

## *Moll Flanders*

### **Daniel Defoe (1660-1731)**

Novelist, journalist and entrepreneur. Probably the most versatile journalist of his time and a prolific writer - over 500 publications. Best known today for his novels, especially *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724).

As a novelist, he was primarily interested in man as a social being, not in individual psychology (this became the focus of attention in the Romantic era). Fascinated by travel (he himself travelled extensively in Europe), adventure, piracy and crime (piracy for landlubbers!) His own life was pretty colourful: he was a spy from 1697 to 1714, initially for William III and then for various ministers.

### ***Moll Flanders* in literary context**

The novel as a form was very much in its infancy when Defoe was writing *Moll Flanders*; trying to make it fit into any one category isn't necessarily helpful. In the introduction to the 1989 Penguin edition, David Blewett approves Robert Alter's definition of Moll's narrative as 'quasi-picaresque'; other scholars such as Lincoln Faller tend to emphasise its relation to crime narratives. There is no one 'correct' approach: Defoe draws on various literary traditions and we need to have a basic awareness of them. 4 main literary traditions to be aware of when reading Moll F: romance; picaresque; puritan narrative; crime narratives.

### **Romance**

The form originated in 12th century France, characteristically recounting the story of a knight and his adventures and concerned with courtly values in all aspects of society, love and battle. Other elements may include the supernatural and a love interest. Romances aren't fundamentally concerned with individual characterisation, although some of the more complex ones explore the psychological development of the hero through his adventures and offer a critique of society and its values.

*Moll Flanders* clearly owes much to the tradition of romanticised folk-heroes or 'rogue-romance'. It has elements of romance such as finding long lost relatives, the rise to gentility, the incest theme (often only implied in romance due to confused identities eg Fielding's Joseph Andrews thinks at one point that Fanny is his sister - disaster is averted and we find out that she isn't). In *Moll Flanders* we have the traditional mistaken identities but the result is tragic and horrifying because the incest is actual, not an implied threat to natural order and to the stability of the family but an actual crime. Defoe appropriates romance conventions to add colour but *Moll Flanders* is clearly not simply a romance.

### **Picaresque**

Emerged in the 16th century in Spain: picaresque narratives provided a realistic account of the life of a rogue (picaro) who survives various adventures by his wits, often satirising society. The term came to be applied to anyone at odds with society, for eg Fielding's Tom Jones, who is an outsider because he's illegitimate. *Moll Flanders* has many picaresque elements: the low born rogue, a variety of adventures, sexual freedom, panorama of life reflected in the travels of the protagonist - cf Tom Jones and Joseph Andrews and their travels. The novel is steeped in irony and satire, which is closely associated with the picaresque. However, we also have to account for the strong religious element in *Moll Flanders*, something one doesn't find in picaresque novels.

## **Defoe and Puritan tradition**

Part of Moll's literary heritage lies in the Puritan tradition of written meditations and spiritual diaries. Defoe's was brought up as a Presbyterian and he intended to go into the ministry - he had a solid theological education which inevitably informs much of his writing.

The title page indicates how we should read the novel: Defoe claims that the narrative is based on Moll's 'memorandums'. This book purports to be the narrative of Moll's life - Defoe does NOT call it a novel - works we now call novels often claimed to be transcripts of real diaries, memoirs, letters etc to give an impression of truth; novels, along with the earlier romances, were often condemned as frivolous, as opposed to morally useful works. By presenting the narrative as true and by stressing on the title page that it is the life of a sinner who repents, Defoe stakes a claim for the novel as a moral work; Blewett refers to it usefully as 'a moral fable'. The list of her crimes, while establishing Moll as a sinner, also whets the reader's appetite for scandal.

