

From Selective Recall to Collective Memory: On Moll Flanders' Insinuation about 18th-century England

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Abstract: As a male author, Defoe breaks the traditional literary paradigm and depicts the memoirs of working women who took the initiative to commit crimes due to the fear of poverty. With the help of memory theory, this paper employs memory theory in conjunction with literary works to examine specific situations that the main character, Moll Flanders, either selectively recalls or ignores. The social context of eighteenth-century England, which is the image of collective memory, is recreated from the perspective that individual memories are constructed in interactive experiences and are always associated with the social context of the time. This includes the social disparity between the rich and the poor, moral and ethical dilemmas, and social class disparities; additionally, the reasons behind the protagonist's decisions and behaviors in a particular situation are explored.

Keywords: Moll Flanders; Memory Theory; Social Cultural Context.

1. Introduction

Daniel Defoe's semi-autobiographical novel *Moll Flanders* adopts the "Newgate Confessions" approach to recount the legendary life of a female criminal. As a male author, Defoe breaks the traditional literary paradigm by revealing the objective factors that forced working women to commit crimes on their own initiative due to the fear of living in poverty. If Moll had belonged to "those who live in a state of stability", she would have been less poor and evil, which demonstrates Defoe's concern for the survival of women at the bottom of the social ladder in 18th-century England and his endorsement of the idea of equality between men and women.

The main character, Moll Flanders, presented her memories to the reader through a memoir autobiography. Moll was a typical representative of the lower class, born in Newgate Prison. In addition to her childhood, she spent 12 years as a prostitute, five marriages, including one to her own brother by chance, 12 years as a burglar, eight years as a felon in exile in Virginia, and finally, after trials and divine warnings, she became wealthy and lived the rest of her life in honest repentance. In an interplay between human memory and the social environment, the protagonist Moll imitated the nickname of a famous female thief. Moll Cutpurse, formerly known as Mary Frith, referred to a famous English burglar between 1585 and 1660. In the ensuing flashback recollections, she was not presented to the reader all at once, but rather selectively and gradually unfolded throughout the course of the narrative. Those selectively remembering or forgetting certain experiences insinuated the background of 18th century English society, including the social disparity between the rich and the poor, moral and ethical dilemmas, and the social class gap.

The formation of memory theory did not happen overnight. In different historical periods, scholars studied and paid attention to memory from different perspectives, and it was not until the 1980s that the concept of "cultural memory" was put forward and continuously developed. Hermann Ebbinghaus, a German psychologist, conducted a systematic theoretical study on memory, which he regarded as a device for storing representations of personal experience. He brought

the study of memory into the period of scientific psychology. Psychologist Frederick Bartlett inherited the research method of his predecessors on the problem of memory, pointing out that memory is examined under social conditions, and this emphasis on social factors opened up a new dimension in memory research (Wu, 2021). French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs put forward the theory of collective memory in the 1930s, shifting the focus of memory from individual memory to collective memory. Collective memory is not a simple summation of individual memories, i.e., collective memory is not the same as collected memories. Anthropologist Paul Connerton explores the question of "how group memory is transmitted and maintained" (Connerton, 2000, p.1). Halbwach's and Connerton's theories reveal the existence of social frameworks beyond memory and the mediums for transmitting memories, respectively, which laid the foundation for the subsequent development of cultural memory theory (Wu, 2021). Art historian Abraham Moritz Warburg examined the role of images as symbols in storing and transmitting memory, and his point of entry was the material aspect of culture, believing that the image form carries collective memory, that is, "social memory". French historian Pierre Nora began to pay attention to the important role of memory in the construction of cultural identity and national homogeneity. According to Nora, the field of memory is the symbolic element of any kind of visible subject, whether material or immaterial, that becomes, by human will and time, the memory heritage of any community (in this case, the French community) (Nora, 1989, p.12). The "lieux" of the field of memory exists as a mediator of cultural memory. In the late 1980s, the Assmanns developed and elaborated on the theory of cultural memory. "Cultural memory is the notion of a society's total knowledge that governs human behavior and experience within a specific framework of interaction and requires repeated knowledge and proficiency from one generation to the next in order to be acquired" (Assmann, 2015, p.126). Although individual memory is related to subjective experience and has a stable position, it still has social attributes, because individual memory is constructed in interactive experiences and is always related to the social context at that time.

2. Current Status at Home and Abroad

Memory theory is a framework for exploring the relationship between the past and the present. In recent years, more and more scholars have started from the memory-related theories themselves, and have also integrated memory theory with different disciplines, so as to provide more rational explanations for research in various disciplines. Jin Shoufu (2017), who studied under the German philosopher and ancient Egyptologist Jan Assmann, the founder of the theory of cultural memory, summarizes the significance of Assmann's theory of cultural memory and its genealogical relationship with "collective memory". Other scholars explore the cultural memory theory's origin (Wang, 2016), evolution (Wu, 2021), dissemination and transplantation (Wang, 2012), focusing on the role of cultural memory in the shaping of identity (Wei, 2022). From an interdisciplinary perspective, Su Lijian (2020) summarizes the structural approach from memory theory as a design method for the narrative space of contemporary poster design. Annette Kuhn (2010) also reads the production and operation of cultural memory from the memory performances of visual media such as photography and photographs. In the field of literary and cultural studies, Gao Xing (2018) uses the theory of collective memory to explore the role of social frameworks on the effects of writers' memories and the way of oral narration; Cheng Zhenyi (2014) introduces the theories of collective memory and cultural memory to the study of cultural heritage. Renate Lachmann (2004) explores the intertextual relationship between "cultural memory" and "literature"; Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney (2006) take "Culture and the Production of Cultural Memory" as their thesis, aiming to clarify the role of literature as a medium of cultural memory.

