***Moll Flanders as a Social Critique/ Sociological Novel***

Daniel Defoe published Moll Flanders, as well as two other novels, in 1722. Since the novel followed the publishing of Robinson Crusoe, Defoe was already an established novelist. The novel criticizes both the conservative and liberal beliefs that existed in eighteenth century Europe. When it first came out, Moll Flanders was criticized by some critics who thought it was too racy and contained subjects that were not appropriate to discuss or write about. Nevertheless, it quickly became a popular novel, helping Defoe's reputation as a novelist.

Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders is widely accepted as a picaresque novel that deals with the morality of a woman born into poverty who takes on a life of crime and prostitution. There is no argument between critics that Moll Flanders contributed to Defoe's success and added to his reputation as a novelist. John Moore, Francis Watson, Pat Rogers, and Miriam Lerenbaum are just a few of many critics who claim that Moll Flanders still reigns as one of the most popular English novels ever written. Watson says that "the fame of Moll Flanders, persistent but for a period somewhat furtive, now stands deservedly and unashamedly high". William Minto, on the other hand, calls the novel "only a string of diverting incidents, the lowest type of book organism, very brilliant while it is fresh and new, but not qualified to survive competitors for the world's interest". Robert Elliot says that "attacks on the book on moral grounds did nothing to diminish its popularity". In her introduction to Defoe's novel, Virginia Woolf says that Defoe was "one of the first indeed to shape the novel and launch it on its way". In a short poem, Reed Whittemore sums up the entire story of Moll's life, declaring that "her fall, is moral". He talks about how she is sent to Newgate and later released as a penitent.

Perhaps the most famous Daniel Defoe critic, Ian Watt divides, Moll Flanders into five episodes, "each of them ended by the death or departure of a husband". Martin Price claims that "in giving us the life-span, with its eager thrust from one experience to the next, Defoe robs life of it climatic structure". Other critics such as Maximillian Novak and Lee Edwards agree with Price's assumption that the unusual structure can prove problematic and most critics have problems with the irony of the novel. Dorothy Van Ghent calls the structure of the novel a "hierarchy of ironies" that "hold the book together". Watt, however, claims there are no ironies. Howard Koonce is yet another critic who states that Moll Flanders is a novel written "basically ironic in structure". As far as content, Paula Backscheider says that Moll Flanders "reflects the economic problems of the first decades of the eighteenth century".

Mark Schorer believes that "sympathy exceeds awareness" when it comes to the author's relations with the main character and notes that throughout the novel the reader is "charged by the author's sympathy". Koonce says that "it is because this appeal for sympathy is perfectly regular, is based on a perfectly consistent pattern, that we find Moll Flanders herself a consistent human being..." Koonce points out that at the end of the book when Moll has a chance to ask for God's mercy it is evident that "the only real subjects for Moll's thought processes are rather more mundane". Feminist critics such as Helene Moglen argue that Defoe tried to make Moll Flanders an individual equal to [Robinson Crusoe](http://voices.yahoo.com/topic/33021/robinson_crusoe.html) but failed because of his "inability to think beyond the values of the emerging sex-gender system". Moore calls the novel "the Crusoe story in another guise". Harold Bloom claims that the reader does not understand Moll, "*because Defoe does not understand her*".

Most critics unanimously agree that Moll Flanders stands out as one of the all-time great of English novels. It stands out above the rest because it portrays an accurate view of the things such as crime, punishment, and prostitution that are taking place during eighteenth century Europe. The reader knows it is accurate because Defoe mixes together the stories of people he actually knew in London to make up the character of Moll Cutpurse. Defoe wove together several different stories in order to present the novel as a partially true story. He wanted to do this so that his readers would be aware of what is going on in eighteenth century Europe and in the criminal world. Since it is an accurate portrayal of society, it becomes a historical novel. The excellence with which Defoe writes the historical novel added to his reputation as a novelist. Moll Flanders is a historical novel which provided an accurate look into eighteenth century Europe through the criminal life and prostitution of Moll Cutpurse and declared Daniel Defoe as the writer who started the genre of novel writing.