In Puritan tradition, life is understood in biblical terms of sin, repentance and redemption. Man faces a series of trials and moral choices. *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), for eg, is, among other things, the narrative of a self-reliant, rather proud man, who comes to recognise his sin and submit to God. Puritan tradition is about man's place in the universe - how he copes with the moral choices that define his being. The episodic nature of Moll's adventures reflects the fragmented and often confused experiences of human life as we struggle to find meaning. Underlying this is the sub text of providence and thus the assurance of ultimate meaning in a divinely ordered universe: Moll seeks meaning through increasingly desperate acts to obtain wealth and social position, things society teaches us give our lives meaning.

The text is complex in that we are dependent on Moll's account. She puts an editorial gloss as it were on the narrative of her life, interpreting the experience or text of her youth through the wisdom of age and repentance. We are not given immediate access to the events of the novel and never receive an unmediated account. We are reading Moll's memoirs, a narrative which functions as an appeal to the reader to like and forgive her and, ostensibly at least, a moral directive to follow the good example of her repentant old age, not the bad example of her criminal youth.

Moll is a variation on the biblical parable of the prodigal son - he goes off to do his own thing, wanting freedom without responsibility to God, his family or society. He squanders his inheritance, gets involved with dissolute figures and ultimately ends up degraded and desperate, living in a literal pigsty. Newgate is Defoe's equivalent to the pigsty. Ultimately the son swallows his pride and returns to his father, begs forgiveness and offers himself as a servant; Moll's submission to transportation, a form of slavery, provides a clear parallel. The prodigal son is welcomed by his father; Defoe and his readers would have been familiar with the parable and its meaning that God welcomes penitent sinners; this is one of the reasons so much of the novel is concerned with whether or not Moll's repentance is genuine.

Moll learns that man does not live alone in an individual moral universe; total freedom on an individual level to do anything we want would lead to anarchy. Moll learns that individual behaviour has to be regulated by law in order for society to have any hope of harmony and stability - human beings are not by nature good citizens but something closer to what Hobbes described.

Thomas Hobbes was an influential 17th century philosopher, whose theories were well known in the 18th century. He was a materialist, who argued that man is simply a physical being and so thought and emotion are

physical processes. His was a mechanistic, atheistic view of the world, denying freedom of will and arguing that our behaviour is determined solely by our reactions to pleasure and pain. He argued that human beings are essentially selfish and defined morality as conforming to social restraint out of self interest as a means of avoiding anarchy.

Hobbes's best known work is *Leviathan* (1651), in which he explains his theories of human nature. He drew a distinction between man in society and man as he would be in a state of nature, without law and social regulation as part of the moral and political systems which govern our behaviour. He refers in *Leviathan* to this theoretical state of nature as 'a war of all against all', a perpetual state of savagery, where 'every man is enemy to every man' and life is 'nasty, brutish and short'. Hobbes felt England had come close to this during the Civil War of 1642-8.

Hobbes constructed a philosophical myth of the origins of society, arguing that man had decided to exchange natural freedom for the benefits of peace and profit. He believed that human nature is so untrustworthy that external political and legal powers and severe punishments are necessary to restrain us.

Moll lives in a sort of Hobbesian state of nature for a while, preying on the weak by thieving in a world which supports the survival of the fittest. Indeed she is sometimes viewed as a kind of early capitalist woman.

### **Moll and Capitalism**

Juliet Mitchell in her intro to the 1978 Penguin edition of *Moll Flanders* sums up Moll's world as follows: 'The first decades after the removal of King James in 1688 were in certain senses the most revolutionary in English history. This was the period of bourgeois revolution transcendent, of individualism and capitalism let loose, of the transition from the religion-based ethics of feudalism to the secular ethics of capitalism...Property became King'(pp.9-10). She notes on p.11: 'fewer and fewer people were persecuted, as they had been previously, for opinions they held, political or religious; the rapid escalation of the death penalty was for offences against property'. In the light of the emergent values of capitalism, Mitchell views Moll as 'the new small time capitalist...progressing to what...she rightly takes to be the capitalist definition of a gentlewoman - the wife of a prosperous businessman or a self-made woman in her own right'(pp.11-12).