3. Selective Recall Insinuates Collective Memory

By analyzing the protagonist Moll's selective memory behavior during the recollection process, we explore the character's participation and shaping of social common memory. At the same time, based on past memories of Moll, we try to explain the moral and ethical dilemmas, lower class life, and serious injustice and poverty of England in the 18th century.

3.1. Highlighting Moral Dilemmas with Spiritual Dilemmas

Individuals' memory shaping and behavioral choices reflect societal pressures and moral standards. While working as a maid in a wealthy family, Moll Flanders is seduced by the eldest son of her master's family, and also playfully "verbal attack" several times, "When he put the bait on the hook and placed the hook in front of me without any effort at all, he was openly playing his game" (Defoe, 2005, p.11). As Moll is defenseless to her elder son's flowery words and gold coin payoffs, she eventually breaks through the moral line and is willing to fall under the siege of vanity. Surprisingly, the youngest son of the master's family, Robin, is so enamored by Moll's beauty that he prefers not to take a wife with a generous dowry, but rather expresses his love for Moll several times and asks for her hand in marriage. Robin's proposal of marriage puts Moll in danger of being ungrateful, as the rich family adopts Moll and gives her a "dame" education with the ladies, and she is fortunate to grow up as an orphan. The rich

man's wife and her daughters begin to "look at" Moll differently because of her class status and suspect her of seducing men. At the same time, the eldest son of the host family tries to persuade Moll to agree to Robin's marriage proposal out of self-preservation and fear that his affair with Moll will be exposed. Judging from the social moral standards at that time, the servant Moll had an affair with the eldest young man of a wealthy family, which would cause the woman to lose her virginity and corrupt social moral ethics. She would be despised by the world, but the eldest young man would not be attacked by public opinion because of his prominent family background. The strict moral and ethical requirements of English society in the 18th century forced Moll Flanders to agree to Luo Bin's proposal. This outcome not only preserved the woman's innocence and reputation, but also achieved the purpose of improving her social status.

3.2. Echoing Class Dilemmas with Identity Dilemmas

Individuals adapt and challenge deeply divided social class identities through memories and behaviors. When Moll was 14 years old, he was taken to live with a noble lady. He saw a life situation that was different from his own. He changed his understanding of "ladies" and yearned for the life of the aristocratic class. "Since I think that Being a noble lady is a good thing, and I love living with noble ladies, so I always want to go there again" (Defoe, 2005, p.8). Later, one of Moll's husbands proposed to go to Oxford pretending to be nobles, and they "hired a splendid carriage, six fine horses, a groom, two servants in the finest liveries, a footman on horseback and a page boy" (Defoe, 2005, p.44). From the persistent pursuit of ladies at the cognitive level to the imitation at the behavioral level, Moll's sadness lies in the excessive belief in the social values manipulated by the patriarchal society, falling into the trap of relying on flashy clothes to improve social status and gain nobility (Ding, 2021).

3.3. Resisting the Gap with the Fear of Poverty

The memory of economic poverty and the fear of poverty is enough to sustain individual resistance to the social gap between rich and poor. Moll was born in prison, and her mother was exiled. After marrying five times, she was still surrounded by poverty. Her desire to get rid of the fear of poverty reached its extreme, "but poverty has led me to this road, so I am afraid of poverty. I had to stay there, and if I could save enough money to live on, I would leave this road voluntarily" (Defoe, 2005, p. 90). When poverty forced her to have no way out, in order to protect herself, her act of theft was justified because "choosing between starvation and crime, self-preservation requires the latter" (Probyn, 1987, p.37). Moll's detailed recollection of her burglary reflects the fact that eighteenth-century Britain was in an important period of social transformation, the rapid development of capitalism, the old and new value system of British society was undergoing consolidation and replacement, and far-reaching changes in the old economic system and social values have ensued.

4. Conclusion

The protagonist Moll's personal memory of mental dilemma, class identity, and fear of poverty confirms the British social background where new and old ideas collide and intertwine. British scholar Ian Watt concluded that Defoe

was an economic prophet because Defoe foreshadowed the existence of “restless self-reliance, immorality, and individualism that does not advocate hard work in the capitalist period” (Watt, 2001, p.114). Defoe was ahead of his time in helping his heroine, Moll, to gallop through decadence and misfortune and endure the challenges of poverty, and in depicting the inner dilemmas of women in a male-dominated position (Deepak, 2021). In the social context of the 18th century English society's underclass life, the serious social injustice and poverty plight, the protagonist, Moll Flanders, has to face poverty, social pressure, and moral and ethical challenges, which profoundly affect her memories and behaviors, reflecting the interplay between human memories and social contexts.

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