

Moll Flanders: The Moral Design

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Moral Purpose

- We have so far covered the themes of gentility and criminal biography in *Moll Flanders*. The last theme to tackle in this novel, before moving on to Mary Wollstonecraft's *Mary*, is that of moral purpose.
- Daniel Defoe states in the Preface to *Moll Flanders* that he intends his work to present the reader with a lesson to learn from, stressing the moral and didactic purpose of the book.
- The moral design was an indispensable part to justify the writing and publication of fiction in the eighteenth century.

Moral Purpose

- The narrative is pervaded by a moral and spiritual theme (an indispensable aspect of spiritual and criminal biographies).
- The voice of the narrator (young) Moll is coloured and controlled by the self-interpretive, reflective Old Moll, who instructs the readers and guides them back to the didactic goal of the book. (This is the narrative point of view we discussed in the lecture file titled '*Moll Flanders*: Narration, Character, Language')

Moral Purpose

- However, the task is not so easy as becomes clear from the narrative.
- Old Moll wavers between **two opposite attitudes**: one which holds the young Moll **responsible** for her actions and guilty of her crimes, and the other one which offers **justifications** for the deeds by referring us to socio-economic factors like poverty and helplessness. (In the child's theft narrative we are clearly offered both attitudes in one).
- This results in **moral confusion** which complicates the didactic purpose for us, readers. We don't know which point of view to take: the one which holds Moll responsible for her actions, thus guilty, or the voice which justified her actions because of her necessity?

Moral Purpose

- Old Moll absolves her young self through narrative, and condemns her through judgment. She depicts her young self's irresistible path towards social and economic stability and repentance, while at the same time her remarks concerning the immoral or criminal deeds are sharp and uncompromising. So in the narrative, in action, Moll is justified by the needy situation she finds herself in, and in the passages of moralization, Moll is guilty.

Moral Purpose

- In this sense we have two conflicting moral designs in the novel:
 - **negative design** which stresses Moll's moral downfall, her plunging into crime and sin, along with the resulting negative feelings of avarice, persistence in crime, indifference to the call of reason...etc;
 - **positive design** showing Moll being helped by Providence in several ways, and guided towards repentance and salvation.

Negative Moral Design

1. **Rhetoric of ruin:** Old Moll's sharp judgment of young Moll emphasizes not only socio-economic difficulties, but also Moll's lack of spiritual or moral principle. She doesn't have a sense of good and bad, virtue and vice.
 - From the beginning, Moll realizes the moral implications of her sinful relationship with the elder brother: **"I finished my own destruction at once, for from this day, being forsaken of my virtue and my modesty, I had nothing of value left to recommend me, either to God's blessing or man's assistance."** (p. 42). She knows that it is wrong to follow her whims and engage in a relationship with a man who only wants to use her for pleasure, showing no respect for her.

Negative Moral Design

- And later on, in her relationship with the gentleman of Bath (adulterous relationship), he falls ill and undergoes spiritual rebirth where he ends his relationship with Moll and fully repents. While Moll says: **"...he was mercifully snatched out of the gulf by a convincing work upon his mind, but that I was left as if I was forsaken of God's grace, and abandoned by Heaven to a continuing in my wickedness."** (p. 184).
- So Moll realises what she lacks: the spiritual insight and willingness to leave the path of crime and proceed on the right path.

Negative Moral Design

2. **Moll's confession to her crimes:** Moll constantly refers to her life as one of extreme wickedness, and regards herself too despicable to give instructions to readers:

"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)

So for Moll, moralisation and instructional passages should not be delivered by one who is willingly engaging in crime and wicked actions.

Negative Moral Design

3. **Ominous hints:** Moll gives voice to catastrophic predictions throughout her story. "my fate was ...determined", "I was pushed to my fate"...etc. This is also part of the moral design which presents Moll as helpless, justified in her deeds. The devil whispered in her ear, and then fate pushed her and predestined her to a life of crime and misery. This is part of moral justification for Moll.

Positive Moral Design

- Providence guides Moll by surrounding her by a number of **good people** (men and women) who help her in life and save her at every point of destruction. Examples:
 - **Men:**
 - ✓ The young brother who marries her despite her lack of money.
 - ✓ The gentleman of Bath who offers her money and stability for the time of the affair.
 - ✓ The fifth husband who offers her five happy years.
 - ✓ The captain of the ship carrying Moll and Jemmy to Virginia who was very helpful.