Moll's marriage to the draper enables her to achieve a degree of bourgeois status but of course this is short-lived and she finds that in her society, capitalist values favour men: women were not educated to engage in trade and even if they managed to find someone to teach them, they were often not legally in a position to trade: most women had no legal identity and therefore couldn't fulfil contracts. The legal identity of unmarried women under 21 was subsumed into that of the father; when a woman married, her legal identity was vested in her husband. The law put women in the same category as children and lunatics, with no legal identity or the rights which attend such an identity. The only women who really had a legal identity were widows. This is why Moll stresses her status as respectable widow - it means she has certain rights and the legal ability to trade. However, as she finds out, she still can't compete on an equal footing with men because she has to rely on male bankers etc - she can't run her affairs herself.

There were successful women traders in the 18th century but society made it very difficult for them - capitalism was essentially a masculine dream - the woman's part lay in basking in the glory of her husband's success and running the household in as genteel a manner as possible.

Frustrated at the difficulties society puts in her way and determined to gain money and thus status and power, Moll turns to a different market and sells herself, initially by marrying for money and ultimately in

prostitution. Defoe in no way condones his heroine's behaviour but neither does he dwell on what was in reality a tragic and ugly profession which invariably led to disease, poverty and death.

Defoe chooses rather to show us why Moll becomes involved in various kinds of crime (prostitution was and is a crime). Critics such as Mitchell rightly point out that for Moll, it is a kind of alternative trade - the only form of capitalism easily open to women of the time but such a view denies the clear moral register of the text. We must be wary of interpreting Moll's behaviour simply as an expression of capitalist principles when for Defoe it is clearly a moral issue.

Moll is also an extreme example of the pragmatic and materialistic way in which her society approached moral values. She is well aware that her society's concern for feminine virtue wasn't to satisfy religious standards but to ensure that children would be legitimate heirs and that a man wouldn't be leaving his estate to another man's child. Moll's rather calculating attitude towards moral values, her concern with being 'found out' as opposed to genuine moral feeling, partly reflects 18th century attitudes in general. The 18th century was full of contradictions: great intellectual achievements in literature, philosophy and science, religious revival; yet beneath the civilised veneer there was gross hypocrisy and immorality on a scale that would make 20th century tabloids blush. In questioning Moll's moral decisions, Defoe questions his society and its values.

### **Crime narratives**

Moll's narrative is in one sense a confession, which has its roots in Puritan tradition but it is also related to crime literature, in particular the highly popular accounts of criminals' confessions and repentance which were collected and published by Ordinaries. Ordinaries were chaplains who attended condemned prisoners, particularly associated with Newgate. In addition to the Ordinaries' accounts there were pamphlets which gave accounts of trials (some more fictionalised than others) and biographies of criminals which told the stories of famous criminals and their crimes and executions.

Crime literature was popular across the social spectrum but the core of the readership seems to have been the middle classes. It's not surprising that crime literature, including *Moll Flanders*, reflected their concerns about crime and crime prevention, often for tradespeople, and gave frequent portrayals of crime as originating in the lack of self-discipline and idleness of the labouring classes.

The early eighteenth century saw growing concern about crime and therefore an increase in publications concerning crime and criminals. Novelists capitalised on public interest in crime, producing narratives rich in roguish exploits, through which serious questions are posed concerning the law and its processes, from the perennial charge that the law is inadequate to protect innocent citizens, to humanitarian concerns regarding the treatment of criminals in prison.

In her biography of Defoe Paula Backscheider argues usefully, 'Always alert to what his contemporaries were interested in and eager to analyze, explain, and point out the implications of social change, Defoe began to publish extensively on crime and criminals'(p.477). His popularity was such that he came to compete 'with the Newgate Ordinary as the most productive and popular crime writer'; there were three editions of *Moll Flanders* and it was serialized in the *London Post*.

### **The significance of the title**

The title is significant on several levels. I'll deal with it briefly here because David Blewett deals with it in detail in

the intro to the Penguin edition.

Moll Flanders is a nickname given to Moll by the inmates of Newgate; nicknames indicate aspects of character or one's place in society. Moll's name has two parts, both of which are significant.

