

# *Moll Flanders*

## A Crime Narrative

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# Crime Narratives

- *Moll Flanders* belongs to the genre of **crime literature** which was highly popular in the early eighteenth century.
- People were highly concerned about crime and criminals as robberies, theft, and crime increased at an alarming rate due to the risky economic situation at the time and the high rate of poverty and destitution.
- One journalist remarked: "so many robberies happen daily that 'tis almost incredible." Some areas even became virtually 'lawless zones'. Of course, these robberies include small or petty theft like stealing a loaf of bread. The prisons were crammed with prisoners, some were even hanged for stealing a loaf of bread.

# Crime in the Early 18<sup>th</sup> Century

- In Defoe's youth, almost all people in a neighbourhood knew each other, but with urbanization (more people moving to cities), things changed. It was easy for strangers to move in crowds, commit robberies or other crimes and disappear untraced.
- By 1720s, crime by women was increasing and it was quite common to hear the names of infamous female criminals (Moll Kind, Sally Salisbury, Betsy Careless...etc).

# Crime Narratives

- In fact many novelists capitalized on public interest in crime, producing novels that addressed crime and posed questions concerning society, poverty and penal acts.
- **Critical viewpoint:** "Crime is attractive narrative material; in an individualistic society especially, it can be ... shocking and moral."
- Criminal fiction offered **sensational pleasure**: the pleasure to watch and satisfy one's curiosity, while at the same time feeding a sense of righteousness.

# Crime Narratives

- Crime literature (criminal biographies, rogue biographies, criminal narratives...etc) narrates the life story and account of criminals.
- The mode is **confessional**, narrating the events, adventures, sins and final repentance of the criminal in a highly fictionalized and dramatized manner.

# Defoe's Crime Narrative

- Daniel Defoe wrote to periodicals about crime and criminals, and by 1718 he became interested in crime and analytical about it.
- He strongly called for transportation (deporting criminals to the New World- America) rather than execution to be implemented. This is clearly advocated in his *Moll Flanders*.
- Defoe knew that novelty attracted most readers, so he picked a woman for his criminal narrative.

# The Significance of the Title

- Moll Flanders is a nickname given to Moll by her inmates at Newgate.
- 'Moll' is a name that was commonly associated with criminals at the time (Moll King, and the 17<sup>th</sup> century Moll Cut-Purse).
- In *Moll Flanders*, we have reference to this parallelism when Moll says: **"I grew as impudent a thief, and as dexterous as ever Moll Cutpurse was, though, if fame does not belie her, not half so handsome."** (p. 299)

# The Significance of the Title

- So Moll draws the link between her name and career as a criminal and the infamous criminal Moll Cutpurse.
- "Flanders" also refers to women who worked in lace and linen, but who had bad reputation as prostitutes
- (Remember the woman Moll the child called Madam, thinking she was a gentlewoman when she was actually called Madam for working as a prostitute?)

# Moll Flanders: A Crime narrative

- Moll's criminal career imitates and parallels the strategy of criminal fiction (we will discuss this in the upcoming slides):
  1. Turning into a famous criminal, Moll will claim that she had started her career as a **desperate response to circumstances**;
  2. Then she offers a negative and shocking example of how a life of **crime hardens the criminal** and destroys his humanity;
  3. **Repentance** follows to offer salvation for the criminal and a moral lesson for the reader.

# *Moll Flanders: A Crime narrative*

- The confessional mode of the novel is a sign that selfhood is a matter of **secrecy**, only to be revealed through the autobiographical narrative technique whereby the protagonist (criminal) unfolds the secret layers of self to readers in a sensational and attractive way.
- The criminal part of the novel offers the impression that Moll's adventures are numberless. This is achieved through the recurrence of several robberies she committed, mostly following the same pattern:

# Narrative Pattern of Criminal Adventures (p.351)

Disguise

Robbery

Escape from danger

Account of the money she got

Reckoning to the governess

Commentaries of the writing Moll

# The Paradox of Crime

- Crime in the universe created by Defoe's narrative demands for its beginning **utter helplessness**, and also demands **complete competence** in the difficult techniques of crime.
- It is also **paradoxical** in the sense that it permits **separation from society**, and grants **membership in counter society (underworld)**. So, although the criminal becomes an outlaw, a person separated from lawful society and mixing with people, yet this criminal is granted entrance to the underworld of criminals.
- In order to convince readers Moll had no choice but to go to crime, her helplessness had to be total: her natural assets as a marriageable woman have been depleted by age, no job, no friend...etc.