Positive Moral Design

- **Women:**
- ✓ The **nurse**: takes care of her in a charitable manner.
- ✓ The **Colchester lady** takes her to her home after the death of the nurse, offers her good life standard and consents to her marriage to her son.
- ✓ The **governess** - despite her wicked practices - helps Moll and when taken to Newgate she employs her utmost skill in getting Moll out of Newgate and sending her to Virginia.

Moral Confusion

- The negative design (Old Moll narrating the event ominously, giving sharp hints and judgment of her young self), and the positive design (the young Moll experiencing some good signs and people who help her through her life) are confusing and render the moral message hard to reach.

Newgate

- Moll's greatest test is the Newgate episode. It records Moll's **greatest defeat** and **greatest triumph**.
- The prison is symbolic of **social restricting** circumstances that Moll had to struggle against throughout her life.
- The prison is the culmination of Moll's struggle and obstacles in life: poverty, necessity, helplessness, fear of the unknown...etc.

Newgate

- ... I was carried to Newgate. That horrid place! my very blood chills at the mention of its name; the place where so many of my comrades had been locked up, and from whence they went to the fatal tree; the place where my mother suffered so deeply, where I was brought into the world, and from whence I expected no redemption but by an infamous death: to conclude, the place that had so long expected me, and which with so much art and success I had so long avoided. (p. 402)

Newgate

- Notice that the language used by Moll to describe the prison, Newgate, is very much that of the rhetoric of ruin, the same language she used to describe her misery and necessity which compelled her to become a thief.
- Newgate is hell for her; it is the nightmare she kept avoiding, but which finally reaches her.
- The narrative is cyclical: it starts with Moll born in Newgate, reaching the point where she returns to it.

Newgate

- Her defeat lies in her **transformation** from the concept of gentlewoman into what she feared most: a convict awaiting death. All her dreams of genteel life collapsed with her entrance into Newgate, as she turns into a degenerate, fallen woman:

"I was become a mere Newgate-bird, as wicked and as outrageous as any of them; nay, I scarce retained the habit and custom of good breeding and manners, which all along till now ran through my conversation; so thorough a degeneracy had possessed me, that I was no more the same thing that I had been, than if I had never been otherwise than what I was now." (p. 410)

Newgate

- Moll, herself, is incapable of recognizing who she really is. The character of gentlewoman she used to assume early in her life, then the multiple disguises she put on as a criminal, and now her new fate as a prisoner at Newgate have shaken the sense of true, coherent, selfhood. Who is she? Which character of her disguises, or her dreams, or her actuality is she?
- However, it is the Newgate episode that marks her greatest triumph as it leads her to repent, which restores her to her self, and leads her to the way of the true genteel life she'd always dreamed of.

Conversion

- Moll undergoes a conversion experience when imprisoned in Newgate.
- Newgate is described as "an emblem of hell itself, and a kind of entrance into it."
- Moll was pushed to her fate: **"It seemed to me that I was hurried on by an inevitable and unseen fate to this day of misery, and that now I was to expiate all my offences at the gallows."** (p. 403)

Stages of Conversion

1. Moll is deprived of God's grace and shocked when in Newgate that she *cannot* truly repent:

"I seemed not to mourn that I had committed such crimes, and for the fact as it was an offence against God and my neighbour, but I mourned that I was to be punished for it. I was a penitent, as I thought, not that I had sinned, but that I was to suffer, and this took away all the comfort, and even the hope of my repentance in my own thoughts." (p. 403)

Stages of Conversion

- In this first stage, Moll faces the inability to repent. She cannot truly admit to her being a sinner, to the crimes she had committed, and the bad deeds in her life. She cannot bring herself to ask God for forgiveness. All she feels at this stage is the agony of having to suffer, to be in prison, and possibly later executed. She still hasn't reached the stage of repentance.

Stages of Conversion

2. She reaches the pit of dejection and enters a condition of total insensibility:

"yet a certain strange lethargy of soul possessed me. I had no trouble, no apprehensions, no sorrow about me, the first surprise was gone; I was, I may well say, I know not how; my senses, my reason, nay, my conscience, were all asleep.." (P.

409)

Stages of Conversion

- In this second stage, having passed the stage of inability to repent, Moll is in a state of numbness. She cannot feel pain or suffering, she is indifferent to all. Both her heart and mind were in a state of 'lethargy' as she calls it: a state of no feeling.