The word 'Moll' refers to a woman of morally dubious reputation, often associated with criminals. Moll was also the nickname of a famous 17th century thief, Moll Cut-Purse. Moll herself is clearly conscious of the parallel and indeed proud of the association in terms of criminal skill: 'I grew as impudent a thief, and as dexterous as ever Moll Cut-Purse was'(p.266). It's possible that during his many visits to Newgate, Defoe may have met Moll King, alias Mary Godson, a famous thief who worked for Jonathan Wild and so she may also have influenced him in his choice of name.

As for Moll's surname, it is doubly significant: Flemish women were associated with cloth-making, especially linen and lace but also with prostitution. Moll's association with cloth and lace is apparent, particularly in terms of her career in theft; her sexual career is equally self-evident (she tells us on p.251 that she's had 13 lovers and she hasn't finished yet!)

It's worth noting that in Defoe's eyes, Moll is guilty of prostitution in more ways than the simple transaction of sex for money: she marries for money, a practice which was common in the middle and particularly the upper classes in the 18th century. Women had little hope of earning a living: they were not educated to work and so had to marry to ensure financial survival. Defoe attacked the practice of marrying for money in *Conjugal Lewdness* (1727): 'Will you live with a man, and lie with a man you don't love?... 'tis but a kind of legal prostitution'.

### **Moll's marriages:**

Firstly, Moll is seduced by the elder brother in the Colchester family where she grows up

1. Marries the younger brother, Robin.
2. He dies and she marries the linen draper
3. Moll unwittingly meets her own brother, marries him and goes to live on his plantation in Virginia (still technically married to the linen draper because he's still alive).  
Becomes mistress to man she meets in Bath. He becomes gravely ill, repents his adultery with her and ends the affair. She turns to theft because she's aware that she's unlikely to be able to find another man to keep her at her age.
4. She goes to Lancashire to find a husband. Marries Jemy; they each con the other by pretending to have money. They part because of money problems and he goes to Ireland to try to make his fortune.
5. Marries the bank clerk; he dies. Meets Jemy, the Lancashire husband, when she's imprisoned in Newgate; they're transported to Virginia together and ultimately return to England and 'live happily ever after'.

### **Marriage laws**

We don't have time to deal with the legal aspects of the novel here properly but if you're interested, you can read sections of my book, *Fictions of Law*, which gives an introduction to 18th century society and its laws and explains legal situations in different novels, including *Moll F*. There's a short section on marriage laws and criminal law as they relate to Moll (about 5 pages each). Defoe explores through Moll's experiences a number of aspects of marital law which were of contemporary interest, in particular: remarriage after desertion, bigamy and incest.

## **Remarriage after desertion**

An issue of contemporary concern - divorce was almost impossible and very expensive and communication was difficult, especially if one's partner went overseas as a sailor or merchant. It was quite possible not to know if they were dead or alive and given the financial difficulties for women who didn't have husbands supporting them, inevitably some remarried.

It was popularly believed that desertion was grounds for remarriage but in law, desertion did not constitute legal grounds for remarriage because it did not invalidate the existing marriage. Moll reflects popular opinion: not having heard from the linen draper for fifteen years, she comments, 'no Body could blame me for thinking my self entirely freed from' him, since he had said 'if I did not hear frequently from him, I should conclude he was dead, and I might freely marry again'(p.180), although she admitted 3 pages earlier, 'I was all this while a marry'd Woman', whose husband 'had no power to Discharge [her] from the Marriage Contract' or to give her 'a legal liberty to marry again'(p.177). Moll is clearly aware of her legal position but attempts to argue herself out of moral and legal obligations according to her personal desires.