In the argument to define the genre of Moll Flanders, critics argue whether the story of Moll is a picaresque or morality story. If it were a picaresque story, Moll is just a lower class character who reveals her vanity by traveling among the wealthy pretending to be rich. On the other hand, if it were a morality tale, Moll could be tragic and contain a fatal flaw that becomes her down bringing. This tragic flaw would be that she constantly wishes to be a lady, though she is far from a lady. She commits numerous crimes attempting to feel like and be viewed as a lady. Or even from another view, Moll could be a criminal who commits crimes as a way of survival and only lacks Christian obedience. John Richetti says that the psychological changes that Moll goes through when she is in Newgate "predicts the main direction that the novel will take in the nineteenth century".

No matter the argument, it cannot be denied that Moll Flanders is a historical novel. There are three areas that define it as a historical novel, as defined by Backscheider. First, it reflects the economic lifestyles of society in the eighteenth century. The main focus of the novel is on money. Throughout the novel, everything that Moll experiences, is in order to receive money. When the brothers are discussing Moll near the beginning of the novel, they say:

"Betty wants but one Thing, but she had as good want every Thing, 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 no Body, she had has good want them all, for nothing but Money now recommends a Woman; the Men play the Game all into their own Hands.

Money controls what happens in the novel. Moll becomes a prostitute in order to make money. Moll becomes a thief in order to obtain money. Moll gets married so that she will have someone to take care of her and provide for her so that she does not have to worry about money. All of her husbands end up broke or otherwise destroyed because of money, leaving her with nothing, right where she was before she married any of her husbands. There are many scenes where she is working as a prostitute and all she thinks about is the money she is going to make. For instance, in one scene, she thinks to herself about the man that is going to sleep with: "as for me, my Business was his Money and what I could make of him".

Second, it is a literary work. People in the early eighteenth century were engrossed in reading fiction and the longer forms of fiction writing were quickly increasing in popularity. Defoe's previous novel Robinson Crusoe had been a bestseller and Moll Flanders even exceeded it in sales. Most of the popular novels were set in London, like most of Moll's story is.

Third, and final, Defoe's novel is about a criminal. Crime was on the forefront of every European citizen's mind in the 1720s. With the increased interest of society in crime, the newspapers and magazines picked up on anything they could get their hands on dealing with crime. Not only is Moll a thief, but she is also a prostitute, a profession that is not often considered a crime although it truly is. She starts out merely picking up a piece of baggage that someone left laying around but as she increases her skills, she goes around swiping as many people's watches as she can. As Moll becomes skilled in thievery, she slips away easily into prostitution as a way to make money, the key focus of Defoe's novel.

Throughout the novel, Moll Cutpurse goes through many changes as she struggles to find her proper spot in life. She lives as an orphan, a servant, a thief, a wife, a mother, a criminal, a prostitute, and many other roles. Lerenbaum says that "Defoe takes cognizance of Moll's roles as... most especially by correlating the stages in her aging process with crises in her personal life". Like Watt, she divides the novel into sections based on the events that happen in her life. The first half of the novel narrates her life as a young woman and a wife. On the other hand, the latter half of the novel resolves to her life as a thief and prostitute before returning to her serving the role of a mother.

Moll develops throughout the novel as she ages. As a child, Moll is content to doing what anyone tells her to do and feels blessed just to be living in the parsonage. As a wife and mother, she starts to become needier and expects her husband to help her financially and socially, as well as emotionally. Many of her marriage break down because of her emotional instability. As a criminal, Moll becomes very cynical of the world and will do whatever she needs to survive, not caring who she steals from or what she takes. For example, in one scene Moll has just stolen the necklace off a child's neck and she thinks to herself:

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.

This is a prime example of Moll's refusal to acknowledge that her crimes were wrong and doing things for only herself. Afterwards she just thinks to herself how much money she can get from the necklace.

At the time that Moll Flanders was written, a genre was not necessary for publishing and classifying a novel. Defoe wanted to validate the novel by using true stories and making it essentially a non-fiction book. Though the main character of Moll Cutpurse is fictional, he comprises the stories of real people to create her memoir. Critics such as Watt argue that part of the comical effect of the novel arises from the unlikelihood of one person experiencing all of the things that happen to Moll. As already explained above, Moll's experiences were very true to what was happening in the European society in the eighteenth century.