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Stages of Conversion

3. **Abhorrence of past sins:** This is similar to the spiritual condition the gentleman of Bath went through before full repentance. Moll says:

"It was now that, for the first time, I felt any real signs of repentance. I now began to look back upon my past life with abhorrence, and having a kind of view into the other side of time, the things of life, as I believe they do with everybody at such a time, began to look with a different aspect, and quite another shape, than they did before." (p. 421)

Stages of Conversion

- In this third stage, Moll finally abhors her past life, her sins, her deviation from the right path of virtue. She no longer finds excuses for her crimes. She does not justify her deeds, but rather blames herself for what she did. She is ready for true repentance first by rejection of her wicked past, then by accepting her fate and coming close to God. She goes through the spiritual growth of the gentleman of Bath, referred to earlier in the lectures.

Stages of Conversion

4. **Spiritual guide:** Now a true minister of God, a spiritual guide, comes to take her soul through confession and the joy of repentance:

"I hid nothing from him, and he in return exhorted me to sincere repentance, explained to me what he meant by repentance, and then drew out such a scheme of infinite mercy, proclaimed from heaven to sinners of the greatest magnitude, that he left me nothing to say, that looked like despair, or doubting of being accepted...he revived my heart, and brought me into such a condition that I never knew anything of in my life before. I was covered with shame and tears for things past, and yet had at the same time a secret surprising joy at the prospect of being a true penitent, and obtaining the comfort of a penitent--I mean, the hope of being forgiven." (p. 424-25)

Stages of Conversion

- What Moll reaches here is the stage of true repentance. Having passed through the previous three stages of 1) inability to repent, 2) numbness, and 3) abhorrence of past sins, she is now ready to sense the joy of penitence with the help of the minister of God, a true guide unlike the previous one she had. She can only achieve this through confession of her sins and tasting the joy of being forgiven.

After Repentance

- Despite the seeming sincerity of her repentance, and once on her way to Virginia with Jemmy, Moll goes back to the same self we recognise: once delivered from Newgate, all she cares about is reaching the social and economic stability she had been always obsessed with. She lies or conceals truths. Obviously, this is not what a true penitent would do.
- Even Defoe, as editor in the Preface, had doubts as to the validity of her repentance: **"she lived, it seems, to be very old, but was not so extraordinary as penitent, as she was at first."**

After Repentance

"but I, who had between £700 and £800 in bank when this disaster befell me, and who had one of the faithfulest friends in the world to manage it for me, considering she was a woman of manner of religious principles, had still £300 left in her hand, which I reserved as above; besides, some very valuable things, as particularly two gold watches, some small pieces of plate, and some rings—all stolen goods. The plate, rings, and watches were put in my chest with the money, and with this fortune, and in the sixty-first year of my age, I launched out into a new world, as I may call it, in the condition (as to what appeared) only of a poor, naked convict, ordered to be transported in respite from the gallows. My clothes were poor and mean, but not ragged or dirty, and none knew in the whole ship that I had anything of value about me." (p. 458)

After Repentance

- Notice that in this passage, after repentance, all Moll cares about is not being forgiven, or saved. We're back to the Moll who had a dream of becoming a gentlewoman, and who was obsessed with material value.
- What do you notice in this passage? The words of someone who barely escaped death, who confessed to sinning, and didn't care about anything in the world but virtue and God's forgiveness?
- ✓ Certainly not! The passage has all the traces of materialism: money, numbers, valuables, things, gold ...etc. It is Moll who is keen on enjoying life as a gentlewoman, not a poor penitent. She doesn't seem to mind investing in stolen goods; something which a true penitent would never do.

After Repentance

- Three things are evident from the Newgate episode:
 1. Moll's progress is one from true helplessness to relative freedom, from indifference to the secret sense of self-importance.
 2. This progress is achieved through re-entering relationships with Jemmy and the governess.
 3. Her secrecy is a form of power (she keeps herself hidden from Jemmy while working on his rescue, she does not tell him the details of her fortune...etc).

After Repentance

- The novel is part of the eighteenth century's literature of privacy (fictional memoirs of private life, hiding the identity of writer... etc)
- And in fact the moral fragmentation we spot in the novel (conflict of positive and negative design, two voices of Moll...etc) comes as an attempt by Defoe to further validate the authenticity of his work by adhering to the disorderliness of life.

After Repentance

- A critical viewpoint: **"Defoe flouts the orderliness of literature to demonstrate his total devotion to the disorderliness of life."**
- This stresses Defoe's obsession with offering a piece of fiction which so mimics reality that he was willing to disregard the order required to make his work well made in order to present 'life' in its lack of order sometimes. We do have stages in our life when we jump from one thing to another without a clear order or systematic movement. This is exactly what Defoe wanted to show. He wanted to be faithful to life in its disorderliness, so he ignored at times in the novel the fictional order.