## **Incest**

20th century readers tend to regard incest simply as a convention of romance, a natural extension of the convention of confused identities. It WAS a romance motif but it was also potentially a real problem: due to irregularities in the birth, death and marriage registers, it was quite possible to marry a relation unwittingly. Moll marries her brother; when she realises, she feels a 'riveted Aversion'(p.147) to him, 'it being an unlawful incestuous living'(p.148). *Moll Flanders* is set in 1650, when incest was made a capital offence; it was still theoretically punishable by death in the 18th century. 20th century readers will understand Moll's horror in terms of natural human reactions and moral thinking but contemporary readers would have recognised, as Moll does, that she has done something which carries the death penalty. Fortunately, her brother shares her horror and agrees to a separation without a court case.

## **Bigamy**

Moll's marriage to her brother is not only incestuous but bigamous because she is still married to the linen draper. She is clearly aware that she is breaking the law but reasons herself out of moral and legal issues with an amoral pragmatism: 'as to my other Husband he was effectually dead in Law to me, and had told me I should look on him as such, so I had not the least uneasiness'(p.142). Again, this is nonsense in terms of law: any second marriage, if the first spouse was alive (even if you thought they were dead), was void. Bigamy was also a serious offence (still is of course); in theory, it carried the death penalty but in practice was often softened to burning of the thumb and, later in the century, transportation.

Moll has committed, sometimes deliberately and sometimes not, several **very** serious offences - serious in terms of moral and secular law. Moll's world is very different to our own - cohabitation and having numerous partners simply wasn't an option for a woman unless she was a prostitute. Moll's offences automatically place her outside society and its behavioural norms. Her criminal career highlights this and alienates her even further from the society whose values she flouts.

## **Moll Flanders and criminal law**

Eighteenth-century readers were fascinated by criminal law and those who infringed its code. To the eighteenth-century mind, the law was not simply a powerful institution but a form of entertainment. Criminal trials and executions attracted audiences from a wide social spectrum - their equivalent of legal soaps.

In 1720s crime by women was increasing - employment opportunities were scarce, largely because the woollen trade was in difficulty and there was a surplus of workers because of the returning military; some women inevitably turned to prostitution and robbery to support themselves. Moll is not quite in this category: she admits that she could earn a living from sewing but she wants to do more than earn a living - she is desperate to climb the social ladder. Crime is the only way in which Moll can obtain wealth and thus a degree of respectability and power.

In the 1720s Defoe worked as an editor and journalist for Applebee's *Journal*, which reported on contemporary crime and trials so he had ample opportunity to observe legal procedure and to develop an understanding of the public appetite for crime. This goes some way to explaining the use of legal detail in *Moll Flanders*, which capitalises on public interest in crime and court procedure, while addressing issues of contemporary concern such as imprisonment and transportation.

Moll is ultimately arrested for stealing expensive brocaded silk. When she faces trial, her discussion of the relevant laws reads almost like a legal text book. However, her legal knowledge is not unusual: felons, that is, those accused of capital crimes, were required to defend themselves in court - they didn't have the right to a defence lawyer. Consequently, law books were studied by prisoners in Newgate prison, often with the assistance of law students preparing for the bar.

Moll is indicted on two counts: larceny and burglary.

Briefly, Moll is clearly guilty of grand larceny or theft of goods worth more than twelve pence. She argues in court that she simply wanted to take the silks outside to see them in daylight before buying them, although she admits to the reader, 'certain it was, that I had taken the Goods, and that I was bringing them away'. The court rejects her argument as 'a kind of Jest'(p.362) and she is found guilty of larceny.

However, she is acquitted from burglary. There are 3 possible reasons for this:

1. The crime took place in the daytime and theft was only deemed burglary if it occurred at night.
2. Burglary presupposed breaking and entering - this didn't have to be violent and could simply involve 'lifting up the latch of a door' but Moll knows they can't prove she did this: her plea is calculated according to precise knowledge of law: 'I knew very well they could not pretend to prove I had broken up the Doors, or so much as lifted up a Latch'(p.361). This is a direct echo of the text book definition of breaking and entering.
3. Theft from a shop building which was not inhabited was not burglary. Moll admits to the reader that the building 'look'd like a private Dwelling-House'(p.347) but the prosecution may not have been able to prove this.