Moll Flanders was the first novel written and with it Defoe started the genre of novel writing. In order to understand the importance of Defoe's impact on the rise of the novel, the term "novel" must be examined. According to Price:

The novel provides a spacious vehicle, with its slow rhythm of disclosure, its opportunities for dialogue, description, commentary... allows a rapid alternation between the character's internal thought and his action... gains fluidity by its prosiness. The novel is the medium in which we can see the spirit of man in its most problematic form.

Backscheider agrees with Price that Defoe's novel helped define the novel and provided many characteristics that make up a novel. She says that some of these characteristics include "it’s easy movement from the external world to the internal world of the character's mind... its focus on an individual with some psychological depth” and many other qualities. For example, after stealing the necklace from the child, Defoe writes that Moll thought "I had a great many Adventures after this, but I was young in the Business, and did not know how to manage, otherwise than as the Devil put things into my Head”.

Price says Defoe's novels have created a puzzle for critics because of his use of autobiographies. The unprecedented area of novel writing allowed Defoe to use any medium he wanted when writing Moll Flanders. Many critics are confused by the structure of the novel. There is a lack of thematic unity and focus on the narration from the characters. One consistency, however, of Defoe's novel is the consistency of irony. Few critics, other than Watt, deny the authors use of irony in the novel. Ghent even refers to it as a "hierarchy of ironies". The problem arises, however, whenever trying to decipher between the ironic parts intended by Defoe and the ironic parts that come along naturally in writing a novel. In her preface to Moll Flanders, Cesare Pavese writes that "it is in the intermingling and in the fusion of these extreme motives that I think this irony exists".

Despite his obvious effect on the rise of the novel, Defoe's mode of writing disturbed critics and fellow writers. Watt states that "[Defoe's] main aim as a writer was certainly to achieve a large and effective output... and this output was not primarily intended for a careful and critical audience". Watt believes that Defoe would have not given a second thought to inconsistencies in the novel, based on his nonchalant attitude concerning his other previous works. Some of the inconsistencies that stick out to the reader include the constant changing between the character's mind and the narrator, without letting the reader know which one is speaking and the intentional/non-intentional use of irony throughout the novel.

No matter how nonchalant his attitudes about writing, Defoe's works almost always turned out magnificent and were praised widely. When Moll Flanders was first released, sales rocketed and everyone wanted a copy of the novel. Three editions had to be made in its first year of printing alone. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, praise for Defoe's novel gradually decreased. Many of his other works received more praise than Moll Flanders and critics began to wonder if the novel would ever be able to make a comeback. According to Homer Brown, it was due to writers such as E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf that Moll Flanders became more popular during the twentieth century. This is because they praised the novel for its "psychological accuracy of character".

Backscheider says that "very few books in the history of any nation hold both literary and popular appeal; Moll Flanders is one of these books". That simple statement establishes the importance of Defoe's novel. His work sets up the nature of novels: the hero/heroine wishes to obtain something but due to circumstances beyond their control they cannot reach this goal. Another key quality of the novel that Defoe established is the use of the character's mind as the narration, rather than a third-person point of view.

Daniel Defoe's novel Moll Flanders started the genre of novel writing and left a mark on the literary world that can still be seen and appreciated today, in the twenty-first century. The impact he made on English society and all future writers has not been outdone by any subsequent writers. With the character of Moll Cutpurse, he painted an extremely accurate portrait of what life was like in the 1700s, especially in London and other parts of Europe, so that people today and anytime in the future can read the novel and understand what it was like to live back then. Additional areas for study concerning Moll Flanders include the emasculation of Moll due to Defoe's sex as a writer, examining Moll as a tragic character, and exploring the "good" qualities of Moll rather than focusing on all of her negative traits. Another possible topic of further study could be to delve more into the psychological aspect of the novel and examine whether Moll could be considered mentally ill. There are of course, many more possible areas of study concerning Daniel Defoe as well.