

An Analysis of Female Roles in Novels

-- Taking Moll Flanders as an Example

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Abstract: As a realistic novel —Moll Flanders uses the autobiographical form to directly show readers a picture of people's life in Britain in the 18th century. The author Daniel Defoe reveals the character for us by describing many concrete details. In his novels, there are always thieves, gangsters and other dark forces, which are different from the heroes of the greenwood who rob the rich to feed the poor in Chinese novels of the same period. This article aims to show a deeper understanding of the characters of this marvelous book by analyzing the growth process of the protagonist, at the same time, through the analysis of the era in which the novel is set, experiencing the struggle and difficulty of women's fate in the patriarchal society.

Keywords: Moll's Characteristic; Growing Experience; Patriarchal Society.

1. Introduction to the Author and Background

Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) is a famous English writer in the 18th century who occupies an important position in the history of world literature. He is often considered as "the father of the English novel" and "the founder of the realistic novels". He is born in a lower-middle-class merchant family. When he grows up, his colorful job experiences exert a far-reaching influence on his later writing, not only providing him abundant writing materials and new creating perspectives, but also making his works realer than others. Defoe begin to write at the age of 59, and he creates many excellent works, most of which adopted the way of self-narration, with plots of twists and turns. Robinson Crusoe, published at the age of his 60, is the first hugely successful masterpiece that makes Defoe famous in the literary world. A novel of a different nature—*Moll Flanders*, published three years later, makes Defoe's work even more unique. There are many novelists in the world who write novels with female protagonists, but Defoe is the first writer who endows women from the bottom of society with a central position in novels.

2. Life Experience of Moll Flanders

The heroine and the narrator of the biography Moll Flanders is born in the Newgate jail. Her mother is convicted a of a felony for a theft and leaves her at half-year-old. Although God has intended a miserable and lonely life for her, she still stubbornly grows up under the care and help of the old nurse. She eagers to be a real gentlewoman who is independent, honest and earns money by her own efforts one day.

However, with her nurse's death when she is near 14 years old, Moll has to be sent to the mayor's house to be a servant. It is exactly from that time that her tragic fate start. Moll is involved in the affairs of two brothers. The elder son of the mayor seduces her and then shamelessly transfers her body to his brother and the young one also falls in love with her and makes proposal for many times. Moll suffers a delimita, and marries the young though she likes the elder one better. Since

then, Moll no longer believes in love and realizes that marriage is just a business for respective interests. So, her later four marriages and thirteen sexual relationships are all for money, not for love.

Driven by poverty, Moll incredibly becomes a thief for gaining money. After the twelve years of stealing, she is caught at length and sent to Newgate prison, just like her mother.

With the help of the minister, she luckily escapes the punishment of death and is exiled to Virginia together with her fourth husband. In the end, Moll finally goes back to England again after many ups and downs.

3. Analysis of the Heroine

3.1. Influences of Social Environment

Professor Nie Zhenzhao once said: "literary works of different eras must have their own specific ethical environments and ethical contexts. When understanding literature, it is extremely necessary to return to the ethical environment and ethical context literature belongs to." If we want to figure out the ethical consciousness of Moll, we need to take the ethical environment and ethical context into consideration.

In the 18th century, Britain was in a critical period of transformation from agricultural society to industrial society, and revolutionary changes took place in every aspect of life. This has greatly promoted the development of social civilization. Behind the boom, however, the potential moral hazard is growing. Social values are also gradually alienated in such a social situation. In Moll Flanders, the ethical environment in which Moll lived was 18th century of England. Some external factors inevitably affect her growth and shape her ethical consciousness. The 18th century was the heyday of capitalist expansion. All the profits are in the hands of the British bourgeoisie. The bourgeois merchants became richer and richer, while the lower poor peasants were ruthlessly driven out of their ancestral homes and even tragically became their slaves and money-making machines. With the rapid accumulation of capital, the economy flourished unprecedentedly. But at the same time, it also brought the idea

of monetarism which may alienate human nature. This may be the source of Moll's moral imbalance. Under the influence of money worship, people are crazy about the pursuit of money. The whole society fell into a mad worship of money and luxury goods. Money seems to be the only ultimate goal in their life. They are crazy about money and almost become the slaves of money. Money worship also deeply influenced Moll. Money made her lose her virginity, also took away all her beautiful vision of love. She is a typical representative of money worship. The decadent social atmosphere made her deeply aware of the importance of money. She gradually became a person who spent the whole life for chasing money. It can be said that alienated social values eventually led to Moll's degeneration and moral imbalance. Society has a deep responsibility in this regard.