The jury finds Moll guilty of larceny but she is acquitted of burglary; she recognises that the distinction is in one sense meaningless because they both carry the death penalty.

Up until this point Moll appears to have regarded the trial as part of her long running 'cat and mouse' game with the law. When she hears the death sentence, she and the reader suddenly become conscious of the terrifying reality of her situation.

Defoe has to maintain a careful balance between Moll's character and the ideological concerns which underpin her narrative. He elicits a degree of sympathy for her, particularly early in the novel and the reader may even enjoy her roguery, participating vicariously in her exploits. Yet Moll must be punished because she has

consistently transgressed moral and social values. By having the court find Moll guilty, Defoe gives the law its due and maintains respect for the system. However, if the death penalty were exacted, the reader would be likely to revolt against the very system Defoe is seeking to defend; the subsequent presentation of judicial clemency is vital in encouraging the reader to support the legal system.

### **Newgate and Moll's repentance**

Moll is sent to Newgate prison to await hanging. Defoe himself fell foul of the law and was prosecuted for debt and seditious libel. At one point he was imprisoned in Newgate, although he was able to pay to be in the Press Yard, where conditions were considerably better than those experienced by poor inmates.

Moll describes Newgate in disturbing detail: 'the hellish Noise, the Roaring, Swearing, and Clamour, the Stench and Nastiness'(p.349). We should not underestimate how awful conditions were in 18th century prisons. Conditions were extremely cramped, hygiene was almost non-existent and they were hotbeds of vice.

William Smith, who campaigned for prison reform, commented of the Fleet prison: 'Men and women, felons and disorderly people, are crammed together in one ward in the day, and at night lie on dirty boards in filthy holes, almost unfit for swine. In this prison riot, drunkenness, blasphemy, and debauchery, echo from the walls; sickness and misery are confined within them.' *State of the Gaols in London, Westminster, and the Borough of Southwark*, 1776.

While in Newgate, Moll appears to repent, although whether or not she internalises the corrective values of the penal system remains ultimately debatable. However, her apparent penitence makes her an appropriate candidate for mercy in a human court at least and is thus essential to Defoe's argument. The Ordinary, or prison chaplain, is impressed with Moll's pious behaviour and persuades a senior judge to give her a reprieve, that is to give her time to ask for a pardon rather than hanging her immediately. Moll asks the authorities to change her sentence from death to transportation, a form of pardon, when the sentence was softened to a period of exile in the colonies. Roughly 50% of prisoners condemned to death during the eighteenth century weren't actually hanged but were transported to the colonies or imprisoned.

In *Moll Flanders*, Defoe argues powerfully for transportation as an alternative to the death penalty. Before the Transportation Act (1718) grand larceny, Moll's crime, was regularly punished by death. The Transportation Act enabled courts to transport criminals if they believed the death penalty to be too harsh. Moll is guilty of many things but readers are unlikely to feel that she deserves death.

There was a degree of humanitarian concern about the penal system throughout the century but 18th century people were more concerned with fighting crime than with the rights of criminals. Defoe isn't arguing that society should be soft on criminals but he argues against unreasonable suffering and death for crimes which don't warrant it. The death penalty was debated throughout the century - most felt that it was an acceptable expression of natural justice where murder was concerned but the debate was less clear-cut in relation to theft.

It's worth bearing in mind that there were a vast number of capital crimes, ranging from cutting down cherry trees and vandalising fish ponds to theft, destroying turnpikes and violent crime.

Moll's experience reflects Defoe's belief in transportation as a means of allowing criminals to break the pattern of crime and make a new life for themselves within society as opposed to in conflict with it. It's perhaps worth noting that as a merchant, Defoe himself profited from transporting people.