# The Paradox of Crime

- “In this distress I had no assistant, no friend to comfort or advise me; I sat and cried and tormented myself night and day, wringing my hands, and sometimes raving like a distracted woman; and indeed I have often wondered it had not affected my reason, for I had the vapours to such a degree, that my understanding was sometimes quite lost in fancies and imaginations.” (p. 283)

# The Paradox of Crime

- Moll is made to represent the dilemma of helpless women in the eighteenth century.
- In this, and many other similar passages in the novel, Moll complains of having no one to assist her, a friend or husband or member of family to support her both financially and emotionally. Her situation is a dramatization of the loneliness and helplessness many women in the eighteenth century faced. With no job prospects, no proper education, and no husband, many women found themselves compelled either to sell their bodies or steal for survival.
- This also enacts Defoe's earlier statement that prostitution and crime are natural consequences of poverty and destitution.

# Justification for Crime

- In these opening scenes of her criminal life, Moll continues to insist that she was driven by **necessity** and by the **Devil** who kept pushing her to proceed in her criminal endeavours:

"Had I gone on here I had perhaps been a true penitent; but I had an evil counsellor within, and he was continually prompting me to relieve myself by the worst means; so one evening he tempted me again, by the same wicked impulse that had said 'Take that bundle,' to go out again and seek for what might happen." (P. 288)

- This is meant to absolve Moll of moral responsibility for her acts.

# Narration of Crime

- Yet along with her **moral apprehensions** (necessity, devil whispering in her ear, fear of the unknown...etc), we find a **detailed description** of the **technique** of shop-lifting and **inventories** of the valuables she manages to steal.
- Notice how she proceeds to offer more details in her narration of the theft of the child's necklace "I went out...my hands " (p.288-290)
- We cannot miss the **speed and momentum** with which she introduces us to her criminal acts. She gives vivid details and description of all objects, streets, things...etc., that makes it possible to visualise and imagine the incident.

# Narration of Crime

- Moll divorces her act from agency, blaming the Devil for her actions.
- Using the pronoun 'it' to refer to the child could symbolically mean how she views her: as a prey, and object not as a human being  
**(objectification of her victim= victim is an object not a person).**
- Moll offers moral justification for her crime: the parents are negligent, the mother is vain, the maid was careless.
- She also refers to the child as 'poor child', 'poor baby', as if she were assuming the character of a benevolent, loving person.

# Narration of Crime

- Defoe offers us the psychology of criminals as they **rationalize their crimes**:
  1. **Schizophrenic claim of hearing voices** ("the devil put a snare in my way").
  2. **Momentary acceptance of responsibility** ("I enterprised my second sally into the world", "the thoughts of this booty put out all the thoughts of the first").
  3. **Reference to material societal responsibility** ("poverty..had hardened my soul...").
  4. **Psychological self-justification turning the vice into virtue** ("I had given the parents a just reproof for their negligence", "the vanity of the mother...", "maid... careless jade".)