As the worship of money takes root in people's mind, social polarization between the rich and the poor is becoming more serious. Meanwhile, while the rich enjoy the benefits that money brings them, the poor are oppressed and persecuted. No matter in terms of title or attitude, the poor do not receive the respect they deserve, which is a great violation of the ethics of equality. For example, Moll was shocked when she was addressed with respect, which set the stage for her later behavior. Moll's reaction and attitude reveal exactly how much difference and antagonism there is between rich and poor. Because Moll was born humble, she was destined to be a maid. People's future seems to be determined by their wealth at that time. It was this brutal upbringing that gave Moll a deep fear of poverty. So, she was driven by a strong desire to get out of poverty and finally made a wrong moral choice. Evil itself may not be so terrible after all. The truly terrible thing is the loss of conscience and moral judgment. We all make mistakes, but with conscience, we can slowly correct our behavior. Once we lose morality, everything spirals out of control. In short, the alienation of social values in 18th century England was very serious. The mad worship of money and the extreme inequality of society all had a negative impact on Moll and the ethical consciousness of most people at that time. In this situation, the survival of the poor becomes very difficult. So, the social environment at that time also drove Moll to make wrong moral choices.

3.2. Moll's Five Marriages

As a character written by a male writer, Moll lives in a patriarchal society. She's just a victim of this male-centric world. Moll lived in a society obsessed with money, which determined every aspect of society, like marriage, status and even the fate of people, especially women. In this novel, Moll's five marriages are also worth pondering. Almost half of the book is devoted to Moll's marriages. From a 17-year-old girl to a 50-year-old woman, Moll's love struggle for 30 years also reflects her choice of love. In Moll's first marriage, we can see her desire for love. Though she was a servant, she studied with her employer's daughters, and received good education, so her talent was no less than other girls. The streets of England during 17th and 18th were not a safe place for anyone. Therefore, for Moll at that time, seeking the shelter of the family is particularly important. If Moll was driven onto streets, she may never be able to shake off her underclass status and may suffer more mishaps. So, we can see how important marriage is for Moll. However, when Moll is in love with the eldest son of her employer's family, the irresponsible man also wants Moll to marry his brother Robin in order to avoid responsibility. Moll's first marriage also had

a great influence on her attitude and choice of marriage in the future.

Though Moll herself has ceased to dream of being a gentlewoman, she expects her spouse to be a gentleman, or at least gentleman-like. It was her expectation that led to the failure of her second marriage. In her second marriage, Moll marries a draper. Despite her second husband's extravagance, Moll never admonishes him. In the 17th and 18th centuries of Britain, marriage is extremely unfair to women. A woman's property was unconditionally returned to her husband after marriage, and the husband had the right to leave it to others. The subordinate status of the wife reduces the voice of the wife in the family. As the draper goes bankrupt and flees, Moll again finds herself in a strange position. This is how the text describes it: "yet I was a widow bewitched; I had a husband and no husband, and I could not pretend to marry again, though I knew well enough my husband would never see England any more..."

When her second husband flees, Moll has to conceal her identity and pretends to be a widow. Such behavior of forging facts, violating ethics and remarrying before the marriage relationship is dissolved not only reflected Moll's necessity to survive, but also gradually made Moll a person who would do anything to achieve her goal. Defoe's arrangement of Moll's third marriage once again brings the drama to a climax. When Moll knows that her third husband turns out to be her brother, she has already participated in a farce of incest. This marriage lasts for three years, but the smitten of conscience forces Moll to finally tell the truth. Moll was born in Newgate prison and began to live a displaced life. Facing the unstable society, although she once wanted to survive on her own labor, she finally bowed to life and society. In her experience, if she wants to survive, she must get rid of the shackles of the ethical framework and use certain tricks and lies to achieve the life she wants. Therefore, after experiencing all kinds of difficulties, marriage was just a commodity or goal to be obtained in Moll's eyes. Love might be too luxurious for her. What mattered most was how long she could get stability and how much money she could get from each marriage.