I must stress that transportation was not the easy romantic experience presented in the recent dramatisation



of the novel, where they sail off blissfully into the sunset! Moll's readiness to face transportation shows her courage and resourcefulness. She relates that the first night on board the ship, 'We were...clapt under Hatches, and kept so close, that I thought I should have been suffocated'(p.386), continuing, 'All that night I lay upon the hard Boards of the Deck'(p.387). However, her suffering is short-lived: the Boatswain gives 'so good a Character of Moll and her husband that 'for fifteen Guineas we had our whole Passage and Provisions, and Cabbin, eat at the Captain's Table, and were very handsomely Entertain'd'(p.397).

Moll is sold to a planter on arrival in Virginia but she buys her freedom: 'the Planter gave us a Certificate of Discharge, and an Acknowledgement of having serv'd him faithfully'(p.402). Moll's good fortune here is not implausible: women convicts were often regarded as poor workers; the planter may feel that Moll's money will provide a better return on his investment than her labour. Most convicts of course wouldn't have the money to buy themselves out of slavery. Moll dwells not on the inevitable hardships of long sea journeys and life in a harsh climate but on the economic possibilities. She tells the reader, 'I...was to be discourag'd with nothing'(p.414).

As a Christian I must say I find Moll's repentance somewhat unconvincing; repentance involves not simply remorse but actively turning away from sin and trying to follow God's law. Moll turns from crime but this may simply be because the legitimate rewards of her inheritance render crime unnecessary. We're not party to Moll's thoughts so we simply don't know but what is clear is that Moll's new crime-free lifestyle testifies to the positive potential of transportation. She and her husband reflect 'with a great deal of Pleasure...how much better' their new life is 'not than *Newgate* only, but than the most prosperous of our Circumstances in the wicked Trade that we had both been carrying on'(p.415). In this instance, at least, transportation serves the ideals of justice more effectively than the death penalty would. Moll ultimately gains an inheritance and she and her husband return to England in a very comfortable financial position.

Those of us inclined to cynicism may doubt Moll's repentance but Defoe recognises that as far as the law is concerned, whether or not Moll's repentance is genuine is in one sense irrelevant. Repentance is significant in secular terms only in so far as it may indicate the likelihood of her re-offending. Discussion of Moll's inner consciousness is not the preserve of the court: it is an exercise in literary criticism, left to the reader. Legal theory determines that language is studied in relation to evidence and the evidence is that Moll is a first time offender who is repenting.

Defoe addresses the issue of interpretation by suggesting the impossibility of ascertaining absolute truth in a human court. Absolute truth is known only by God; human courts must judge according to finite and thus potentially fallible evidence. Defoe makes the reader conscious of this fundamental problem through the essentially rhetorical nature of much of Moll's discourse, be it legal or apparently spiritual.

Moll appeals to the reader on a personal level, admitting her guilt in asides calculated to elicit sympathy or at least to weaken our condemnation. Yet she also appeals to the reader as Judge, stressing mitigating circumstances. We may like to feel that we are given privileged access to Moll's feelings but ultimately we cannot be sure that she is not simply providing us with different versions of reality, without ever giving us access to the 'truth'. Reading inevitably involves a process of literary judgement; Defoe invites us to parallel this with judicial judgement. This may be problematic in that it encourages scepticism towards Moll, but Defoe persuades the reader to enter imaginatively into the realm of legal interpretation, to understand more fully the function of the court and the nature of its judgements.

Defoe is able to explore and comment on the legal system through Moll in a way that he could not with a

more conventional character: she articulates the views of criminals, a social group who may not be deemed appropriate mouthpieces for legal reform but who are in one sense uniquely qualified to discuss it. Moll is both a commentator on the law and a participant in its system. On a lighter note, Moll's outrageousness and dubious moral practices enable Defoe to treat serious subjects like the law with humour and even scandal, thus entertaining the reader.

Moll provides a human face to crime. Defoe suggests it's easy to dismiss criminals and want to hang them all until we get to know one, in this case Moll. We're forced to see her as an individual, to learn what life is like for someone like her, born to be an outsider by virtue of birth and poverty. We have to recognise her as a person, who suffers and triumphs, loves and loses, a person with fundamental good qualities but capable of moral weakness, someone rather like us in some ways - a sobering thought!

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