# Crime

- Moll tries honest quilting work after her initial entrance into crime, but only as a cursory act, for she blames the devil again for pushing her back to crime: **"However, at last I got some quilting work for ladies' beds, petticoats, and the like; and this I liked very well, and worked very hard, and with this I began to live; but the diligent devil, who resolved I should continue in his service, continually prompted me to go out and take a walk, that is to say, to see if anything would offer in the old way."** (P. 295)

# Avarice

- Moll has been driven by necessity, but has later acquired a taste for the forbidden. **Avarice** takes over:

"But my fate was otherwise determined; the busy devil that so industriously drew me in had too fast hold of me to let me go back; but as poverty brought me into the mire, so avarice kept me in, till there was no going back. As to the arguments which my reason dictated for persuading me to lay down, avarice stepped in and said, 'Go on, go on; you have had very good luck; go on till you have gotten four or five hundred pounds, and then you shall leave off, and then you may live easy without working at all.' (p. 302)

# Disguise and True Selfhood

- Moll's criminal career is a matter of many **disguises**. As mentioned earlier, the confessional mode of the criminal narrative aims to unfold the many layers of selfhood which were hidden or kept secret.
- Moll is the accumulation of her different versions of the self. Yet the multiplicity of disguises she takes on almost make her lose her sense of self-coherence.

# Disguise

- In the very first incident of theft, Moll says: **"I dressed me (for I had still pretty good clothes)"**. This is the first form of disguise she uses: attempting to look like a gentlewoman.
- She puts on different profitable disguises (read the following incidents of disguise): as a man (318), as a beggar (p. 373), as a widow (p. 356), as a porter's wife (351)...etc.
- The occasional moralizing fades out as Moll explains in detail how she disguised herself. What we are offered is an extended account of the techniques of crime, with no trace of the moral message here.

# Artistry of Crime

- Readers are offered the **pleasure of watching**, as onlookers, how skillful and dexterous Moll the thief is.
- As her experiences proceed, we are urged to admire her skill at disguise and escape rather than her dexterity and skill at crime.

**"I could fill up this whole discourse with the variety of such adventures, which daily invention directed me to, and which I managed with the utmost dexterity, and always with success."**

(p. 355)

# Caution and Secrecy

- What helps her escape is the **caution** she practices and the **secrecy** she holds on to, even in relation to her comrades in crime.
- **Caution:** "I began now to be very wary, having so narrowly escaped a scouring, and having such an example before me." (p. 311). Moll does not trust her true identity to anyone. She knows that being careful can save her from prison.
- **Secrecy:** "...for he gave in my name, whom he called Gabriel Spencer, which was the name I went by to him; and here appeared the wisdom of my concealing my name and sex from him, which, if he had ever known I had been undone." (P. 323)

# Caution and Secrecy

- She even disguises herself at the beginning of her criminal acts from her own governess.
- She first presents herself as the innocent victim of circumstances to her governess. "I came home to my governess..." (p. 297)
- And even when her governess offers her instruction on the artistry of theft, she pretends she is no thief: "Some time after this..." (p. 298)

# Warning to Readers

- Criminal biographies claimed also to offer readers a **warning** and to let them into the different ways criminals follow to steal money.
- Notice the incident when she goes into a crowd trying to steal the gold watch of a gentlewoman: "The next thing of moment..." (p. 313)
- And Moll tells us plainly that in order to survive a world full of Molls, we need to imitate her caution.

# Warning to Readers

- On the other hand, every branch of my story, if duly considered, may be useful to honest people, and afford a due caution to people of some sort or other to guard against the like surprises, and to have their eyes about them when they have to do with strangers of any kind, for 'tis very seldom that some snare or other is not in their way. The moral, indeed, of all my history is left to be gathered by the senses and judgment of the reader; I am not qualified to preach to them. Let the experience of one creature completely wicked, and completely miserable, be a storehouse of useful warning to those that read. (p. 395)

# Warning to Readers

- This passage is an embodiment of Defoe's claim in the Preface that his novel offers scenes of crime in order to teach a moral lesson. This instructional piece acts as a licence for the novel to be accepted by families and critics alike. Without the moral lesson, the novel will be immoral and hardly suitable for families and general readers.
- So *Moll Flanders* is a crime narrative that presents readers with the psychology of criminals, the techniques of criminals, and a word of warning to readers to know and avoid criminal tactics.