3.3. Moll's Self-Redemption and Moral Growth

In *Moll Flanders*, Moll goes through a series of mistakes and immoral choices, but she shows a certain level of self-redemption and moral growth by the end of the novel. As the story progresses, Moll gradually becomes aware of the consequences of her past actions and reflects upon her moral choices. She starts feeling guilty and remorseful, expressing regret for her past wrongdoings. This remorse is evident in her confessions and self-criticism, as she honestly confronts her past and attempts to take responsibility for her actions. Furthermore, Moll demonstrates efforts to change her way of life and behavior. She resolves to break free from her sinful past and seeks a more moral and upright lifestyle. While she still maintains ambition for wealth and status, she learns to pursue her goals through legitimate means rather than relying on deceit and fraud. In the final chapters of the novel, Moll gradually shows care and appreciation for family and familial ties. She returns to her hometown, reunites with long-lost relatives, and establishes genuine family relationships with her children. This rebuilding of family and strengthening of emotional bonds signifies Moll's moral growth and rediscovery of true values. Moll Flanders' self-redemption

and moral growth are not instantaneous but rather a gradual process. Through experiencing a series of challenging life circumstances and facing the consequences, she starts reflecting on her actions and takes proactive steps to change herself. Her emphasis on caring for family and building authentic human connections demonstrates her value for moral principles and reconstruction. This portrayal of self-redemption and moral growth adds complexity and authenticity to the character of Moll Flanders. She is not merely an adventurous and cunning woman but also someone with inner struggles and a sense of accountability for her mistakes. This development allows readers to gain deeper understanding and resonance with her fate and humanity.

3.4. The Revolutionary Characterization of Moll Flanders in Literature

Moll Flanders is a non-traditional female character. She is a brave, resourceful, and adventurous woman, contrasting with conventional female archetypes of her time. She defies traditional moral standards and societal norms, fearlessly pursuing her own interests and desires. This portrayal showcases the strength and determination of women, bringing about groundbreaking innovation to the representation of female characters. Furthermore, Moll Flanders' story explores the complexities of human nature and the diversity of morality. She embodies both a criminal and a caring, responsible mother. Her character portrays the dualities of human goodness and wickedness, while also delving into the influence of personal choices and social circumstances on moral behavior. This intricate depiction of human nature inspires readers to contemplate moral concepts and sparks discussions on ethical relativism and moral dilemmas. Additionally, Moll Flanders' narrative is presented in the first-person perspective, allowing readers to delve into her inner world and thought processes. This narrative approach breaks away from the traditional third-person narration, enhancing the authenticity and intimacy of the story. It provides a new storytelling technique for future novelists, stimulating innovative explorations of narrative perspectives and techniques. Moreover, Moll Flanders' story reveals societal inequalities and class divisions. As a poor woman, she is

compelled to navigate survival and success in a male-dominated society. Her experiences reflect the realities of the society at the time and ignite discussions on social class, gender, and power dynamics. This serves as a rich source of material for later writers and inspires critical reflections on society.

In conclusion, the characterization of Moll Flanders in literature breaks free from traditional imagery, offers nuanced portrayals of human nature, introduces innovative narrative techniques, and prompts reflections on social realities. Her character provides new perspectives and creative inspiration for future writers and readers.

4. Conclusion

In this book, the author Defoe uses the first-person narrative technique in the novel. At the beginning of the novel, the old Moll recounted her life experience, which enables readers to more truly feel the living conditions of women at the bottom of society at that time. Regarding the protagonist Moll, on the one hand, I admire her stubborn will of refusing to bow to fate, and on the other hand, I also think that in her pursuit of happiness, the hardships of external conditions cannot be the reason for her to lose her morality and self-consciousness. In a word, Moll's birth and end may have had ups and downs, but we can see her resilience, her struggle, and her inner unyielding in her life experience. It also shows the powerlessness of women in a patriarchal society, but it is in such an environment that Moll's role is unusually precious.

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