is an indicator of **social prestige and material value**.
- The novel is replete with such material description of things.

Materialism

- This critical viewpoint stresses the materialism of Moll's world: "What is important in Moll's world of things is the counting, measuring, pricing, weighing, and evaluating of all things in terms of the wealth they represent and the social status they imply for the possessor."
- In the novel, we have systematic conversion of all subjective, emotional and moral experience (marriage & motherhood) into money, into what can be materially measured.
- Personal relationships, people...etc are important in as much as they offer Moll material gain: materialisation of the personal.

Materialism

"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 £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, about as much more by my husband, left me a widow with about £1200 in my pocket." (p. 86)

Materialisation of Subjective Relationships

- Notice Moll's description of her marriage and life: **"good husband", "we lived very agreeably", "received much", "acquired no great matters", "my circumstances were not great", "mended by the match".**
- There is one referent for all the above: Money.
- What five years of her marriage and motherhood mean to Moll are finances, bonds, cash in her pocket...etc. This is the systematic subversion of values and personal relationships into money.
- As for her children by this husband, she says:
"My two children were, indeed, taken happily off my hands by my husband's father and mother, and that, by the way, was all they got by Mrs. Betty."
(p. 86).

Necessity and Crime

- Moll is presented as a character with great skills of adjustment and determination. She has strong will. She knows exactly what she wants and struggles to achieve her aims.
- She is furnished with the means to "mend" her circumstances by accepting the values and rules of her society.
- In her society, what matters is money, and she has no money.
- She tried to achieve her dream of genteel living by marriage. So marriage was for her a means for economic and financial security, rather than love and warmth.

Necessity and Crime

- Moll is a collector of quantities of things and of cash, as necessary for survival. She has one thing to sell and that is her body. When this is no longer a marketable commodity, she simply takes the things and the cash (steals them). So she shifts from marriage to prostitution to theft and crime.
- Defoe says: **"Men rob for bread, women whore for bread; necessity is the parent of crime. Ask the worst highwayman in the nation, ask the lewdest strumpet in the town, if they would not willingly leave off the trade, if they could live handsomely without it."** Defoe offers a social critique by analysing the phenomena of prostitution and crime as resulting from poverty rather than evil or bad motives.

Necessity and Crime

- This is fully dramatized in *Moll Flanders*. After her marriage age is over, Moll describes her tricky situation which leads her to her first criminal act. (p. 284-286) "For a little relief...night."
- In this narration of her first criminal adventure (stealing a bundle left unattended in front of a shop), Moll describes her desperate situation, her need for money, her misery, which led her to roam the streets until she sees the bundle then the devil whispers in her ear to steal it. What is important in this adventure is Moll's emphasis on necessity, not evil nature, as the main reason which for venturing into crime.

Necessity and Crime

- The passages detailing her criminal adventures and theft are followed by her moralising statements. (Moll's robbing a child: "I went out now by daylight..." p. 288).

"The last affair left no great concern upon me, for as I did the poor child no harm, I only said to myself, I had given the parents a just reproof for their negligence in leaving the poor little lamb to come home by itself, and it would teach them to take more care of it another time." (p. 289)

- Notice how Moll ends the passage with moral preaching for the parents to take care of their children. Obviously, this is Defoe's strategy of offering a moral lesson in order to make critics and readers accept the story of a criminal.

Remember: he mentioned in the preface that he wanted to tell this story in order to give a moral lesson. This will help him sell his novel.

Necessity and Crime

- Why would Moll, the thief, moralise and justify her criminal activities?
- The answer is simple: although her adventures are criminal, she herself is **not** the criminal type. She is not a woman of the underworld, but a woman whose aspirations are thoroughly middle class.
- All she wants is economic security and middle class respectability. She steals out of necessity, not bad criminal nature.
- She also embraces middle-class morals, and thus would present this, and perhaps other criminal incidents, as a piece of good social work she is doing: here she is offering the parents a warning to look after their child and protect her.

Necessity and Crime

- Necessity causes her to marry for money, steal for financial security.
- Moralisation and reflection are only possible when cash is available, not when one is poor and desperate. Once Moll is rich, she can repent and look back on her past life with remorse and penitence.
- Action and reflection cannot be done at one and the same time. Poverty leads to crime and richness to morality and penitence.